

# FREEMASONRY AND SECULAR SPIRITUALITY IN THE OTTOMAN GRAND EAST<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The foundation of the Ottoman Grand East may be considered as one of the important corner stones of social transformations which occurred during the period spanning the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic. The hereby article, by analysing the rituals and constitutions of the Ottoman Grand East, points to the prevalence of a Masonic culture rich in elements of secular spirituality. Additionally, it posits that the profile of the founders of the Ottoman Grand East, along with the cultural background and political environment of that era, had a considerable impact on the secular spiritual identity of Ottoman Freemasonry, which may even have implications for contemporary Turkish Freemasonry.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The period between the years 1909 and 1923, starting with the foundation of the Ottoman Grand East (the first national and independent grand lodge over the Turkish territory) and concluding with the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic (the nation state which replaces the collapsed Ottoman Empire) presents an era during which Turkish Freemasonry can be seen as a method to attain secular spirituality.

It is noteworthy that the profile of the initial Muslim Freemasons within Turkish territories exhibits a considerable overlap with the Sufi tradition of Islam. This overlap goes beyond a mere intersection of membership: the dawn of Turkish Freemasonry admits a culture that is intertwined with Sufism.

There exists a theoretical basis to explain this observation: the Sufi tradition is a particular reflection of the universal tradition of initiation upon which Freemasonry is based. On the other hand, the cultural determinants of Turkish Freemasonry go beyond the tradition of initiation. After all, many members of the Ottoman Grand East had strong political involvements with the Union and Progress Party, which was the core political movement of the Ottoman Empire between 1889 and 1918. Interestingly, 1909 is a year during which the political project of the Union and Progress Party was quite compatible with the establishment of an institution of secular spirituality. Thus, although similarities between Sufism and Freemasonry are observable throughout the Muslim geography in general, explaining the case of the Ottoman Grand East deserves further inquiry. In particular, due considerations are to be given to the

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possibility of a conscious design aiming to facilitate the spread of Freemasonry over Ottoman territories, an aim of which the roots can be found in the political environment of the Empire.

## 2. OBSERVATIONS

Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire started as an establishment which was more commonly attended to by non-Muslims.<sup>2</sup> The affiliation of Muslim notables, bureaucrats and intellectuals to lodges occurred relatively later, by mid-19th century. The acceptance of Muslims paved the way to a relationship with the Young Turk movement, which transformed Ottoman Freemasonry into an institution in defence of liberal social values and composed of people of various religions and nationalities.<sup>3</sup> The founding members of the Ottoman Grand East are of a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds<sup>4</sup>, and its multi-cultural structure is reflected both in the election of the first Grand Officers<sup>5</sup>, and in its rituals specifically developed for the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

The founding declaration of the Ottoman Grand East is in French. Equally important, even though it was for a limited period, the first constitution is adopted from the Grand

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<sup>2</sup> As an example, in the first half of 18th Century, the sixth article of the regulations of Saint Jean d'Acre Lodge working in Akra City of Syria (today, Akko City in Israel) says "*Jews, Muslims and other people who were baptised only by circumcision cannot enter the Lodge unless they are baptized by water*". See Zarcone, Thierry, "Le Croissant Et Le Compas", Dervy, 2015, p: 31.

<sup>3</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioğlu describes the Young Turk movement as "a link in the historical chain of Ottoman westernization and bureaucratic modernization representing the modernist wing of Ottoman intelligentsia and bureaucracy"; Hanioğlu, M. Şükrü, "The Young Turks in Opposition", Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, p: 7.

