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State, Faith and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands

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Fred Anscombe

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Alex Drace-Francis

This review was developed from a discussion on the occasion of the launch of the book, hosted by the ['Rethinking Modern Europe \[2\]'](#) seminar in which both author and reviewer participated, together with Professor Benjamin Fortna (University of Arizona).

Frederick F. Anscombe's *State, Faith and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands* is the latest of a number of works in Ottoman history that have focussed attention not on a rise-and-fall paradigm of 'grandeur and decline' but on long-term trends and continuities. Rather than analysing what caused the Ottoman polity to be defeated by European Powers, Anscombe considers instead why it ultimately lasted longer than Europe's other eastern Empires; and also offers a synthetic account of *how* it worked. Particular attention is paid to the internal transformation of governance, and this is used to give a new interpretation to both the origins and character of the independent successor states. As such it follows several recent trends: first, in questioning the myth of Ottoman weakness, and second, in attempting to analyse the evolution of post-Ottoman polities in a comparative light rather than as discrete (European and Asiatic) developments. [\(1\)](#)

Anscombe's book begins with an account of the structure of Ottoman governance in its classical form (pp. 21–33). He identifies the first major crisis period facing the Ottoman state as being that of 1768–1839, and the early part of the book is dedicated to understanding how this crisis came about and led a restructuring of the Ottoman order (pp. 33–89). He then provides an account of the religious, political and legal thought and practice that formed the basis of the Empire in the period from 1839–1908 (pp. 90–120) followed by an account of its destruction in the period from 1908–24 (pp. 121–48). The second half of the book (pp.

148–291) deals with the successor states which emerged in the Balkans and the Middle East, including Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Turkey and the Arab states.

While other scholars have identified the crisis and transformation of the Ottoman polity in earlier periods (2), Anscombe's analysis of the 1768–1839 transition is convincing, and gives attention to the military superiority of foreign powers as well as to any perceived structural weaknesses in the Ottoman state. He also provides a convincing account of the weak nature of the successor states, particularly in the Balkans but also in the Arab Lands.

I very much appreciated Anscombe's account of the religious, legal and intellectual underpinnings of the reforming Ottoman state. At the same time, I wonder whether the account implies too much uniformity and intellectual coherence both to the concept of the state and to that of Islam, to the extent that he declares the Empire to have been Islamic 'from beginning to end'. Other accounts of the Ottoman order stress that it was Islamic in some areas of life (law) but eclectic in others, with the continuation of informal practices of governance being the norm.(3) Anscombe's answer to this is to show the relevance of Islamic law (sharia and kanun) to non-Muslim communities (pp. 26–31)). The discussion here is certainly interesting, and he is right to override the now increasingly-questioned older view of the Empire as being divided for legal and administrative purposes into separate religious communities (*millets*) (4); but his examples pertain only to criminal law. He does mention that family law remained the preserve of non-Muslim religious authorities, but this was an important fact not just for social life but for a political system where patronage and household networks played such a major role.

Moreover, I also wonder whether the reassertion by Ottoman actors of principles of religion and state as a response to crisis can be interpreted paradoxically as a result of interaction with (not blind imitation of) European models, particularly that of Russia but also that of western states, countries in which monarchical and imperial authority existed in symbiosis with a control of the church hierarchy.(5) At other junctures Anscombe makes very suggestive comparisons between the religious nature of the Ottoman state and that of, say, 19th-century Britain. I think the non-Ottoman world could be seen in this narrative as a dynamic stimulus which whom the Ottomans had a longer history of interaction rather than as an alien sphere which arrived as a shock in the late 18th century.(6)

While the post-Ottoman states' instability, weak economic performance and lack of success in attracting loyalty from their citizens is hard to deny, I think Anscombe has to some extent succumbed to the temptation to draw too strong a contrast between the old Empire and the new states. It is stated at several points that the Christian population of the Empire were never dissatisfied with Ottoman rule, which I think is not tenable. Attention is not given to Christian actors who made numerous explicit statements of dissatisfaction with the regime.(7) There is also a tendency to label activists who developed ideas of independence as 'alien' to the Ottoman order, or as deriving their ideas solely from Europe. The Greek proto-nationalist Rigas Velestinlis is described as living 'in Vienna' (p. 152), whereas in reality he spent only the very last portion of his life there; most of his political ideas were developed in Ottoman Wallachia. Likewise, Bulgarian revolutionary Georgi Rakovski is described as operating from abroad (pp. 152-3, 171), when in fact he worked mainly in Belgrade and Bucharest when they were still part of the Empire, in Bulgarian communities which owed their flourishing existence inter alia to Ottoman political and commercial routes; like Rigas, he spent an important part of his early life in Istanbul.

