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The Armenian of *hikmet-i cedide*: philosophy in the late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

This essay challenges the ethnocentrism of the dominant literature on *hikmet-i cedide*, or the new philosophy, in the late Ottoman Empire. *Hikmet-i cedide* was "new" in the sense that it did not confine itself to theological discussions and interpretations of holy books. Instead, it found its source of inspiration in the principles of modern Western philosophy, and especially the philosophy of the Enlightenment and Auguste Comte's positivism. The dominant literature reduces this *hikmet-i cedide* to the philosophical writings of Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. Problematizing such ethnocentrism, this essay gives an account of *hikmet-i cedide* from the perspective of Ottoman–Armenians' early engagement with positivism and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment. It argues that Armenians' philosophical discourses in the second half of the nineteenth century were characterized by a belief that the principles of the new philosophy were the *sine qua non* for national survival in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious context of the Empire. They were also characterized by a commitment to reconciling modern Western philosophy with religious attachments. However, this characterization should not be thought to be confined to so-called "Armenian philosophy" but may be generalized to broader late Ottoman thought.

Keywords: Armenian; Ottoman Empire; positivism; Enlightenment; philosophy

Introduction

Modern Western philosophy, and especially the philosophy of the Enlightenment and Auguste Comte's positivism, was introduced in the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century. Broadly speaking, the philosophy of the Enlightenment was characterized by a commitment to rationality, secularism, and the idea of social progress. Hostile to ignorance and superstition, and imbued with materialist, deist, and at times atheist tendencies, the enlighteners of the eighteenth century valued reason and scientific thinking over faith and tradition. They were critical of ecclesiastical authority, divinely ordained morality, and religious sanction of monarchy. They believed that reason, aided by observation and secular education, could not only provide humans with the tools to unlock the mysteries of nature and discover the universal moral and political order, but also help humankind continue its

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historical progress towards social and intellectual perfection. Enlighteners accordingly argued for universal education, religious toleration, public opinion as the measure of governments, and the principles of natural equality and political liberty. Thus, they laid the foundations for basic human rights and democratic republicanism (see Dupré 2004; Gay 1977; Israel 2001; Kenny 2017; Robertson 2015).

Similarly, Auguste Comte embraced the idea of social progress and argued for the perfectibility of humans' intellectual capabilities through education. He claimed that the human mind had historically passed through three successive states. These were the "theological," "metaphysical," and "scientific or positive" states. The latter was "the true final state of human intelligence," based on Francis Bacon's principle that "there can be no real knowledge except that which rests upon observed facts" (Comte 1970, 4, 7). Moreover, Comte believed that by leading to scientifically informed social action, the positivist state had the potential of bringing social order to post-Enlightenment societies, which were in moral and political crisis due to the collapse of traditional authorities after the French Revolution (ibid., 28).

Quite a few scholars and intellectuals in the late Empire were impressed by this "new" philosophy (*hikmet-i cedide* in Ottoman Turkish, *nor p'ilisop'ayowt'iwn* in Armenian). Critical of traditional philosophy that had largely been confined to theological discussions and interpretations of holy books, Ottoman performers of the new philosophy in the late nineteenth century embraced the scientific worldview and committed themselves to the idea of social progress and intellectual development through education. In his 1868 *Hamar'o't Patmowt'iwn P'ilisop'ayowt'ean* (Brief History of Philosophy), Madatia Karakashian, an Ottoman–Armenian intellectual and a former priest, summarizes perfectly how the new philosophy was received in the late Empire: "In the face of [the new] philosophy, which proceeds with demonstrations and renounces [God], orthodox philosophy, which accepts [God] and is pious, finds itself in a situation that is reminiscent of the dawn of humanity, when God's creatures saw in the human race something both hostile and charming" (Karakashian 1868a, 76).[1]

Before explaining what made the new philosophy both hostile and charming for the Ottomans, it is worth noting that the literature on the introduction of modern Western philosophy in the late Empire is totally oblivious to the writings of Karakashian. This is because this literature is predominantly ethnocentric. That is, it traces the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy back to the modernization and Westernization of "Muslim/Turkish thought." Hence, in this literature, the terms "Turkish thought" and "Ottoman philosophy" are often used interchangeably (see, e.g., Bolay 2016; Demir 2018; Hanioğlu 2005; İskenderoğlu 2020; Karakuş 2015; Korlaelçi 2021; Özervarlı 2018; Poyraz 2014; Vural 2019).

Challenging such ethnocentrism, my aim in this article is to give an account of the Ottoman version of the new philosophy from the perspective of Armenian thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth century. I will especially focus on Ottoman–Armenians' early engagement with positivism and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment between the 1860s and 1880s. In the next section, I will briefly describe the social and intellectual context providing the background against which Armenian thinkers composed philosophical discourses. This will help us understand Karakashian's portrayal of the new philosophy as something both hostile and charming. A textual analysis of Ottoman–Armenians' philosophical discourses will be conducted in the two subsequent sections. First, I will examine the positivist epistemology of Madatia Karakashian, Yeghia Demirjibashian, and Kalusd Gosdantian. I will then inquire into the political philosophy of Nahabed Rusinian, Madteos Mamurian, and Krikor Chilingirian. I will argue that Ottoman–Armenians' philosophical discourses in the second half of the nineteenth century were characterized by an "alarmist nationalism" and a certain "reconciliationism."[2] I will end the article by inquiring into the possibility of generalizing this characterization to broader late Ottoman thought.

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[1] Translations from Armenian are mine.

Armenian enlighteners

Ottoman–Armenian performers of the new philosophy were of the generation of *lowsaworealner*, or enlighteners. Lowsaworealner was the term for young Armenians in the mid-nineteenth century who challenged the authority of the clergy and the Ottoman–Armenian economic elite holding control over the Patriarchate. In order to end the reign of traditional authorities over the Armenian community, enlighteners fought for a secular, democratic, and pluralist constitution beginning in the early 1850s. After a decade-long struggle, they finally beat their opponents, namely *xawarealner*, or darkeners, when, in 1863, the Ottoman government ratified their constitution, *Nizamname-i Millet-i Ermeniyan* (the Armenian National Constitution) (see Alboyacian 1910, 390–421; Artinian 1988, 75–91).