<sup>4</sup> As an example, amongst 29 people who participated in the meeting dated 1 August 1909, only 12 of them were Muslims. These were: Faik Süleyman Pasha from Makedonya Risorta Lodge, Osman Talat from Meşrutiyet Lodge, Aziz Hasan Pasha and Ahmet Nesimi from Vatan Lodge, Mehmet Ali Baba from Muhibban-ı Hürriyet Lodge, Nail Reşit, Osman Saip, Nuri Nazif, Tevfik and Sadık from Vefa Lodge, Osman Fehmi and Hilmi Bey from Resne Lodge. Non-Muslims were Edouard de Nari, Victor Algrante, Jacques Kalderon, Feyzi Menahem, Victor Mordo from Bizansiyö Risorta Lodge, A. Salem from Veritas Lodge, David J. Kohen, E. Casanova, Mişel Noradunkyan from Renaissance Lodge, Bohur Kamhi from Makedonya Risorta Lodge, Raphaella Ricci from İtalya Risorta Lodge, Herkül Diyamantopulo, Erera Dario from Meşrutiyet Lodge, Joseph Sakakini from Vatan Lodge, İlyas Modiano, Jak Suhami from Şafak Lodge and Nadra Moutran from Uhuvvet-i Osmaniye Lodge.

<sup>5</sup> 9 Muslims and 13 non-Muslims were elected as Grand Lodge officers in the meeting held on 1 August 1909. These officers were Grand Master Mehmet Talat, Deputy Grand Master Mr. Galip, Senior Warden Dr. Mehmet Ali, Deputy Senior Warden Eduard de Nari, Junior Warden Osman Fehmi Niyazi, Deputy Junior Warden Nadra Moutran, Orator Dr. Rıza Tevfik, Deputy Orator Mişel Noradunkyan, Secretary Osman Talat, Deputies of Secretary Solon Kazanova, Fevzi Menahem, Dario Errera, Almoner Sarım Kibar, Almoner Dr. Modiano, Treasurer Dr. Suhami, Senior Steward Rafael Ricci, Junior Steward Diran Kelekyan, Deputy Steward Osman Saib, Senior Deacon Nail Reşit, Junior Deacon Dr. Bohur Kamhi, Deputy Deacon Viktor Algrante, Fourth Deacon Tevfik.

<sup>6</sup> At the outset, consultations with the Grand Orient of Belgium is a highly interesting matter. See Özalp, Koray, "First Turkish Rituals: Mişel A. Noradunkyan and Two Important Documents", Mimar Sinan Periodical, 2013, No: 159, p: 88-94.

Orient of Belgium.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, a new constitution in two languages, namely French and Turkish, is prepared. The text in French chronologically precedes the one in Turkish.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, a comparison of this founding document in two different languages reflects remarkable differences.<sup>9</sup>

First, the word “Mason” (which is used today in Turkish to mean “Freemason” but without having the connotation of a builder) is not used in the Turkish version of the texts. Instead, the expression “Bâni-i hürriyet” (where “Bâni” means “Erecter” or “Founder” and “Hürriyet” means “Freedom”) was preferred. In a similar vein, the French abbreviation “Maç::” for Freemasonry is replaced with “Bâ::” (which abbreviates “Bâni”), as well as “Maç:: Ottomane” being replaced with “Ottoman Bâ ::” in the oath of Grand Lodge Officers. This decision deserves attention, since the word “Mason” existed in Turkish to mean Freemason.

Another remarkable aspect of the first constitution of the Ottoman Grand East is the use of the expression “Scotland Tariqat” (“tariqat” meaning “Sufi Order”) instead of “Maç:: Ecossaise” in French (meaning “Scottish Masonry”). The term “Scotland Tariqat” is also used as a corresponding term for “Rite Ecossais” (Scottish Rite), hence establishing an equivalence between “Tariqat” and “Rite”. This equivalence also exists in the rituals which qualify themselves as “Âyîn” [in Latin – “ain”], which means “Religious Ceremony” in the Muslim tradition.

It is important to understand why these well-known terms of Ottoman social life implying notions of Islam were preferred. After all, an important part of the founders of the Ottoman Grand East consisted of non-Muslims. Moreover, their backgrounds reflect a good knowledge in Masonic literature. Here, three observations are in order:

- a. The word “Mason” in Turkish has also the connotation of being non-believer or infidel, and was even used as a swear word in some circles.<sup>10</sup>
- b. The Ottoman Grand East aimed to spread Freemasonry among the Muslim population of Ottoman territories. In fact, the sixth article of the 1909 constitution explicitly states the objective of having lodges in Syria, Iraq, Tripoli,

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<sup>7</sup> From the translation of the minutes of the Ottoman Grand East dated 9 August 1909, Mimar Sinan Periodical, Special Edition, No: 157, p: 51.

