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The Return of Chrysoloras: Humanism in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Contexts

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Abstract: The journey of Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras and his stay in Florence at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has been celebrated as an event that decisively shaped the course of European humanism. The later return of Enlightenment humanism to Ottoman lands in the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries can be described as the return of Chrysoloras. This return is generally known in a fragmentary form as a regional phenomenon: the story of Greek, Arab, Turkish and Jewish nationalisms and of the Ottoman reforms. It is also framed historically as the evolution from a traditional and theological society to new forms of epistemic, literary, civic and national communities, while often leaving aside failures and later contradictory transformations. The present essay offers an integrative study of modern humanism in late Ottoman and post-Ottoman contexts. The migration of Enlightenment humanism to the Middle East raised a wide range of expectations, projecting a new national or imperial organization within a harmonious diplomatic relationship with Christian Europe and the Americas. Yet, the more the revivalist and reformist projects evolved, the more they involved ethnic and religious conflicts and colonial intervention. This article illuminates the rise and fall of humanism in Middle Eastern contexts.

Keywords: humanism; enlightenment; late Ottoman history; Arab nationalism; Greek nationalism; Zionism; Tanzimat; Muslim religious reform



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1. Introduction

The migration of Byzantine scholars to the Italian Peninsula at the end of the fourteenth century and during the fifteenth century decisively shaped Italian and later European Renaissance humanism. This transfer of Greek knowledge from the Christian East to the Latin West anticipated and accompanied the progressive fall of Constantinople (1453). A famous story is that of Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras (1350–1415) being invited by Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) to teach Greek in Florence to a group of distinguished humanists. Indeed, Chrysoloras, who brought with him many rare Greek manuscripts, taught Greek language and literature during the years 1397–1400 to figures like Guarino Veronese (1374–1460), Jacopo d’Angelo (c.1360–c.1410), Roberto de’ Rossi (c.1355–1417), Niccolò Niccoli (1364–1437), Leonardo Bruni (c.1370–1444), Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder (1370–c.1444), Uberto Decembrio (1350–1427), and Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459)¹. Out of this unique training in grammar and literature emanated a comprehensive literary effect, most visible in a wide range of direct translations from and imitations of Greek classical literature. This new access, rendering and use of Greek sources became a marker of fifteenth-century *studia humanitatis* and later a central cultural issue in nineteenth- and twentieth-century elaborations of humanism². Western scholars’ dependence on earlier medieval Arabic or Hebrew translations decreased progressively. Bruni’s translations from Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Plutarch and other Greek classics attracted the attention and criticism of his contemporaries and were later celebrated as a paradigmatic shift defining Renaissance humanism (Baron 1955a, pp. 114–21; Botley 2004, pp. 5–62). No less important in this context was Bruni’s 1403–1404 *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis* (Panegyric

of Florence), written in clear imitation of the Greek tradition of panegyrics of Athens, and more specifically of Aristides' *Panathenaic Oration* (155 AD; [Aristides 1973](#)), a text to which he was introduced during his studies under Chrysoloras' guidance ([Bruni 1978](#); [Santosuosso 1986](#))³. Bruni's *Laudatio* stood at the center of Hans Baron's notion of civic humanism developed in *The Crisis of Early Italian Humanism* (1955) and often served to demonstrate the supposed humanistic shift of orientation, from earlier theological to new urban concerns ([Baron 1955b](#), pp. 163–99)⁴. The opening words of [Bruni's \(1978, pp. 135–36\)](#) *Laudatio* have often been heard in this sense:

Would that God immortal give me eloquence worthy of the city of Florence, about which I am to speak, or at least to my zeal and desire on her behalf; for either one degree or the other would, I think, abundantly demonstrate the city's magnificence and splendor . . . Indeed, this city is of such admirable excellence that no one can match his eloquence with it. But we have seen several good and important men who have spoken concerning God himself, whose glory and magnificence the speech of the most eloquent man cannot capture, even in the smallest degree . . . Therefore, I too shall seem to have done enough if, marshaling all competence, expertise, and skill that I have eventually acquired after so much study, I devote my all to praising this city even though I clearly understand that my ability is such that it can in no way be compared with the enormous splendor of Florence.