The rise of enlighteners may be traced back to the expenditure of capital by wealthy Armenians on philanthropic work and the educational activities of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the late Empire. Members of the Armenian economic elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were called *Amira*, or commander. The amiras were either *sarraf*s, i.e. bankers, providing the Muslim/Turkish ruling elite with the capital necessary for the functioning of the Ottoman system of tax-farming, or technocratic bureaucrats employed as imperial architects, directors of the imperial mint, and directors of imperial powder-works (Antaramian 2020, 29). Cognizant of the political influence and communal popularity one could harness through philanthropic work, the amiras founded primary and secondary schools for Armenian boys and girls in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Alboyacian 1910, 152–153). Moreover, they provided scholarships to promising young students to continue their higher education in the major capitals of Europe, especially Paris (Barsoumian 2013, 127).

Catholic and Protestant missionaries similarly invested in the education of Armenian youth, especially by founding schools, periodicals, and printing houses for them. The most influential missionary organization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the Armenian Catholic Mkhitarist Congregation. This congregation was founded in İstanbul by Mkhitar Sebasdatsi in 1701. In 1707, Mkhitar took his order to Venice and devoted himself to the enlightenment of Armenians (Etmekjian 1964, 71–72). With this aim, he and his disciples published periodicals, scientific works, dictionaries, and translations from Western languages. Furthermore, they founded primary and secondary schools in İstanbul, İzmir, Venice, Padua, and Paris.

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[2] In this article, the term "nationalism" does not necessarily refer to the commitment of founding a nation state on the basis of ethnicity or biological descent. Instead, it is used as the translation of the Armenian term *azgase'r*, or "nation-loving."

Such investment in education gave rise to a generation of well-educated and "Westernized" intellectuals in the Ottoman–Armenian community in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mostly educated in France, these intellectuals were especially influenced by contemporary French writers, such as Auguste Comte, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Victor Hugo.[3] They were also inspired by the revolutions of 1848 (Alboyacian 1910, 228–238). Thus, they were imbued with the ideas of social progress, positivism, naturalism, secularism, and constitutionalism. In addition to pioneering the process that led to the composition and ratification of the Ottoman–Armenian Constitution of 1863, they contributed to the intellectual progress and cultural enlightenment of Armenians through literary and educational activities (see Etmekjian 1964, 136–147; Young 2001, 78–82). In their project of cultural and political enlightenment, they were particularly motivated by an "alarmist nationalism." That is, they largely believed that the adoption of the new philosophy was the *sine qua non* for the survival of the Armenian community in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious context of the Empire, functioning as an arena of struggle for the survival of the fittest "nation."

For example, on the pages of his journal *Arewelean Mamowl* (Oriental Press), Madteos Mamurian argues that "the greatness, power, and effectivity" of a nation depends on its "wealth," especially when the latter is "grounded in industriousness, dexterity, and science" (Mamurian 1879b, 425). However, Armenians suffer from "ignorance," which is responsible for the fact that "the desire for progress" is alien to them. Hence, they are unable to improve their lives and the means of production they employ in the production of wealth. Hypnotized by "religious superstitions," they are convinced that they should trust nothing but "destiny" and "providence" (Mamurian 1880, 491–493). Accordingly, what Armenians need is "education and light" (ibid., 495). Only through education in the natural and applied sciences, such as the agricultural sciences and political economy, may Armenians cultivate their material and intellectual capabilities and thereby "compete with other, more powerful, richer, wiser, hardworking, and industrious neighboring nations" (Mamurian 1879b, 435). This is especially urgent given that the Ottoman–Greeks have already surpassed Armenians in the spheres of agriculture, commerce, and property acquisition (ibid., 433–434). Moreover, it is only with the cultivation of their material and intellectual capabilities that Armenians may accumulate the capital necessary for pressuring governments to respect their rights and freedoms (Mamurian 1880, 457–459).

Similarly, in his journal *Me'ghow* (Bee), Harutiun Sıvacian states that "whoever stays behind [in the race for social progress and cultural enlightenment] will disappear" from the face of the earth (Sıvacian 1857, 220). In his view, the nineteenth century is an age when "the light of sciences" attacks "the darkness of ignorance" on all fronts to such an extent that "sciences have already begun to replace destiny in the allotment of glory and welfare" (Sıvacian 1856a, 4). The Empire is not exempt from this war between light and darkness. "As a friend of enlightenment and progress," the

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[3] For example, Rusinian studied medicine at Sorbonne University. Mamurian finished his education at the school of the Mkhitarist Congregation in Paris after attending Nersesian College in İzmir. Another student of this college, Demirjibashian, studied at the business school in Marseilles.

Ottoman government in the nineteenth century has not only established secular schools and colleges, but also "opened its gates to European arts and crafts" (Sıvacian 1856b, 29). This means that Armenians have to compete now not only with the Greeks or Muslim Turks, but also with "enlightened" Europeans. The latter's advancement in arts and crafts is grounded in observation, experimentation, scientific knowledge, and education, while Armenians are still living in conditions reminiscent of "the European Middle Ages" (ibid., 79). Under these circumstances, "the first responsibility of a true nationalist" is to make sciences and education publicly available to each and every member of the Armenian nation (Sıvacian 1857, 219). What is at stake is "a nation's formation, prosperity, enlightenment, and happiness" (Sıvacian 1856b, 98).

Finally, Yeghia Demirjibashian claims that the fact that Armenians have fallen behind their European rivals in the race for social progress and cultural enlightenment turns them into easy prey for missionary activities. This is because, due to their lack of education in the positive sciences, Armenian teachers and religious leaders are not capable of competing with Catholic and Protestant missionaries for the minds and souls of Armenian youth. Accordingly, many Armenian families send their children to missionary schools, causing them to be alienated from the faith, lifestyle, and communal belonging of their ancestors. This threatens Armenians' national integrity (Demirjibashian 1887b, 380). Therefore, it is imperative for the Armenian community to improve its schools and the condition of its teachers according to Western – that is, positivist – standards. Demirjibashian asks his fellow Armenians to have faith in the positive sciences, with the help of which it is possible to "fight the officers of alien churches" and "compete with foreign schools" (ibid., 380, 382). He reminds them that "however small and poor, a nation can survive if it has faith in positivism" (ibid., 383).