<sup>8</sup> The French text of Constitution of the Ottoman Grand East was effective as of 20 November 1909, and the Turkish version as of 28 December 1909. The French text of the Regulations of Ottoman Grand East was effective as of 20 November 1909, and the Turkish version as of 14 December 1909. The French text of the General Regulations of the Lodges of Ottoman Grand East was effective as of 28 February 1910, and the Turkish version as of 14 March 1910.

<sup>9</sup> A thorough analysis of such differences can be found in Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim, “Rituals in Turkish Freemasonry from Beginning to Present, Entered Apprentice Degree, 1909-2012”, İzmir Valley Research Lodge Publications No: 20, October, 2019, as well as in Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim, “Early Rituals of Supreme Council in Turkey”, 150th Anniversary of the Supreme Council of Turkey, Special Publication, İstanbul, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Nişanyan, Sevan, in Nişanyan Dictionary, under the headings of “Freemason” it is stated that it means atheist, unbeliever, irreligious, denier, according to the work of Ahmed Vefik Pasha named Lehce-i Osmâni, dated 1876.

and etc. This objective was quickly implemented, and new lodges under the Ottoman Grand East were rapidly consecrated in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon.

- c. The term “tariqat” carries Islamic connotations but its usage in that era is much more comprehensive than expressions such as “sect”, which carry far more religious implications.

As a result, we see an effort to use a culturally-acceptable terminology in order to create an institution that can be easily described and can be made a centre of attraction among Ottoman Muslim intellectuals. On the other hand, this was an era during which “multicultural identity” was an inevitable concept for the Union and Progress Party. Hence, this terminological choice could not exclude non-Muslims. Consequently, the first article of the constitution of the Ottoman Grand East self-defines as “an association based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, as well as inherent in the idea of progress and seeking the truth, without being interested in religious sects and treating every religion equally”. If “every religion is equally treated” then this new “Scotland Tariqat” shall embrace all religions and, as being implied in its rituals, see all humans as subjects of the Supreme Being, thus summoning all notables -free and of good morals- of any religion within the Ottoman Empire to its organisation. In the light of these observations, the conceptual differences between the French and Turkish texts are signs of a consciously-designed social call for the Ottoman Muslim intellectual elite, without excluding non-Muslims. Regarding this design, we come across the following remark: *“Talat Pasha who is spiritually a comitadji –a member of a secret society with paramilitary roots- has proposed firstly to establish an Islamic Freemasonry to his comrades in order to get rid of foreign influence and to start becoming politically organized”*.<sup>11</sup> Various rumours exist with regard to this subject.<sup>12</sup> It is to be noted that Talat Pasha is one of the most powerful politicians of his time and the first Grand Master of Ottoman Grand East.

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<sup>11</sup> Kuran, Ahmed Bedevi, “Revolutionary Activities in Ottoman Empire and Republic of Turkey”, İstanbul, 1959 p: 181, quoted by Koloğlu, Orhan, “Masonry in Islamic World”, Kırmızı Kedi Publications, March 2012, p: 170.

<sup>12</sup> Thierry Zarcone, writes of a presumed dialogue between Mecdi Tolun -an Islamic thinker and a prominent politician of his era- and Talat Pasha. Even though it may not have occurred, it nevertheless sheds light on an important sociological and psychological reality.

- Effendi, if we shaped our organization (Union and Progress Party) as a cult, which one it might be?
- Like what?
- For instance, a cult the followers of which will be knights.
- Why not? Let's be Mevlevi.
- It is impossible. Mevlevies are eccentrics.
- Then, Qadiriyya?
- It is not possible either.
- Rufai?
- This is not possible at all.
- What do you think of Bektashism?
- Not bad, but it is not wide enough.

Mecdi Effendi who guessed what Talat Pasha had in mind from the first question onwards, said to Talat:

- May I say something Talat? I know the word on the tip of your tongue. You are trying to say “Let's be Masons” aren't you? Get this idea out of your mind. We cannot follow any idea that has secret and unholy agenda and imported from West. I am absolutely telling you, the day you are possessed by such ill-judged idea, you would ruin yourselves and the Comita.

