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LECTURE on Zoom

Ottoman Pluralism

by

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Declaring the formal equality of all Ottoman subjects, the Reform Edict of 1856 stated that henceforth no “class of people” in the empire could be held inferior to another. The Syriac Christians were thus faced with a dilemma: could they be said to constitute a discrete and distinguishable “class of people” of their own? In the ensuing decades, an abiding concern of the Syriac Christians was to convince their Ottoman imperial administrators that, yes, they could—that notwithstanding centuries of Armenian tutelage, the Syriac Christians were a historically independent “*millet*” comparable to those of the larger Christian communities in the empire. To achieve such recognition, the Syriacs would have to strike the correct balance between, on the one hand, an assertion of their

communal distinctiveness warranting administrative representation independent of the Armenians, and on the other, a demonstration of their conformity to the model of *millet* difference that organized the post-Tanzimat state’s new system of “Ottomanist” pluralism. Yet state recognition was only half of the story. In an era of census counts, population registers, and representative provincial councils, the central church under the patriarch in Mardin had to ensure that the Syriac Christians correctly identified themselves as such to the state in order for the category “Syriac” to achieve representative purchase. The nineteenth-century project of Ottoman pluralism thereby precipitated a wide-ranging process of communal reorganization, in addition to a discourse of Syriac historical distinctiveness and authenticity.

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