As a result, from the perspective of enlighteners, Armenians were surrounded by Ottoman as well as European rivals, threatened by foreign missionaries, and subjected to a government that could easily deprive them of their rights and freedoms. Under those circumstances, it was commitment to the principles of the new philosophy that could help them survive as a free and prosperous nation. In other words, Armenians should embrace the findings of the positive sciences, commit themselves to the reign of reason and secular education, and thereby become capable of successfully competing with neighboring nations. It is worth noting that portraying education in the positive sciences as a matter of survival in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious context of the late Empire was confined neither to Armenians nor to philosophical discourses. For example, the directors of Ottoman–Jewish schools founded by the Alliance israélite universelle in the second half of the nineteenth century frequently stated in their reports to the Central Committee in Paris that only through education in the natural sciences and Western techniques could the Jews compete with the Greeks and Armenians and thereby overcome their moral and material deprivations (see Dumont 1982).

However, and paradoxically, the project of enlightening Ottoman nations according to the principles of the new philosophy was permeated with the danger of destroying their collective identity. This was because, in the Empire, one's public or collective identity was founded on one's membership in a religious community, while the new philosophy had materialist, deist, and even atheist implications. Moreover, due to its anti-traditionalism, the new philosophy had the potential of being interpreted as a form of radical individualism, or the principle that private pursuits and the self-interest of the individual as the ultimate normative reality always trump the needs of the community.

Specifically, the Ottoman method of accommodating cultural diversity was based on religious differences. With this method, i.e. the so-called *millet* system as "an ad hoc procedure for the organization and integration of non-Muslim religious communities into the empire," the non-Muslim millets (nations, understood as religious communities) of Armenians, Jews, and Greeks enjoyed the collective autonomy to organize their lives according to their religious customs and intra-communal hierarchical structures as long as they recognized the superiority of Islam (Barkey 2005, 9). Hence, ethnocultural groups had so far arranged their communal life according to religious organizations. In the case of Armenians, it was the Apostolic Church that functioned as the foundation of communal life and collective identity. For centuries, it was this Church that had administered "national" institutions and governed interpersonal relations among "the nationals."

Accordingly, the new philosophy was both hostile and charming for Ottoman–Armenians, to use the terminology of Karakashian. It was charming because the survival of Armenians as a free and prosperous nation depended on their willingness to embrace the principles of positivism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, it was also hostile, because the materialist, radical individualist, deist, or atheist implications of the new philosophy could destroy the very existence of the Armenian nation as a religious organization. That was why the new philosophy had to be reconciled with Christianity, and especially with the Christianity of the Armenian nation.

It is worth noting that Armenians' engagement with modern Western philosophy as a charming but hostile enterprise was not an isolated phenomenon. Parallel developments took place in the imperial context and within different ethnoreligious communities. Particularly, the period of modernization in the late Empire known as the Tanzimat initiated reforms according to Western standards in the spheres of administration, law, and education. In addition to the establishment of military engineering and medical schools in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şâhâne*, a secondary school modeled on the French *lycée*, *Mekteb-i Sultânî*, was opened in 1868. Furthermore, promising young men were sent to France for education. This led to the formation of a new generation of intellectuals studying Western, and especially French, literature. Against this background, Muslim/Turkish intellectuals, such as Münif Paşa, Hoca Tahsin, Namık Kemal, Ahmed Midhat, Beşir Fuad, and Abdullah Cevdet, took an interest in the problems of modern Western philosophy, considering that the superiority of Western civilization was grounded in its new understanding of science and rationality (Vural 2019, 17–48). As in the case of Ottoman–Armenians, a major reason of such engagement was an "alarmist nationalism." That is, these intellectuals believed that the adoption of the principles of the new philosophy was a matter of survival for the Muslim/Turkish nation in the face of non-Muslim insurgences and continuing military defeats in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see Hanioğlu 2005; Poyraz 2014). However, they also believed that these principles had to be reconciled with Islam, given that they had the potential of destroying the very foundation of the Muslim/Turkish nation, namely religion.

For example, "the Young Ottomans," such as Namık Kemal, argued that the sovereignty of the Muslim/Turkish nation, or *millet-i İslâm*, could not be maintained in the modern era without reforming Ottoman administration according to the principles of the new philosophy, such as constitutionalism, separation of powers, the idea of social progress, and the ideals of natural equality and political liberty (Mardin 2000, 283–336). The Young Ottomans attempted to reconcile these principles with the "political theology" of Islam, especially by citing the political practices of ancient Islamic states, Quranic verses, and hadiths (ibid., 81). Similarly, Muslim/Turkish philosophers such as Hoca Tahsin, Ahmed Midhat, and Abdullah Cevdet cited Quranic verses and hadiths in order to reach a compromise between Western positivism and materialism on the one hand and the principles of Islam on the other (see, e.g., Cevdet 2017; Tahsin, 2011, 2019; see also Utku 2015).

Similar attempts to reconcile modern Western thought with the foundations of their ethnoreligious identity could also be observed in the Ottoman–Greek community. For example, influenced by the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century and British empiricism, Ottoman–Greek intellectuals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as Iosipos Moisiodox, Dimitrios Katartzis, and Veniamin Lesvios, sought a compromise between modern Western thought and Eastern Orthodoxy (see Kitromilides 1990; 2010).

In the following sections, I will elaborate on such "reconciliationism" in the Ottoman–Armenian community by analyzing, first, Armenians' early engagement with positivist epistemology and, then, their interest in the political philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Armenians and positivism

Positivism started to flourish in the Armenian world between the 1860s and 1880s. What Armenian intellectuals found appealing in positivism was its commitment to the findings of the natural sciences and their method. Armenian positivists believed that the reign of the scientific method was the *sine qua non* to enlighten the masses and put them on the way to material and intellectual progress. Thus, positivism would provide the means to destroy "poverty, ignorance, and darkness" prevailing in the historical Armenia (Harutiunian 1987, 183).