Bruni's new humanistic knowledge of Greek language and literature seems here emphatically invested in a new historical and secular task: the praise of the civic perfections attained by the most developed urban center of the period, Florence. Humanism has often been centered around this civic or secular shift of interest, leaving aside many other aspects of early modern humanism and religion. This essay is devoted to a forgotten aspect of humanism and its interplay with religion. It does not retell the well-known story of the migration of Greek knowledge from the decaying Byzantine Empire to Italian Renaissance centers. On the contrary, it sketches the opposite journey, the "return of Chrysoloras"—or rather the return of humanism to Ottoman lands, and its deployment and fate in the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries⁵. The type of humanism that will stand at the center of this essay is not the fifteenth-century humanism of Bruni. It is a later type developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe that centered not only on the renewed literary mastery of classical sources but also on a new scientific and technological mastery of nature and human societies. God and religion are often reduced in this context to a simple pre-requisite for natural order and human civilization ([Taylor 2007](#)). The historical context of this essay is also radically different from the *Quattrocento*. Whereas the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the parallel rise of the Ottoman and the Atlantic empires, the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries witnessed a reorientation of Western empires toward the East after the loss of the Americas, together with a progressive dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. From the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, European conquests and imperial influence, regional nationalisms and religious reformist movements, as well as Ottoman attempts to restructure the Empire, shaped a new, evolving Ottoman and post-Ottoman sphere in which ideas played a new political role. The following pages attempt to narrate the return, or rather the rise and fall, of humanism in the Ottoman East under new national and international conditions. They propose a nuanced and yet comprehensive interpretation of its hopes and effects, aiming at elucidating the specific Middle Eastern dialectics of secularization and religious renewal in the age of nationalisms, Ottoman reforms and Europeans' growing colonial grip.

2. The Re-Appearance of Humanism in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Context

In his 1803 *Mémoire sur l'état actuel de la civilisation dans la Grèce*, Greek scholar Adamantes Koraes (1748–1833) solemnly announces "to the whole of enlightened Europe . . . the efforts . . . [the Greeks] are making to enlighten" themselves too ([Coray 1803](#), first page of the introductory letter)⁶. This great news sent to Western Enlightenment circles

was meant to anticipate the closure of a great historical cycle: Greece, cradle of science and civilization, wrote Koraes, was about “to regain possession of the lights of our ancestors, from which a long series of misfortunes had, so to speak, deprived us” (Coray 1803, first page). In the bulk of the *Mémoire*, one reads an eloquent secular narration of the conditions under which Greek enlightenment developed between the Ottoman lands and Europe:

By a new direction which various circumstances had just given to the channels of commerce, in a short space of time, several Greek houses came into possession of extraordinary wealth; and for the first time, the name of millionaire was heard to be pronounced among a people who were accustomed to regarding the small number of those who possessed a capital of a hundred purses, as men showered with the favors of fortune. (Coray 1803, pp. 17–18)

Koraes elegantly sums up the complex ascension of a Greek elite within the Ottoman administration, commerce, and liberal and intellectual professions in Istanbul or Anatolian shore cities, in the Balkans or in the Greek lands. Referring to the “invisible hand” of commerce rather than to divine providence, Koraes had in view the growing role of Greek merchants in maritime commerce during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It generated a new wealth and class relatively independent from the ruling ecclesiastical class (Pizaniyas 2011). Since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Greek Orthodox ecclesiastical rule was operating under Islamic Ottoman domination and protection, which granted to the Orthodox clerical class grouped around the Patriarchate of Constantinople spiritual and administrative rule over the Christian Orthodox subjects. This ecclesiastical class, which functioned for centuries as a dual intermediary between the Ottoman Sultan and the Christians as well as between the current subjugation to Islam and the expected Christian redemption, was progressively challenged by a new emerging group, which began to play a new mediatory role in commerce, education and knowledge, and also in forging new secular representations of future liberation.