(See Zarcone, Thierry, “Mystiques, Philosophies Et Francs-Maçons”, Institut Français d'Etudes Anatoliennes d'Istanbul, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Paris, 1993, p: 304.)

Within this perspective, there is one more aspect to emphasize. Ottoman Freemasonry was already associated with certain ancient Sufi orders such as Bektashism, Mevleviyeh and Melamiyah, known for their tolerance to different beliefs within the Ottoman territories.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between Islamic Sufi orders and Freemasonry was known in England even in the early days of 1850s. For example, in an article in “Cassell’s Illustrated Family Paper”<sup>14</sup> published in London on 9 June 1855, a Bektashi “lodge” in Belgrade was introduced as a Masonic lodge. The said article mentions the members of this “lodge” as “Turkish Freemasons” who belonged to one of the major Sufi orders, and describes the Sufi rituals as Masonic rituals.<sup>15</sup> It is worthy to note that this “lodge”, named Ali Koç, had members from various religions and played an important role in contributing to the peace talks between Hungarians, Serbs and Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

“Dervishes or Oriental Spiritualism” by John Porter Brown, published in 1868, may be pointed out as another interesting example. Brown was a famous Mason who was the Istanbul Consul of USA between 1835 and 1836, and the Istanbul Consul General of USA between 1857 and 1859. He was also the Worshipful Master at “Oriental” and “Bulwer” Lodges in Istanbul, working under the jurisdiction of the United Grand Lodge of England. Furthermore, from 1868 to 1872, he was the Provincial Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge of England in Turkey. In his book, Brown qualifies members of a certain “tariqat” belonging the Sufi tradition as “Muslim Masons”.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a periodical named “Le Monde Maçonnique”<sup>18</sup> also mentioned that a number of Sufi “tariqat” members had joined “Oriental” and “Bulwer” Lodges in 1863 in Istanbul.<sup>19</sup>

Also, in Istanbul towards the end of the 19th century, a lodge named “I Proodos” working under the jurisdiction of the Grand Orient of France was known for its “Bektashi” members. I Proodos Lodge is famous for its exceptional and historical initiations of certain Ottoman dynasty members, some as important as the sultan’s sons Murat, Nurettin and Kemalettin Efendi.<sup>20</sup> The greatest excitement at this point must have happened when a Freemason was crowned, namely Murat the 5th. The

<sup>13</sup> Koloğlu, Orhan, “Abdulhamid and The Freemasons”, Eylül Publications, İstanbul, 2001, p: 223-224.

<sup>14</sup> “Cassell’s Illustrated Family Paper”, published by John Cassell in London, was considered to be one of the most important periodicals of its era.

<sup>15</sup> AĞAOĞLU, Yavuz Selim, “A Document About Ottoman Freemasonry from British Press”, Tesviye Periodical, İstanbul, March 2006, No: 67, p: 32-33.

<sup>16</sup> Koloğlu, Orhan, “Freemasonry in the World of Islam”, Kırmızı Kedi Publications, March 2012, p: 58.

<sup>17</sup> Zarcone, Thierry, “Le Croissant et Le Compas”, Dervy, 2015, p: 140-141.

<sup>18</sup> “Le Monde Maçonnique” was an important Masonic periodical, published in Paris between 1858 and 1886.

<sup>19</sup> Atabek, Reşad, “Masonic Activities in İstanbul and İzmir Valley between 1861-1880”, Mimar Sinan Periodical, İstanbul, 1984, No: 53, p: 4-14.

<sup>20</sup> Koloğlu, Orhan, “Abdulhamid and the Freemasons”, ibid., p: 97-101.

power of Murat the 5th did not last long in the turbulence of Ottoman politics, but the Caliph of the world of Islam being a Freemason was surely more than a considerable achievement for the brethren.

Another historical character to point out -one of the founders of the Ottoman Grand Orient- was Riza Tevfik, a famous politician and intellectual who was also a prominent member of the Bektashi order, elected as the Grand Master of Ottoman Grand East in 1919.