The introduction of positivism in the Ottoman–Armenian community may be traced back to Karakashian's 1868 *Hamar'o't Patmowt'iwn P'ilisop'ayowt'ean* (Brief History of Philosophy). In this first systematic treatment of the new philosophy, Karakashian's defense of positivism takes the form of a history of philosophy. He defines the history of philosophy as the journey of "the human mind's greatest exercise," namely "free thinking" (Karakashian 1868a, preface). Free thinking consists of humans' historical endeavor to find the right method for discovering truth "by themselves" instead of referring to "supreme beings" (ibid., 5–6). In Karakashian's view, positivism stands at the zenith of this journey.

Specifically, he divides the history of philosophy into four main periods, namely "ancient philosophy" (640–470 BC), "middle philosophy" (470 BC to 200 AD), "mixed philosophy" (200–1600 AD), and "modern philosophy" (1600–1868 AD). He argues that ancient, middle, and mixed philosophies were far from discovering truth. Instead, they led to skepticism, denying the human race the possibility of knowing truth. This was because their methods were not the right ones. That is, they employed either the "hypothetical" or "deductive" method. Modern philosophy, on the other hand, "points out the right method or way to search for and demonstrate truth" (ibid., 58). The method in question is that of doubt and observation.

Karakashian names René Descartes and Francis Bacon as the forefathers of this method, which would further be developed by French and Scottish enlighteners in the second half of the eighteenth century, such as Voltaire, Baron d'Holbach, and David Hume. These enlighteners believed that the source of knowledge was the empirical observation of the material world. Thus, they advocated some sort of empiricism or empiricist materialism (ibid., 71–72). Moreover, with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the method of doubt and observation was transformed into a philosophical doctrine critical of every form of metaphysical thinking (ibid., 72–74). This led in the nineteenth century to the championing of positivism, or "the principle that does not accept anything true other than what is acquired through observational and critical methods" (ibid., 75). As a result, modern philosophy became hostile to "spiritualist and theological foundations" (ibid., 75–76). Nevertheless, Karakashian attempts to reconcile the principles of modern philosophy with religious commitments in his *Hamar'o't P'ilisop'ayowt'iwn kam Skzbownq Hogebanowt'ean, Tramabanowt'ean, Baroyakani ew Bnakan Astowac'abanowt'ean* (Introduction to Philosophy or the Principles of Psychology, Logic, Ethics, and Natural Theology), published in the same year as his history of philosophy.

In this work, he particularly follows in the footsteps of Enlightenment and Early Enlightenment thinkers, such as Kant, Descartes, and John Locke, and starts his philosophical analysis with an inquiry into the faculties of the human mind. He argues that human intelligence is composed of three parts: "consciousness," "reason," and "perception" (Karakashian 1868b, 16). As opposed to perception, consciousness and reason do not necessitate sensory data to discover truth. This is because consciousness works with "introspection." Reason, on the other hand, has the ability to discover "the first truths," which do not require empirical verification, such as "one and the same thing cannot exist and not exist at the same time" (ibid., 38).

Karakashian also follows in the footsteps of Scottish enlighteners discussing the idea of natural religion, or the principle that reason, unaided by revelation, may prove the existence of God (see Stewart 2019). Accordingly, he formulates "natural," "moral," and "metaphysical" arguments for the existence of God, grounded in the powers of consciousness and reason. The natural argument is based on a "first truth," namely that "everything has a cause." It claims that the existence of natural entities necessitates the idea of God as the first cause (Karakashian 1868b, 88–89). According to the moral argument, on the other hand, humans are conscious of the fact that their desires and inclinations often contradict moral laws. Hence, the latter cannot be a human invention. This proves that God exists as the creator of moral laws (ibid., 89). Finally, the metaphysical argument states that by introspection humans know that they have the idea of an infinitely wise, good, and powerful God. Assuming that the idea of infinity cannot be produced by anything finite, the idea of God must have been produced by nothing but God (ibid., 90).

It is on this foundation that Karakashian discusses religion. In other words, as an Ottoman–Armenian writer whose public identity, as well as the identity of his readers, is primarily defined in terms of membership in a religious community, he is not satisfied with proving the existence of God. Instead, he claims that the idea of God necessarily leads to the idea of religion as "servitude" to God. Such servitude may be "internal" or "external." The former refers to "belief," "love," and "respect," whereas the latter requires "prayer" and "worship" (ibid., 98–99).

However, regardless of whether he accomplishes the bridging of the gap between the existence of God and the necessity of practicing religion, Karakashian's attempt to reconcile modern Western philosophy with Armenians' religious commitments fails. The reason is that what gave the Armenian community its collective identity was not just any religion. It was not even Christianity, but specifically the Christianity of the Armenian nation. Therefore, if modern Western philosophy, or positivism in particular, was going to be successfully reconciled with religion, a more "national" compromise between seemingly incompatible worldviews had to be reached. It was Yeghia Demirjibashian who attempted to reach such a compromise.

In his journal *Grakan ew Imastasirakan Sharjhowm* (Literary and Philosophical Movement), Demirjibashian argues for what he considers the *sine qua non* for the social progress and intellectual development of the Armenian nation, namely positivism and its materialist and evolutionist ramifications. By positivism he understands the scientific search for truth, which confines itself to the observation of the material world and aims at the discovery of general laws regulating the relationships between natural phenomena (Demirjibashian 1885b, 78). Thus, positivism does not endorse innate ideas, nor does it accept the existence of spiritual or immaterial forces. Instead, it claims that "there is nothing but matter," which may be neither created nor destroyed (Demirjibashian 1887, 61). Matter may only be transformed depending on "the number, size, shape, and order" of its constitutive elements, namely "atoms" (Demirjibashian 1886, 123). Human beings are no exception. After all, the human is not a "creature outside [material] nature" (Demirjibashian 1883a, 35). In fact, humans are nothing more than transformed animals, evolved out of "creatures very inferior to monkeys" (ibid., 36).