Koraes shrewdly describes the new epistemic orientation of this merchant elite: “These newly-rich people [. . .] were quick to realize that, while fortune poured out its gifts blindly, they needed eyes, and clear-sighted eyes, to preserve and make the gifts of fortune bear fruit” (Coray 1803, p. 18). Their first step was to replace “the services of European clerks to manage their affairs” with “national youth, now forced to learn by the lure of considerable salaries” (Coray 1803, p. 18). As consequence, a progressive but radical change occurred in the relationship of the Greek merchant families vis-à-vis knowledge. First, “studying the languages of the countries with which one had commercial relations . . . gave them a tincture of erudition and belles-lettres” (Coray 1803, p. 18). Then, “learning arithmetic and the fine art of bookkeeping” provided the minds of the merchants “with the means of discovering the truth” (Coray 1803, p. 18). Koraes depicts the “desire for education and expatriation [that] took hold of the souls of young people”, and also the drive “that great wealth should naturally inspire in its possessors, to expand their trade through establishments in foreign countries” (Coray 1803, p. 19). Soon, “capitalists were setting up new trading houses in [. . .] Italy, in Holland, in various German countries, and above all in Trieste” (Coray 1803, p. 19). This new network of Greek merchants went hand and hand with the quasi-autonomous development of a Greek fleet. “The islands’ current navy is owned exclusively by Greeks, and from the skippers down to the mousses [apprentice sailors], it is manned exclusively by Greeks” (Coray 1803, pp. 24–25). This fleet was another factor for “multiplying the means of earning” money and education (Coray 1803, p. 25).

Out of the commercial and technological achievements of a transnational Greek merchant class, Koraes derives a larger effect of enlightenment, later to be labeled Greek enlightenment and nationalism⁷. Following a logic of imitation and emulation, learning foreign languages revealed to the Greeks “the advantage of studying our own [language]” (Coray 1803, p. 19). Furthermore, narrates Koraes, “in some [. . .] cities, colleges are being enlarged, and foreign languages and even the sciences taught in Europe are being added” (Coray 1803, p. 33). On the island of Chios, a kind of university and polytechnic is even evoked by the author of the *Mémoire*. Yet, the most visible result of this diffusion of en-

lightenment was the “printing of [Greek] books translated from Italian, French, German and English” (Coray 1803, p. 34). If Chrysoloras contributed decisively to fifteenth-century Italian humanism by teaching Bruni and his colleagues how to translate Greek literature, Koraes envisions nineteenth-century Greek coming out of an inverse movement of translation. Therefore, he mentions with great pride the Greek translations of Locke, Candillac and Montesquieu (Coray 1803, pp. 54–55). The rebirth of Greek literature and philosophy encapsulated the new secular promise of the Greek merchants and intellectuals to the Greek people and to Western Europe:

we can already sense that this language is also undergoing a kind of revolution. Cultivated by so many different feathers, it’s still difficult to predict exactly when it will settle down . . . Judging by its infancy, it promises to be a meeting of good qualities, difficult to find elsewhere. (Coray 1803, p. 56)

