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## ***Metternich's Judgement on Islam: Modern Thinking?***

### **Abstract**

*The goal of the paper is to analyse the attitude of one of the most important personalities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Austrian Chancellor Metternich, towards Islam, and draw attention to the fact that his view was much more modern than the opinions of other leading European diplomats and politicians of the period under research. Metternich surely was much more broadminded than it could be presumed from a conservative statesman and the member of the Catholic Church.*

The current increased interest in Islam and the coexistence of Western civilisation and the Moslem World is naturally connected with the increase in academic research on the history of the relations between the Occident and the Levant. Its aim is not only to analyse their diplomatic, military, economic and religious aspects, but also to discover the attitudes of Europeans towards Islam. Hindsight often reveals a picture full of clichés and prejudices shared by our ancestors about the unfathomable culture in the distant Near East. Their inability to fully understand this strange world sometimes led to ethnic-centred efforts at its transformation according to the rules of the Western, Christian, civilisation.

Probably the most sought-after ideas are those of prominent people dominating European affairs and engaging themselves in the East. To these criteria corresponds one of the most important personalities of the modern European history, Austrian Chancellor Clemens Wenzel Lothar Nepomuk Prince von Metternich. This "coachman

of Europe" of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an important player on the chessboard of European diplomacy as well as a commentator of contemporary events with remarkable analytical skills. Since Austria was forced to deal with the affairs of the Ottoman Empire inhabited mostly by Moslems, Metternich also focused his attention on its internal situation including the religion, and he did it to a degree unusual at that period for a statesman of his significance.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, it is surprising that Metternich's opinions on this topic have not been researched up to the present time, in particular when they differ from those of a considerable number of his contemporaries warning against the danger of Islam and talking of the need to expel the Ottomans from the Continent or their conversion to Christianity. Whether these ideas originated from devotion or other ideologies is unimportant; Metternich did not sympathise with them and though his own attitude was influenced by conservative principles, it does not necessarily mean that his view of Islam could not be more modern than the visions of liberals who outlined various plans for more or less extensive changes in Ottoman society with the principal aim to make the world better.

It is naturally difficult to say what "modern" thinking about Islam is exactly. However, if it means the eradication of prejudice and a sincere aspiration to perceive the real state of affairs without the application of the West's own civilising and religious dogmas, it is necessary then to consider whether the Austrian chancellor's views on Islam cannot be labelled as modern. The analysis of Metternich's attitude towards Islam in purely devotional matters is the object of this paper. His personal beliefs relating to the influence of this religion upon the functioning of a state apparatus is entirely omitted because it forms the content of another essay.

Metternich's outlook on the world was, among other factors, founded on tolerance towards different opinions if he did not find them a threat to the existing order. He apprehended the attempts at the destabilisation of the political situation, but he was little interested in matters of faith, and his religious tolerance was crucial in the latter. The prince was a child of 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment and his own Catholicism had no real significance in his *Weltanschauung*.<sup>2</sup> This fact manifested itself, for example, in his opposition to anti-Semitism, which was not insignificant in Europe at that time.<sup>3</sup> As to the Ottoman Empire, Metternich tried to assume a rational attitude towards the country by

which Austria was connected by the longest frontier of all European countries as well as extensive economic and political interests.

In the chancellery in Vienna, the general attitude towards the Levant was not based upon any romanticising dreams but a strict analysis of the reports dispatched by the Austrian representatives residing in the Ottoman territory; there were many good observers of the local conditions among them. Through a careful study of their conclusions, talks with leading Orientalists and travellers and the reading of various relevant sources Metternich tried to gain accurate knowledge of the real situation prevailing in the East. Consequently, it cannot be surprising that, at least because of a considerable amount of intelligence gathered by the chancellery, the Austrian statesman was respected by the members of the diplomatic corps in Vienna as a commentator of the events within the Ottoman Empire.