Nonetheless, for Demirjibashian, the materialist and evolutionist implications of positivism should not function as an excuse for Armenians to abandon their religious commitments. On the contrary, "it is the duty of Armenians to attend church, the national church" (Demirjibashian 1887a, 230). Demirjibashian's strategy for reconciling the new philosophy with Armenians' religious commitments is to employ the idea of evolution, and especially the idea of social evolution. Primarily, he describes religion as a product of the human mind's evolutionary transformation. He claims that the belief in the soul of the dead functioned as the foundation of prehistoric religions. As the human race climbed the evolutionary ladder, this belief was replaced by the idea of a higher soul or a supreme being (Demirjibashian 1884b, 172). The latter was represented at first as a concrete entity. With the further evolution of the human mind, representations of the holy took on more abstract and universalist forms (Demirjibashian 1885c, 64–65).

In Demirjibashian's view, the fact that religions are historical products of the human mind's evolutionary transformation entails that they should continue evolving in line with the current progress of humanity. Otherwise, they function as stumbling blocks to the evolution of societies. This is because, just like individuals, societies also have their own "physiology," the health of which depends on the harmony between their organs (Demirjibashian 1883b, 178). Focusing on the physiology of the Armenian society in the late Empire, Demirjibashian claims that scientific and philosophical developments in the West immensely influenced the Armenian community in the mid-nineteenth century, leading to a gradual transformation of its cultural, administrative, and educational structures according to Western standards. Such transformation included not only the introduction of constitutionalism in Ottoman–Armenian society, but also an increase in the number of community schools, science courses, and scientific periodicals in the Armenian language (Demirjibashian 1884a, 11–12; 1885a, 18–24). This means that if the Apostolic Church does not want to malfunction as a pathological organ in the social body of Armenians, it must reform itself according to such transformations. Particularly, it must make sure that its clergy is educated in the positive sciences and taught the intrinsic value of tolerance towards unorthodox opinions (Demirjibashian 1887b, 381). Second, it should find a way to reconcile the scientific theory of evolution with religious narratives, i.e. "reconcile Darwin with the Holy Scriptures" (Demirjibashian 1885d, 183).

Assuming that the Church does its part in ensuring the harmonious development of social organs, the individual members of the Armenian nation must "stick to and protect whatever there is in the Armenian Church" (Demirjibashian 1885c, 66). This is because, just like religions, the Armenian nation is also a product of social evolution, and because the Church has so far functioned as the main driving force in this evolution. In Demirjibashian's words, "religion has played, and still does play, such a great role in our nation that we are called 'a religious nation'"; it was "the officers of this sublime Church" who acted as "the greatest operatives of our national civilization" and who "gave direction to our language and literature" (Demirjibashian 1888a, 170; 1888b, 388, 390). As a result, the positivist commitment to the social progress and intellectual development of the Armenian nation does not contradict with devotion to the very foundation of this nation, namely religion. On the contrary, "loving one's nation" and "loving one's religion" are, or at least should be, "synonymous for Armenians" (Demirjibashian 1885d, 182).

Consequently, both Karakashian and Demirjibashian struggled in their own ways to reach a compromise between religious commitments and positivism. However, the complete account of Armenians' early engagement with positivism in the late Empire may not be given without mentioning the name of Kalusd Gosdantian, even though the latter's positivism considerably differs from that of Karakashian and Demirjibashian. In his 1878 *Me't'oti Vray* (On Method), Gosdantian rejects any form of compromise. Instead, he argues that religion, and especially Christianity, corresponds to a "regression" in the human mind's historical evolution (Gosdantian 1878, 44). This history comprises the linear process of humanity's age-old commitment to finding the right method for discovering truth.

Specifically, influenced by the philosophy of Auguste Comte, Gosdantian divides the human mind's historical evolution into four stages. In his view, the first stage was characterized by "the instinctive method." This was the method of primitive people, whose intellectual capacity was identical to that of infants, especially in that they were both moved by blind instincts (ibid., 107–108). The instinctive method was followed by "the religious method." At this stage, humans "explained" natural phenomena by referring to spiritual forces. Gosdantian argues that, grounded in revelation or "sacred" texts, religious explanations were far from discovering truth, because no claim to revelation or sacredness was capable of empirical verification (ibid., 119–120).

The third stage of the human mind's evolution was that of "the rationalist method." This method came into existence thanks to "the awakening of the Greek mind" in the sixth century BC (ibid., 23). At this stage, religious explanations were replaced by critical thinking. It was particularly Socrates who developed this method and "struck an eternal blow against blind religious and traditional systems" (ibid., 31). Nevertheless, the age of critical thinking started to deteriorate with first Neoplatonic mysticism and then Christian scholasticism (ibid., 41–43). Moreover, independently of such deterioration, the rationalist method was unable to grant humans the possibility of discovering truth, because humans at this stage were hypnotized by their intellectual capabilities instead of observing the material world. Accordingly, the rationalist method produced nothing but endless sophistry (ibid., 131–132).

Finally, humanity entered the last stage of its intellectual development with the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was the stage of "the positivist method." As the only right method for discovering truth, the positivist method accepts nothing other than what is verifiable by observation. It is with this method that "the tremendous torrent of sciences, discoveries, [and] inventions," like "a fountain of light," has put humanity in the process of overcoming the darkness of ignorance and religious superstitions (ibid., 91). Gosdantian names this process "*Kulturkampf*," or "that great battle in the name of enlightenment" (ibid., 160). Rejecting any form of compromise between positivism and the religious method, he argues that this battle "will continue until other methods fall and science reigns over them as their ruler" (ibid., 159).