Yet, Koraes did not satisfy himself with this vision of a Greek cultural renaissance. He added to it a careful analysis of the new geopolitical situation of the Ottoman Empire following the Russo-Turkish War in 1768–1774. “By virtue of a prestige that is difficult to reconcile with the progress of enlightenment, [. . .] Europeans still imagined themselves to see in this [Ottoman] power the heroes who had conquered the empire of the East” (Coray 1803, p. 20). The Russo-Turkish War “dispelled this prestige forever” insists Koraes (Coray 1803, p. 21). Moreover, it proved “to the whole of Europe that this volume of power, which she took for the stoutness of a vigorous and well-constituted state, was nothing but a dropsy which sooner or later would lead the Ottoman Empire to its destruction” (Coray 1803, p. 21). In consequence, “as the Greeks regained their courage, the Turks felt discouraged and humiliated” (Coray 1803, p. 22). The commercial and cultural ascension of the Greeks in the Ottoman Empire is cast by Koraes within a larger historical transformation in which European powers are gaining an irresistible ascendancy over the Ottomans. He also adds to this growing military and epistemological gap between Europe and the Ottoman Empire a new internal division, according to which “the bachas [pashas] and intendants of the provinces [. . .] no longer received their emperor’s orders except with haughtiness, and as associates of the empire” (Coray 1803, p. 23). In the cultural and geopolitical fresco painted by Koraes, an emerging Greek enlightenment promised to reconnect the Greeks, in a near future, to the growing European superiority, while taking advantage of Ottoman weaknesses and divisions.

Several models of the reconnection of the Greeks to Europe are sketched in the *Mémoire*. Koraes explains that during the eighteenth century, “the Greek nation, by an instinct that is not difficult to explain, had a sort of predilection for the English and the Russians” (Coray 1803, p. 43). The Russians were perceived as a possible protector. Indeed, they had always been “the natural enemies of their oppressors” (Coray 1803, p. 43). The English, however, were considered a global moral defender of “dignity against the hubris of a barbarous court” (Coray 1803, p. 43), that is, against the exactions of the Ottomans. Yet, “no sooner had the revolution begun than the same instinct drew the Greeks to the side of the French” (Coray 1803, p. 43). Following the radical changes in France and the military campaigns in Europe and Egypt, the Greeks began to imagine the “consequences that this revolution could have produced in relation to the fate of Greece” (Coray 1803, p. 43). “Admiration for the prodigies performed by the armies of the Republic” and “memories of those that had once been performed by the Greek armies” (Coray 1803, p. 43) merged in the minds of the Greeks, who started to support the idea of regaining their national independence by virtue of a French military expedition rather than by divine intervention. Thus, the rebirth of humanism in Ottoman Greek communities did not limit itself to a cultural and economic ascent within a declining Ottoman Empire, but set the blueprint for the war of independence in the 1820s and the secession of Greek lands under the protection of Christian European powers.

3. Arab Humanism: The Return of a Long-Departed Guest

George Antonius' famous book *The Arab Awakening*, published in 1938, was to a certain extent similar in its intention to Koraes' *Mémoire*⁸. It also sought to broadcast to the West the linear and secular story of another regional awakening in the Levant: not that of the Greeks, but of the Arabs. Similarly to Koraes, Antonius looks back to the "earliest stirrings" "down to present day" and beyond. He sketches the outline of a new historical movement, "the Arab movement", over a century, until he reaches the contemporary problems it will have to face. Following in the footsteps of Koraes, he begins his narrative with the appearance of a new Arab enlightenment and humanism:

The story of the Arab national movement opens in Syria in 1847, with the foundation in Bairut [*sic*] of a modest literary society under American patronage. (Antonius 2001, p. 13)

Antonius is referring to the Syrian Society for the Acquisition of Sciences and Arts (al-Jam'īyya al-Sūriyya li-Iktisāb al-'Ulūm wa-l-Funūn), founded by a group of Christian missionaries and Christian Arab scholars based in the newly expanding city of Beirut. The first goals of that society, as expressed in its statutes, were:

1. "to make its members learn sciences and arts by the means of discussions, scholarly correspondences, learned speeches, and exchanges of information";
2. "to collect books either printed or in manuscript, in particular those written in Arabic and corresponding to the scholarly interests of the society";
3. "to revive the appetite to learn general notions about sciences and arts independently from controversial religious and legal issues, since these do not pertain to the society" (Al-Bustani 1990, p. 19).