Metternich concluded that Islam was not an intolerant religion oppressing the members of other creeds. Therefore, he did not find this faith dangerous for European civilisation founded upon Christian principles, as he wrote in March 1841: "The Moslem law is not intolerant. It is indifferent to non-believers, it in no way cares about the internal regulations of the confessions, it does not meddle in the affairs of foreign cults, and if in the course of time man had to deplore more than the deviation of this rule, it is not at all in the spirit of Islamism where the cause must be sought."<sup>4</sup>

As for the adherents of the Moslem faith, Moslems, the prince did not even consider them to be bloodthirsty people longing to commit atrocities and forcing non-believers to convert to Islam. For example, he was well aware of the fact that during the Greek insurrection against the sultan's rule in the 1820s, the well-known atrocities were perpetrated by the Ottomans as well as the Orthodox Greeks, and not solely the former could be blamed for them. Moreover, though the mutual hatred of both ethnic groups was significantly influenced by their religious differences, Islam itself could be hardly responsible. Accordingly, in Metternich's opinion, the atrocities of the Moslems were only "occasional incidents" and not a symptom of the alleged intolerance of their religion towards others.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the Austrian chancellor knew that some Moslems were not sympathetically inclined towards the Christians and Jews,<sup>6</sup> which was particularly true of the situation in Syria where both non-Moslem minorities had to suffer some humiliating regulations such as the prohibition of riding a horse in a city or the requirement to wear brightly coloured clothes, to say nothing of the inequality of rights in

1) *Basic published surveys on Austrian activities in the Levant in the 19th century*: BEER, 1883, pp. 390–419; BUCHMANN, 1999, pp. 187–204; SAUER, 2002, pp. 17–78; FISCHER, 2006, pp. 60–123.

2) WIDMANN, 1914, p. 105.

3) PAULEY, 1992, p. 20.

4) Metternich to Esterházy, Vienna, March 7, 1841, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Wien (henceforth: HHStA), Staatenabteilungen (henceforth: StA), England 236.

5) WIDMANN, 1914, pp. 67–68.

6) Metternich to Stürmer, Vienna, December 18, 1840, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 78.

trials with Moslems.<sup>7</sup> These restrictions were not abolished until the administration of tolerant Egyptian Governor Mohammed Ali in the 1830s. However, Metternich did not ascribe these restrictions to the Islamic faith but to the deficiencies of the poorly-functioning Ottoman administration, in particular to the malevolent conduct of some local dignitaries who often behaved wilfully and against their sovereign's wishes: "The intolerance of Moslems is not the cause of Christian suffering in the Orient. It is found primarily in the disorder of the administrative apparatus of the Empire, the logical consequence of which is the tyranny of local authorities."<sup>8</sup> The accuracy of this opinion is supported by the conclusions of a leading expert on Ottoman history, Roderic H. Davison, who maintains that there was no systematic persecution of Christians by Moslems in the Ottoman Empire, nor any systematic oppression of Christians by the Ottoman government.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Metternich was certain of the Ottoman government's sincere effort to remedy the administrative abuses making the life of the non-Moslems more difficult. Sultan Mahmud II himself declared his attitude towards all inhabitants of his Empire with these words: "I distinguish my Muslim subjects in the mosque, my Christian subjects in the church, and my Jewish subjects in the synagogue, but there is no other difference among them. My love and justice for all of them is very strong and they are all my true children."<sup>10</sup> The chancellor would have surely agreed with the frankness of this avowal if he had known it, as it is proved by his own statement: "The Porte has entered a new course during Sultan Mahmud II's rule; Mohammedan fanaticism has disappeared and given place to real tolerance. Since the new reign [of Sultan Abdülmecid I] even greater progress has been made; the edict of Gülhane [an important reform decree promulgated in Constantinople on November 3, 1839] has given to the rayahs [non-Moslems] guarantees that they have never had; it has sanctioned the principles that are the safeguard of the human rights."<sup>11</sup>

The second reason for the difficulties of the Christians living within the Ottoman Empire was, according to Metternich, a mutual malevolence of various Christian Churches whose mutual hatred often surpassed the aversion of some Moslems against them<sup>12</sup> and made itself felt in practice by annual scuffles in the Church of the Holy