The Bektashi order was one of the most influential Sufi orders in Ottoman World, and played an important role in the reconciliation of various groups, beliefs and religions. Several of its practices are reminiscent of initiation, and its understanding of universal morality and seeking the truth with freedom of conscience, may be considered to be helpful in building a social base for Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>21</sup> By benefiting from the existing sociocultural background between Freemasonry and Sufi orders, the steps taken during the foundation of Ottoman Grand East in 1909 has noticeably reached to its goals.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The panorama we describe draws several aspects of the interaction between Freemasonry and the political opposition during the final period of the Ottoman Empire. The extent to which a considerable group within the Union and Progress Party might have instrumentalized Freemasonry is to be emphasized. In fact, the foundation of the Ottoman Grand East can even be seen as the crowning of the “Cosmopolitan Opposition” which politics exacerbated through Freemasonry.

The significant influence and weight of non-Muslims in the foundation and initial organization of the Ottoman Grand East is self-evident. On the other hand, the will of Union and Progress to organize Freemasonry over the entirety of Ottoman territories, according to its own views and political intentions, is also visible. Based on these observations, it can be argued that different groups sharing a common denominator acted jointly during the foundation of the Ottoman Grand East.

There is here a critical observation to be made. Clearly the design of this new institution has benefited from the closeness, cultural similarities or predispositions between Freemasonry and certain Sufi fraternities of Islam. Within the context of the era, such an observation can be made not only for the Ottoman Empire but also for several other parts of the Muslim geography. However, in the case of the Ottoman Grand East, this cannot be merely explained by the evident cultural closeness between Islamic Sufism and Freemasonry. The chosen terminology in the constitution, the by-laws and rituals point out to the existence of a conscious and deliberate design, aiming to facilitate the spread of Freemasonry over Ottoman territories. After all, the founders of the Ottoman Grand East were experienced and

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<sup>21</sup> Studies on both Freemasonry and Sufi orders, especially the Bektashi order, indicate similarities on ritual practices and social roles in Ottoman community. (See: Zarcone, Thierry, “Gnostic/Sufi Symbols and Ideas in Turkish and Persian Freemasonry and Para-Masonic Organisations”, *Mimar Sinan Periodical*, March 2008, No: 145, p: 9-27.

important Freemasons who were raised in various European Grand Lodges. Furthermore, many of them were non-Muslims. Hence, it is rather clear that they would not aim at organizing a new Islamic fraternity under an institution with clear modernist tendencies, in a period during which winds of freedom throughout the Empire were in full swing. As points to note in this respect, we see the constitution of the Grand Orient of Belgium being used initially, which was later replaced with an authentic constitution, first prepared in French, then translated into Turkish. The rituals also present a similar case and we see the Grand Lodge delegating authority to one of its non-Muslim members to discuss these issues with the Grand Master of the Grand Orient of Belgium. This picture seems to be complemented with the idea of a free tariqat, open to all convictions for the enlightened Muslim elite, who were already inspired by Auguste Comte.

Every design runs the risk of gradually evolving towards a different direction when put into practice. The evolution of the Ottoman Grand East, which found itself in the midst of political troubles, wars and disasters, is quite a notable adventure, with a considerable impact on the quick falling apart of the different groups which had jointly acted in the foundation of the Ottoman Grand East. The political project of Union and Progress was shakily defeated indeed. This eventually led to the renunciation of the “Cosmopolitan Opposition”, which in turn resulted in a non-cosmopolitan state with no opposition. On the other hand, the gradual diminution of the weight of non-Muslims in Ottoman Masonry did not result in an increase of Sufi influences.

The uncompromising secular character of the Republic of Turkey, which replaced the disintegrated Ottoman Empire, seems to have managed to suppress the rise of possible Sufi approaches within Turkish Freemasonry.<sup>22</sup> However, even within the secular picture of today, a kind of “Embarrassed Sufism” seems to have been inherited, living in the institutional culture of Turkish Freemasonry.

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<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, this demeanour has also been carried onto the Republican era. It is possible to observe the traces of this fact from lodge minutes dating back to 1924. For instance, during a labour on 11 July 1924 in Gunes Lodge -which was established back in Ottoman times- it was recorded that Bektashism is “Muslim Freemasonry”, and that a Bektashi may be accepted into a lodge without being inquired.