These three goals design a clear humanistic and enlightenment project. On the one hand, the society created a new private–public sphere in which scientific and artistic knowledge, Arabic literary expression, and book collecting and reading practices were cultivated by a relatively close group of scholars. This sphere, although promoted by foreign and local Christians, was conceived as independent from religious and state institutions and fostering new collaboration between scholars of different religious communities. On the other hand, the constitution of this limited sphere of enlightenment, based in the rapidly developing city of Beirut and centered around the Arabic language and Arabic literature and expression, was supposed to produce a significant effect in the larger public, creating a virtuous circle of change by education and various means of diffusion of new cultural values⁹. The use of the verb form "*inhād*" (the reviving or the rebirth) associates the expected dynamic relationship between the "Syrian society" of scholars and the broader society in Beirut and other urban centers in Ottoman Syria with a cultural and proto-national notion of renaissance (*nahḍa*). This notion of revival effected by a newly enlightened group repeated a central motif of Koraes' earlier *Mémoire*: the renewed humanism of a few, of an elite, announces a renaissance of an entire historical group identified with a language and a territory after a period of decadence corresponding partly to Ottoman rule. Exemplary of these hopes of enlightenment was one of the learned speeches given at the Syrian Society during that period. The speech, entitled "On the Education of Women", was offered by the man who was soon to become leader of this awakening movement, Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883) (see Abu-Maneh 1980; Hanssen and Safieddine 2019; Tibawi 1974, pp. 238–52; Zachs 2005, pp. 126–54). There, al-Bustani presented his conclusions derived from the reading of "men of knowledge and research" and the practical consideration of "effect and impact" of women's education or ignorance "on the social body and public in terms of culture, prosperity, misery, and good and evil" (Al-Bustani 1990, p. 40). He demonstrated in the speech "the necessity of educating women and its benefits as well as the damages resulting from their state of ignorance" (Al-Bustani 1990, p. 40). Learning about books, social observation and discussions within a scholarly forum were expected to effect changes to long-inherited habits.

One notable difference existed between the Greek renaissance of Koraes and the Arab renaissance of the Syrian Society. The former took for granted that the Greek revival would eventually eliminate the Muslim presence in Greece. It constituted a religious, national and geo-strategical secession from the Ottoman Empire and a return to the Christian and European sphere of influence¹⁰. Although heavily influenced by Christian missionaries and the rapidly growing commercial contact with Europe and the Americas, the intentions of members of the Syrian Society and later similar groups were entirely different (Zachs 2005, pp. 39–85, 126–54). In a later famous speech on *Ādāb al-ʿArab* (Arab culture or literature) delivered in 1859, Al-Bustani constructs a narration of the historical conditions that could lead to a renewed growth of an Arabic epistemic and literary culture in late nineteenth-century Syria (Al-Bustani 1859). There, he associates sciences with a series of rather secular conditions: gradual development, the “gathering of many intellects to reach the desired goal”, “movements and travels from one place to another”, reading of books, “freedom of thought” and learned speeches. Accordingly, the rebirth of *adab al-ʿArab*, understood as an Arabic epistemic and literary culture in the spirit of modern science, is not a sectorial or confessional project, but a comprehensive transformation of the society and its religious structuration. “Sciences are like guests”, writes al-Bustani, “they stay only at the house of who hosts them well” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 2)¹¹. The three parts of al-Bustani’s speech describe the appearance, disappearance and expected reappearance of this guest, the epistemic condition of sciences and literature, while *disconnecting* it from confessional divisions. Thus, in the first division, he recasts the Islamic theological notion of the period of “*Jāhiliyya*” (pre-Islamic Arab paganism or ignorance according to the Qur’an) as an epistemic period of illiteracy and knowledge limited to Arabic language, poetry and rhetoric. In the second part, which focuses on the Islamic period, al-Bustani begins with an even bolder statement:

Qadi Sa’aid Ben Ahmad al-Andalusi said that the Arabs in early Islam did not care for sciences, only for the sciences related to their language and the knowledge linked to their religious laws. They did not even consider the craft of medicine. (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 4)

Instead of presenting the Qur’anic revelation as transforming the epistemic state of the Arabs, al-Bustani proposes an alternative narrative for the later appearance of the socio-political conditions for an Arabic epistemic and literary culture, *adab al-ʿArab*. He designs a ruse of reason typical of the Enlightenment. First, the “strong inclination [of early Muslim Arabs] toward invasion and military campaigns and their exaggerated interest for expanding the sphere of their control distracted them from paying attention to matters of literature and sciences” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 5). This historical contradiction between early Islam and sciences is dramatically exposed by al-Bustani in the following story:

when Amr ibn Al-As conquered the city of Alexandria in the year 640 CE under the Caliphate of Umar bin Al-Khattab, after a long siege, Yahyia Yaakubi of Alexandria, known as [John] the grammarian (see Meyerhof (1932)), told him one day when he was accompanying him: ‘You have seized the all the riches of Alexandria and taken hold of all its contents. Things that interest you, I am not hindering you from having them. And things that do not interest you, let us have them first.’ Amr told him: ‘What do you require?’ He said: ‘The books of wisdom that are in the royal libraries.’ He replied: ‘I cannot offer them before asking the authorization from the commander of the faithful, Umar bin Al-Khattab.’ Amr wrote to Umar explaining to him the request of Yahyia and he received the following reply from Umar: ‘Concerning the books that you have mentioned, if their content agrees with the book of God, then the book of God is richer and suffices us. And if they contain matters that disagree with the book of God, then there is no need of them, and proceed to their destruction.’ When Amr received the reply of Umar, he dispatched the books in the different hammams [Turkish baths] of Alexandria to be burned in their fireplaces. And they fed the fires for a

long time. It is said that the number of the books was 400,000. (Al-Bustani 1859, pp. 5–6)

This bold legend about the early Islamic stance toward the sciences was probably taken from European sources that minimized similar attitudes in early Christianity¹². Yet, al-Bustani did not satisfy himself with this critique of early Islam, as many Europeans did. He composed out of it a story of cultural and epistemic reconciliation between Muslims and Christians. The “great irreplaceable loss” of the Alexandrian libraries, first feared and felt by the Christians only, is progressively understood, internalized and mourned by the Muslim Arabs themselves, eventually producing their epistemic transformation. “When the Arabs awoke from the darkness of ignorance and stupidity after this event, they begun to share with the rest of the world sentiments of sadness and sorrow for the loss of this considerable library” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 6). The awakening from *Jāhiliyya* is thus not a theological event, but a progressive socio-cultural transformation that resulted from “the expansion of religion” and the “control of the prosperous countries which were centers of ancient good taste and elegance” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 6). Out of this mixing of populations and an interreligious exchange of knowledge and habits came a new “spirit of gentleness and civilization” for the Arabs and the progressive end of “their rejection of sciences”. This *mélange* of ancient and Christian cultures with the new Arab Muslim one created the conditions for *adab al-ʿArab*. From this moment on, the “progress [of the Arabs] in these matters was as fast and astonishing as it was earlier in matters of war” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 6).

After a long description of the many achievements of medieval *adab*, al-Bustani closes the cycle of this epistemic transformation:

The Arabs remained as such until the desire of kings and elites for science ceased, therefore, the causes for seeking and acquiring science and studying its books dropped until many of these volumes had been lost and the sciences could not find clients anymore. Time made scientists disappear. Ignorance took strong hold of people to the point where they began believing that acquiring and seeking sciences are an error and a waste of time. (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 21)

Al-Bustani goes on to describe the *translatio* of sciences “to the lands of Europe through the Maghreb and Spain” and the refuge they found there. Christians in Europe “opened their gates and hearts welcoming the old friend who had left them [for] many generations” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 22). They “commanded the translation of the best writings of the Arabs into Latin”, leading sciences to return “with abundant profits from the East to the West” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 22). Enlightenment decreased in the East while increasing in the West until Europeans achieved a “great superiority over the Arabs” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 22).