Sepulchre during Easter.<sup>13</sup> This hatred occasionally had far more tragic consequences such as the ejection of the Catholic Armenians from Constantinople at the beginning of 1828, which was indeed ordered by the sultan but for political and not religious reasons, and the main instigator was the patriarch of the Orthodox Armenians who wanted to get rid of his schismatic co-religionists regardless of their suffering caused by the harsh winter and the food-shortage; both took the lives of the elderly, women and children. For some it could well be surprising that the Moslems soon started to criticise the sultan's decision and called for its nullification.<sup>14</sup>

From the above mentioned facts, Metternich was convinced that the internal deficiencies of the Ottoman Empire could be improved by governmental reforms and he never requested the expulsion of the Mussulmans from Europe or the partition of their state. He also opposed the view, held by some of his contemporaries, that it would be beneficial to convert Moslems to Christianity. With the respect for other cultures and religions and in compliance with his conservative principles, he rejected the arrogant behaviour towards the Levant on the part of men with little regard for local conditions, traditions and customs, who advocated the necessity to introduce "European civilisation into the most beautiful regions of the universe."<sup>15</sup> The Austrian chancellor actively opposed various designs for the radical change of Oriental affairs through the careless application of measures efficient, for example, in France or Great Britain but, according to him, little compatible with the Ottoman-Moslem tradition.<sup>16</sup>

A strong anti-Ottoman attitude could be found at that time for example in the German newspaper *Augsburger allgemeine Zeitung*, which was a thorn in Metternich's side due to its liberal attitude. Its articles on Islam and Ottoman society not infrequently contained opinions that a leading Austrian historian, Karl Vocelka, stamped as "superficial and witless."<sup>17</sup> The praise of the Hatt-i Sharif of Gülhane (Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber) by the *Augsburger allgemeine Zeitung* for a Christian principle allegedly contained in this document and beneficial for the Ottoman Empire was in sharp variance

7) KRÄMER, 2003, p. 85; SCHÖLCH, 1989, p. 229.

8) Metternich to Stürmer, Vienna, February 7, 1841, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 83; The same opinion can be also found in Metternich to Esterházy, Vienna, March 7, 1841, HHStA, StA, England 236.

9) DAVISON, 1993, p. 62.

10) SHAW, 1977, p. 59.

11) Metternich to Ohms, Vienna, November 7, 1840, HHStA, Staatskanzlei (henceforth: StK), Rom 64.

12) Metternich to Stürmer, Vienna, February 7, 1841, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 83;

Metternich to Lützow, Vienna, February 14 and July 12, 1841, HHStA, StK, Rom 67. 13) EGERTON, 1841, p. 19.

14) Ottenfels to Metternich, Constantinople, January 10, February 2 and 15, March 19 and 29, 1828, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 32; Metternich to Ottenfels, Vienna, February 19, 1828, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 35; Miltitz to Frederick William III, Pera, March 3, 1828, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin (henceforth: GStA PK), HA III, Ministerium des Auswärtigen I (henceforth: MdA I), 7266; see also FRAZEE, 1983, pp. 258–259.

15) HAJJAR, 1970, p. 172.

16) Metternich to Stürmer, Vienna, December 3, 1839, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 72.

17) VOCELKA, 1992, p. 415.

with Metternich's opinion that the edict was in absolute harmony with the Ottoman-Moslem tradition and in no way contradictory to Islam.<sup>18</sup> Austrian historian Karl Vocelka obviously and in my opinion rightfully agrees with the judgement of the latter when he criticises the statement of the former: "It is entirely evident from the notice about the Christian spirit contained in the edict that the Europeans were not willing to understand the real character of the Ottoman Empire, but rather they always judged the internal Ottoman conditions in line with their own intellectual stereotypes."<sup>19</sup> Another illustrious example of "the European arrogance against the world of the Levant"<sup>20</sup> was French poet Alphonse de Lamartine who called for the Europeanisation of the Ottoman Empire inhabited by, as he said, "primitive people."<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, the "Lamartinian Euro-centric ideas" motivated by passion and entirely ignoring the real situation in the Levant were widespread among Europeans, in particular the French. A notable example was the idea of a former physician in Napoleon's army and long time resident in Constantinople, Doctor Barrachin, who wanted to emancipate the Christians living in the Ottoman Empire and liberate the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He had an article printed with a picture of a liberal Frenchman leading a Moslem, Greek, Armenian and Jew under a flag of a unified religion.<sup>22</sup>