I would agree with Anscombe that few of the earlier leaders of revolts in the Balkans can be described as 'nationalist', and his critique of the paradigm of decentralization through the rise of *ayans* and bandits in the 18th century is fascinating, particularly the point that these people – whether Christian, in the case of the Serbian rebels, or Muslim, in the case of figures such as Ali Pasha of Yanina or Osman Pasha of Vidin – claimed loyalty to the Ottoman system at the same time as their actions seemed to undermine it. However, their interaction with European powers did in fact entail the introduction of norms and expectations along European nation-statist models, at these figures sometimes sought foreign protection (of Napoleon, in the case of Ali Pasha, or of Russia or Austria, as in the case of the Phanariots) (8); and also sometimes moved to another region to claim further authority, as in the case of figures like Mohammed Ali or Kemal Atatürk who

came from Balkan roots to transform Egypt and Anatolia.

The treatment of the nationalist ideologies of the 19th century, and of trends in the 20th and 21st such as the revival of religion after the fall of communism in the Balkans, is somewhat sweeping.⁽⁹⁾ It is true that much historiographical activity in post-Ottoman states consisted in the production of factitious and stereotyped narratives, but this is not something exceptional about the Balkans.⁽¹⁰⁾ Likewise, on language reform, Anscombe has a point in noting that in the development of modern standard Bulgarian, differentiation from other south Slavic norms sometimes proceeded from political considerations (pp. 150-151), but it is an exaggeration to conclude therefrom that Bulgarian is an artificial language.⁽¹¹⁾ The existence of different dialectal norms and centres of authority across a broad linguistic continuum merely reflects the realities of Ottoman decentralization, the presence of Balkan peoples in other empires, and the role of religious missionaries. As such it is an interesting case for understanding the nature of late Ottoman diversity, rather than an aberration from a putative early Ottoman ecumene or in contrast with the successful language-building enterprises in the countries of Western Europe.

These are some points which arose in my mind when reading Frederick Anscombe's fascinating and provocative interpretation of late and post-Ottoman realities. Whatever its debatable aspects, I learnt a huge amount from it and thank Anscombe for making me think much more deeply about many aspects of comparative, imperial, transnational and national history. He has also done well to bring together a wide body of recent research into a clear narrative covering the long term. Sharply written and provocative in its interpretations, Anscombe's work will undoubtedly be of interest to anyone researching or teaching Ottoman or comparative imperial history.

Notes

1. See e.g. the work of; Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London, 1999); Virginia Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870* (Harlow, 2007); Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Benjamin Fortna, 'The Ottoman Empire and after', in *State-Nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Turkey. Orthodox and Muslims, 1830–1945*, ed. Benjamin Fortna et al. (London, New York, NY, 2013).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E.g. Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State. The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (2nd ed., Syracuse, NY, 2005), esp. pp. 40–52.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E.g. Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds* (Berkeley, CA, 1995); Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1600* (Basingstoke, 2004); Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream* (London, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See also here the work of Paraschevas Konortas, 'From ta'ife to Millet', in *Ottoman Greeks in an Age of Nationalism*, ed. Dimitris Gondicas and Charles Issawi (Princeton, NJ, 1999), pp. 169–80; and Tom Papademetriou, *Render Unto the Sultan. Power, Authority and the Greek Orthodox Church in the Early Ottoman Centuries* (Oxford, 2015).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See e.g. Mustafa Aksakal, 'Europeanization, Islamization, and the new imperialism of the Ottoman State', in *Paradoxes of Peace in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas Hippler & Miloš Vec (Oxford, 2015), pp. 250–8.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See e.g. Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (London, 2005); *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World [Proceedings of the British Academy, 156]*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock (Oxford, 2009); *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World*, ed. Anna Contadini and Claire Norton (Farnham, Burlington, VT, 2013); Palmira Brummett, *Mapping the Ottomans. Sovereignty, Territory and Identity in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Cambridge, 2015).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. To take just the Greek case, the documents in *The Movement for Greek Independence, 1770–1821*, ed. Richard Clogg (Basingstoke, 1976) give a balanced range of views.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Fikret Adan?r, 'Semi-autonomous forces in the Balkans and Anatolia', in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 3, ed. Suraiya N. Faroqhi (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 183–4.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. More nuanced accounts, looking at continuities, may be found in the books *State-Nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire* ed. Fortna (cit. supra); *Ottomans into Europeans*, ed. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Wim

van Meurs (London, 2010); and *Balkan Nationalism(s) and the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Dimitris Stamatopoulos. 3 vols. (Istanbul, 2015).[Back to \(9\)](#)

10. Marius Turda, 'Academic history writing in the Balkans to 1945', in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 4, ed. Juan Manguaschca, Stuart Macintyre and Attila Pok (Oxford, 2011), pp. 349–66. The inclusion of Turda's analysis alongside the other contributions to this volume gives a good opportunity for readers to think about the Balkan case in comparative context.[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. Compare Maria Todorova, 'Language as cultural unifier in a multilingual setting: the Bulgarian Case during the nineteenth century', *East European Politics and Societies*, 4, 3 (1990), 439–50; and Rossitza Guentcheva, 'Symbolic geography of language: orthographic debates in Bulgaria', *Language and communication*, 19 (1999), 355–71. Just on a technical note, Anscombe is in error to state that the adoption of postpositive articles in Bulgarian caused the abandonment of noun inflection: as the examples of Romanian and Albanian show, it is possible to have both features.[Back to \(11\)](#)
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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/119719>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/events/seminars/259>