Gosdantian's unwavering commitment to positivism, refusing to reconcile modern Western philosophy with religious commitments to the point of atheism, was a rare exception in the intellectual world of the late Empire. Furthermore, his case was an exception that proved the rule. Deviating from that rule cost Gosdantian dearly as he was excommunicated by the Church, copies of his book were burnt, and he could not publish anything else for the remainder of his life (Hagopian 1979, 52–57). In addition, he became an open target for both conservative and secular scholars (see Harutiunian 1987, 187–188). Interestingly, Gosdantian's critics were not limited to the Armenian community. For instance, in his 1882 *Qnnowt'iwn Me't'oti Vray Anown Grqowkin* (Examination of the Booklet Called On Method), George W. Wood, a Presbyterian minister and missionary in the late Empire, argues that people like Gosdantian, who are influenced by "atheistic and worthless books and periodicals in French" and who do not hesitate to turn their back on the Christian heritage of the Armenian nation, irresponsibly put Armenians on a path to facing the most horrible lesson to be learned from history, namely that "nations may die" by "committing suicide" (Wood 1882, 118, 120).

Armenians and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment

Similar to positivism, the political philosophy of the Enlightenment was introduced in the Ottoman–Armenian community in the second half of the nineteenth century. Influenced by the works of French enlighteners, as well as by Russian–Armenian writers and activists such as Mikayel Nalbandian, Ottoman–Armenian intellectuals argued for inalienable rights, natural equality, public opinion, representative government, and free individuality as "the most essential characteristic" of human beings (Sargsian 1999, 4; see also Sargsian 2001). They did this by seeking a compromise between the principles of the new philosophy and the Christianity of the Armenian nation – that is, through the lenses of "nationalism" and "reconciliationism."

For example, in his 1879 *Dasagirq P'ilisop'ayowt'ean* (Textbook of Philosophy), Nahabed Rusinian suggests that independently of revelation or religious authorities, the human mind is capable of discovering the universal moral and political order. He claims that, in the spheres of morality and politics, the good is that which complies with "duty" and therefore feels "pleasant," whereas the bad contradicts with it and therefore leads to "pangs of conscience" (Rusinian 1879, 156–158). However, it is not feelings that function as the ultimate criteria separating what is good from what is bad. This is because it is only through reason that humans may determine their moral and political duties.

Specifically, reason discovers that humans are by nature endowed with a free and rational "individuality." Accordingly, they have a natural right to that which satisfies the basic requirements of such individuality. In Rusinian's words, "the conditions of humans' individuality are in fact their rights," such as the right to live, work, and improve one's moral and intellectual capabilities (ibid., 164). The idea of natural rights necessarily leads to the idea of natural duties. After all, "there is no right without duties," just as "there is no duty without rights" (ibid., 166). These duties may be directed to one's own self or the self of others.

For instance, as free and rational individuals, humans have a duty to improve their potential to act moral, free, and rational by avoiding habits such as laziness or self-indulgence that would stunt their "understanding and will" (ibid., 167). Similarly, they have a duty to treat others in such a way that the latter do not lose their capability of fulfilling the basic requirements of free and rational individuality. Thus, one should respect the "life, property, honor, and freedom" of individuals and eschew "misguiding their [moral] sentiments and rationality onto evil paths" (ibid., 170). Keeping fellow humans away from evil paths is an obligation not only of particular individuals but also of governments. Political authorities should act as "paternalist governments" and ensure that the basic material needs of individuals are satisfied. This requires not only respecting individuals' freedom to choose any occupation they want, but also providing jobs for those who are capable of working. It also requires establishing "shelters" and "asylums" for those who are incapable (Rusinian 1864, 23).

In his 1864 work entitled *Azgayin Hanganakowt'iwn* (National Contribution), Rusinian mixes a touch of nationalism with his defense of individualism. Moreover, he implicitly portrays this nationalism as religious nationalism. Particularly, he claims that, just like humans, nations also have their basic needs (ibid., 26). The basic needs of nations comprise the sum total of the material and moral needs of their members. By moral needs Rusinian understands the needs for education and spiritual guidance. Since these needs are basic, their satisfaction must be free of charge. However, moral needs may only be satisfied with the help of public officials, whose livelihood depends on monetary compensation for their services. This grants national institutions, such as churches and schools, their respective rights (ibid., 99). Given that there is no right without duties, the rights of national churches and schools necessarily burden nationals with certain duties, such as the duty of tax payment. Addressing the members of the Armenian nation, Rusinian writes:

> The [Apostolic] church bestows its grace upon the [Armenian] Nation for free. [Similarly], schools perform their services without charge [. . .]. If churches and schools did not require a building, if that building did not occasionally necessitate renovation, and if, finally, officers of the church and schools did not have material needs, i.e. if they did not need to survive [. . .], the paying of taxes would not be a necessity (ibid., 100).

For Rusinian, the members of the Armenian nation will voluntarily fulfill their national duties depending on the satisfaction of three conditions. These are "constitutionalism," "representationalism," and "education." Constitutionalism refers to the idea that no political authority may perform governance arbitrarily, as if the governed were nothing but "a mindless herd" (ibid., 82). Thus, the governing elite may not make political decisions without first subjecting them to "the court of public reason" (ibid., 83). As a result, constitutionalism means rationalism: "rationalism for the governing, rationalism for the governed, and rationalism for every member of the nation" (ibid., 81). Similarly, "representationalism," or the principle of representative government, means "accountability." Thanks to such accountability, the governing elite may be prevented from burdening the governed with some duties without at the same time respecting their rights (ibid., 84–85). Finally, "education" means "enlightenment" (ibid., 86). Without education, "rationality is renounced, representationalism falls down, and the constitution is destroyed" (ibid., 87). In addition, education is the *sine qua non* for fighting radical individualism, because it is only through education that individuals may understand the true nature of their needs, rights, and duties. They understand that their individual needs and those of their nation cannot be separated from each other. They also understand that the necessity of fulfilling their national duties and therefore paying taxes corresponds neither to a voluntary gift nor to tyrannical exploitation, but to the right of a self-governing nation managing its collective needs on its own (ibid., 92–96).

Consequently, Rusinian avoids degenerating his defense of individualism into radical individualism by attributing moral needs and basic rights to nations as corporate organizations. Moreover, he implicitly defines nations as religious organizations. That is, he assumes that nations require public institutions for the spiritual guidance of their members and that, in the case of Armenians, the question of the nature of these institutions – i.e. whether they are of Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, or Apostolic nature – has already been settled. In short, he assumes that the Armenian nation is a religious nation with one particular church.