The above-mentioned visions annoyed Metternich, who sharply rejected all these wishes to enlighten the Levant through the achievements of the Western world and the demands on a protectorate of the West over the East.<sup>23</sup> He opposed similar projects, in particular when their authors were the French, whom he strongly mistrusted. No wonder that the prince also opposed Barrachin's chimerical appeal lacking, according to his opinion, rational basis and utility.<sup>24</sup>

Metternich's respect for Islam and Moslems is likewise evidenced by his opposition to plans for the internationalisation of Jerusalem proposed by France and Prussia at the beginning of 1841. Both aspired to exclude this part of the world from the sultan's direct control and place it under the supervision of the European Powers.<sup>25</sup>

18) Metternich to Stürmer, Vienna, December 3, 1839, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 72.

19) VOCELKA, 1992, p. 415.

20) BERTSCH, 2005, p. 288.

21) Ibid, p. 287.

22) Königsmarck to Frederick William IV, Büyükdere, June 30, 1841, GStA PK, HA III, MdA I, 7284; Canitz to Frederick William IV, Vienna, November 29, 1841, GStA PK, HA III, MdA I, 7365.

23) BRUNEAU, 1932, p. 141.

24) Metternich to Apponyi, Vienna, July 12, 1841, HHStA, StA, Frankreich 322; Canitz to Frederick William IV, Vienna, November 29, 1841, GStA PK, HA III, MdA I, 7365.

25) VERETÉ, 1992, pp. 141–157.

Unfortunately, their authors forgot that, as Metternich rightly remarked, Jerusalem was a Holy city not only for Christians, but together with Mecca, Medina and Damascus also for Moslems. The latter worshipped in the mosque built on the location of Solomon's Temple much like the former in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Consequently, the sultan could never surrender this territory, in particular since he was not only the secular ruler, but also the head of Islam as a caliph.<sup>26</sup> These projects finally came to grief and Metternich deserves the main credit for it. He was persuaded that under the given conditions the Ottoman rule was the most suitable one because "the Christians in Syria cause each other more harm than the Moslems want and cause to them. The presence of a representative of a sovereign authority motivated by the *esprit de corps* of a central government that is perfectly tolerant will be sufficient for executing the welfare that we want to ensure to the Christian population generally and the Catholics particularly."<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, though Metternich is often regarded negatively for his conservative principles, his attitude towards Islam and the Levant can be considered to be far more sensible and less arrogant than those shared by a considerable number of liberal-minded visionaries eager to promote their own world views but with no regard for the actual situation in the East. Metternich never had these ambitions and never behaved disdainfully or adversely towards Islam in spiritual matters. On the contrary, he always declared that the Ottoman Empire had to "remain Mussulman."<sup>28</sup> Whether this opinion can be considered to be more modern than the one maintained by the "progressive liberals" is open to discussion.

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26) Metternich to Apponyi, Vienna, January 26 and July 12, 1841, HHStA, StA, Frankreich 322; Metternich to Esterházy, Vienna, March 7, 1841, HHStA, StA, England 236; Beauvaulle to Palmerston, Vienna, March 2, 1841, The National Archives: Public Record Office, Foreign Office 120/197.

27) Metternich to Guizot, Vienna, February 8, 1841, HHStA, StK, Rom 67.

28) Metternich to Stürmer, Vienna, December 3, 1839, HHStA, StA, Türkei VI, 72.

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