The religious character of the Armenian nation is also emphasized in the philosophy of Madteos Mamurian. Similar to Rusinian, Mamurian argues that as rational entities, humans are by nature endowed with freedom and individuality. The essence of free individuality lies in humans' "ability to direct their will towards the good, true, and beautiful by improving their rationality" (Mamurian 1871a, 478). Hence, freedom refers neither to "anarchism" nor to unrestrained indulgence in "temporary and vulgar pleasures" (ibid.). On the contrary, it burdens individuals with an obligation to do what is necessary to reach, and help others reach, the good, true, and beautiful. In Mamurian's view, what justifies the idea of basic rights is the fact that they function as critical prerequisites for the fulfillment of such obligations (Mamurian 1873, 165–166).

Specifically, no moral or political obligation may be fulfilled without "self-ownership." Self-ownership, or the right to freely use one's mental and bodily capabilities, is a fundamental right of human beings. This right entails "freedom of work," or the principle that "man has a right to perform any occupation and art he chooses according to his abilities and enjoy their products" (Mamurian 1871a, 481). Thus, it necessitates universal and categorical respect for freedom of thought, trade, and capital accumulation.

However, individuals may not genuinely enjoy their freedoms without education. After all, it is only through education that they may free themselves from "civil and religious prejudices" (ibid., 478). Moreover, without education, they are doomed to be treated as "minors" by their governments, not knowing whether the misfortunes they encounter in life are "punishments by God" or the results of "bad laws" and "bad governments" (Mamurian 1871b, 526–527). Nonetheless, Mamurian is skeptical of the state providing citizens with public education. In fact, his defense of basic rights is often articulated in an "ultra-liberal" fashion. That is, he confines the jurisdiction of the state to the protection of individual rights against unjust intrusions, fearing that when the state "constantly supervises, represses, [or] prohibits men's individual, social, civil, and economic activities," it acquires the power to force them into "some sort of infancy and slavery" (Mamurian 1871a, 482). Accordingly, he likens not only medieval "guilds" but also "mercantilist" policies to "those chain rings that constrain productive work" (Mamurian 1871b, 528). In addition, he implies that individuals would eagerly undertake economic initiatives, the conditions of free market competition would be satisfied, prices would therefore be lowered and wages would be increased, if the governed could speak up and tell their state: "We take responsibility for our work, our commercial activities, our education, our progress, and our way of worshiping. Your only job is to protect us all under every circumstance" (Mamurian 1872, 209, 211).

Nevertheless, Mamurian shirks from showing the Armenian Church the same "ultra-liberal" attitude that he has shown to the state. Accordingly, just like Rusinian, he does not allow his defense of basic rights to degenerate into radical individualism by portraying the Armenian nation as a religious organization. This is especially apparent in his 1878 and 1879 review of Gosdantian's *Me't'oti Vray* (On Method). In this review, Mamurian states that he did not like *Me't'oti Vray* "as an Armenian individual" (Mamurian 1878, 76). The reason is that Gosdantian's atheist positivism ignores the fact that "the main elements of nations are their institutions. These elements may be grounded in moral, religious, political, or historical circumstances" (Mamurian 1879a, 345). As the very preconditions of national existence, they cannot be abandoned suddenly; they require gradual transformation. Given that religion and the Apostolic Church have historically provided these preconditions for Armenians, removing the religious element from their hearts is to lead them into annihilation as a nation. After all, "under the current circumstances," Armenians are devoid of "a [self-governing] fatherland, [independent] political tradition, or a shiny literature and science" (ibid., 346). Functioning as the tie of national unity, it is only their "religion" and "history" that make Armenians who they are (ibid.). Therefore, asking what Gosdantian asks of them, namely embracing atheism in the name of cultural enlightenment and social progress, means not knowing the first thing about "poor Armenians" and "the laws of their historical evolution" (ibid., 345).

Finally, Krikor Chilingirian seems to reject such a portrayal of the Armenian nation as a religious organization, as he puts strong emphasis on the importance of separating religious authority from civil authority. He claims that the separation of powers is the *sine qua non* for the enlightenment of Armenians. However, he, too, attempts to reach a compromise between religious commitments and the principles of the new philosophy. Specifically, similar to Rusinian and Mamurian, Chilingirian is motivated in his philosophical writings by "nationalism." The aim of these writings is to "establish the dignity of the [Armenian] nation among enlightened nations" (Chilingirian 1861a, 1). This is "the sacred duty of a true nationalist" (ibid.). The first step of fulfilling this duty is to disseminate scientific knowledge among the nationals. After all, science as "the absolute queen" can change "the fate of the world" (Chilingirian 1863, 449). However, the fate of the world, and especially the fate of the Armenian world, may not be changed without the protection of basic rights and freedoms, particularly freedom of thought. Without the exercise of these freedoms, the human mind is doomed to "blindly believe or obey all those limitations that establish the force of traditions and customs" (Chilingirian 1861b, 2).

Chilingirian argues that in order to destroy such limitations, Armenian educators and public intellectuals should do their best to ensure that the members of the Armenian nation are enlightened according to the principles of the new philosophy. First, they should be taught the intrinsic value of freedom from arbitrary power, or the principle that political governance is legitimate if and only if it is exercised according to general laws aiming at public utility and requiring obedience from both the governed and the governing. They should also be taught that they have "natural" and "inalienable" rights, such as the right to work, trade, print, and worship (Chilingirian 1862b, 380). It is only through such education that Armenians may become what Europeans started to become in the eighteenth century, namely "first *man* and then *citizen*," capable of overcoming "social corruptions" by "problematizing religions [and] traditions" through "the light of the mind" (Chilingirian 1862a, 354).

In Chilingirian's view, when the light of the mind is brightened by education, "public opinion" turns into "the sword of nations, the spear of justice, [and] the shield of rights" (ibid., 353). Public opinion "has [always] been the most powerful force behind social transformations" and "will [always] be the force through which present and future nations determine their collective fate according to their own will" (ibid.). It is impossible to extinguish this force by setting up conservative barriers. Such barriers may slow down the progress of nations towards enlightenment, but only at the expense of paving the way for its radicalization into "a revolutionary fire" (ibid., 354).

However, none of this works without the separation of political authority from religious authority, or without a commitment in the sphere of social and political life to "the reign of rationality" instead of "a kingdom that is grounded in revelation" (Chilingirian 1866, 412). Hence, religious authority should be confined to its proper place and be concerned with nothing but "the direction of the soul towards heaven" (ibid., 410). The reign of rationality, on the other hand, requires philosophy. The latter "analyzes the elements of man's individual and communal existence," "prepares him for overcoming the miseries of life," and, thus, seeks "justice," understood as "the lawful harmony between social, civil, and political interests of humanity" (ibid., 410–411).

Nevertheless, Chilingirian bridges the gap between religion and philosophy by depicting "the law of progress" as "the law of nature," which is nothing but "the will of God" (Chilingirian 1864, 189). According to the law of nature or God, human beings as free, rational, and "perfectible" entities are "destined to incessant progress" towards moral and intellectual perfection (ibid.). Although different nations may not show the same rates of progress towards perfection, "progress is one of the natural preconditions of being human" (ibid., 190). Therefore, when it is slowed down beyond natural limits, unnaturally forcing nations into their "original position" of infancy, "God initiates physical or moral commotion" to generate communal metamorphosis, often taking the form of "social revolutions" (ibid., 189–190). Sanctifying revolutions in the name of freedom and social progress, Chilingirian goes even further and identifies the motto of the French Revolution with the essence of Christianity. He writes that "the essence of Christianity is liberty, equality, and fraternity" (Chilingirian 1862b, 380).

Conclusion: Ottoman philosophy

I have argued that Ottoman–Armenians' early engagement with modern Western philosophy between the 1860s and 1880s was characterized by an "alarmist nationalism" and a certain "reconciliationism." Devoid of a self-governing fatherland, surrounded by Ottoman as well as European rivals, and threatened by foreign missionaries, Armenian intellectuals thought that the survival of their nation depended on the acknowledgment of the principles of the new philosophy. Accordingly, they attempted to disseminate a positivist or scientific worldview among Armenians and argued for natural equality, free individuality, constitutionalism, public opinion, and inalienable rights and freedoms. However, these principles had the potential of exterminating what the new philosophy was supposed to protect, namely the very existence of the Armenian nation. This was because Armenians acquired their national identity in the Empire via their membership in a religious community, and because the new philosophy had materialist, radical individualist, deist, and even atheist implications. Hence, modern Western philosophy had to be reconciled with Armenians' Christianity.

I have suggested that such "reconciliationism," together with "alarmist nationalism," was not confined to Armenians but shared by intellectuals of different ethnoreligious origins in the late Empire. This raises the question of whether it is possible to talk about something like "Ottoman philosophy" with transcultural characteristics. It is premature to definitively answer this question as there is no literature on philosophy in the late Empire that does not confine itself to philosophical activities within a particular ethnoreligious community. Moreover, we have no strong evidence indicating that philosophical discourses written in the Armenian or Greek languages were read by Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Ottoman intellectuals of different ethnoreligious origins were engaged with modern Western philosophy in total isolation from each other. This is especially because we know that there were strong institutional relations between the intellectual elites of different *millets* in the late Empire.

For example, Karakashian taught between 1868 and 1872 at the *Mekteb-i Sultânî*, a cradle of "Westernization" for Muslim/Turkish as well as non-Muslim intellectuals in the late Empire (Aras 2019, 287). Similarly, Demirjibashian worked at the *Babıâli Tercüme Odası* (Fenercian and Bedrosian 1921, 21). Muslim/Turkish philosophers, leading constitutionalists, political "Westernizers," and educational reformers, such as Namık Kemal, Fuad Paşa, Âli Paşa, Münif Paşa, and Ziya Paşa, owed their intellectual development to the time they spent in this office.

Rusinian, on the other hand, taught philosophy and medical ethics at the *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şâhâne*. His *Dasagirq P'ilisop'ayowt'ean* (Textbook of Philosophy) was composed of his lectures in the 1870s in this cradle of positivism and materialism (see Yıldırım 1995). The most prominent Muslim/Turkish positivists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Abdullah Cevdet and Rıza Nur, would receive higher education at the *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şâhâne*. Rusinian was also among the main architects of the Armenian Constitution of 1863. As an embodiment of the Enlightenment's political ideology, this constitution would function as a model for the *Kânûn-ı Esâsî*, the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 (Davison 1963, 134–135).

In addition to such institutional relations, there were also literary interconnections between Armenian philosophers and Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. For instance, Chilingirian was responsible for the first Turkish translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. His 1863 translation of Hugo's work into Turkish with the Armenian script made this masterpiece of social justice available to the Ottomans almost two decades before Şemseddin Sami's translation with the Arabic script (Pamukciyan 2002, xxi). It is worth noting that Muslim/Turkish intellectuals who were interested in philosophical enterprises in the late nineteenth century, such as Ahmed Midhat, Namık Kemal, Ahmed Vefik Paşa, and Ali Suavi, were familiar with the Armenian script (see Cankara 2015).

Moreover, we have reason to believe that Gosdantian's *Me't'oti Vray* (On Method) and the intra-communal controversy surrounding its atheism were known by some Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. This is because one of the most-read French positivists in the late Empire, Émile Littré, wrote an article in his *La Philosophie Positive Revue* in 1879 to defend Gosdantian against his Armenian critics, calling him "the Auguste Comte of İzmir" (Littré 1879). Gosdantian had already published an article in French in Littré's journal in 1878. This article was on ways to propagate the scientific worldview in the Orient (see Gosdantian 1971).

As a result, it is safe to assume that as professors, translators, public officials, and literary figures, Armenian intellectuals played crucial roles in the formation of the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy. However, whether we can further this result and reconstruct "Ottoman philosophy" depends on future research with pluralist commitments, cognizant of the fact that "Ottoman philosophy" may not be studied without reading together the philosophical works of intellectuals with different ethnoreligious origins, and without inquiring into cross-cultural encounters between these intellectuals.

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