Where were the Arabs and where are they now? The golden generation of their culture has passed and a dark generation has come and settled. The beginning their dark age started by the end of the fourteenth century, and kept growing and increasing until it became pervasive in their countries and among their peoples. (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 22)

Yet, this third cycle was about to reach its end according to al-Bustani. The nineteenth-century Arab enlightenment, like the earlier medieval one, is presented as a Muslim–Christian endeavor, recreating the epistemic conditions for Arab *adab*, between Cairo, Beirut and Istanbul. On the one hand, “Muhammed Ali Pacha did in this generation with the writings of the Europeans what Charles the Great did with the Arabs, he ordered the translation of the best of their writings to Arabic” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 28). On the other hand, al-Bustani describes at length the many Christian schools, learning institutions, libraries and printing houses that developed in Beirut and other sites in Syria. The combination of the two processes leads al-Bustani to make his famous final call and profess his utopian vision of enlightenment and humanism:

O Compatriots! O offspring of notables and grandchildren of Syriac and Greek kin, mounted on the camel's hump of the nineteenth century, the century of inventions and discoveries, the century of culture and knowledge, the century of manufacturing and arts! Rise! Get up! Be aware! Wake up! Roll your sleeve up your forearms of determination! Culture is standing at your doors from all sides, knocking, requesting entry into your majestic and radiant mountains, your valleys, your plains, and your deserts, which nature has decorated with lofty ornaments of beauty. Reject your sectarianism, partisanship, and personal prejudices and outstretch your hand to shake the hand of culture. Open the doors to this old friend who is coming back to you after a long absence. Welcome it and greet it with utmost happiness, so that it can fill your land with contentment and comfort, and dress it in splendor and pride. (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 42)¹³

The returning guest is a recurring metaphor in al-Bustani's speech for a set of epistemic conditions, relatively independent from religion, that have been moving over the centuries between East and West and have been responsible for the several renaissances of science and literature. Such a precious guest should this time be hosted not just as a passing guest, but as a long-term guest who will completely transform the divided houses of the confessional Syrian society toward a new shared notion of the nation. Arab humanism is carefully constructed by al-Bustani as a set of epistemic conditions developed over time, which can periodically transform a limited tribal and confessional society into a universal civilization. Yet, the great difference between the Abbasside humanism and that of the nineteenth century consists of the fact that the first happened in a period of conquest and expansion, whereas the second took place in a period of recession. The medieval *adab* was mainly an internal cultural exchange (Hellenistic, Persian, Christian, Jewish, Muslim) within the newly established Muslim empire. The modern *adab*, however, meant the welcomed influence or return of European sciences, literature and technology within Ottoman society. The guests to welcome were not only the Christian or Pagan people conquered during the first Islamic expansion but also the powerful, expanding European empires.

4. Antonius' Suspicion Regarding Mehmet Ali and the Tanzimat Reforms

In the second chapter of *The Arab Awakening*—in fact, the first narrative section after the general considerations developed in the opening chapter—Antonius coined a strange notion regarding the historical achievements of Mehmet Ali (1769–1849) and his son Ibrahim (1789–1848). This notion is “the false start” (Antonius 2001, pp. 21–34). With this harsh historical judgment, Antonius conveyed an unacknowledged suspicion of Muslim political reforms. In sharp contrast with the leading role attributed by al-Bustani to the educational and cultural reforms introduced by “the Ma'mun of the nineteenth century Muhammad [Mehmet] Ali Pasha” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 42)¹⁴, Antonius described Mehmet Ali and his son as having ontological “weighty handicaps”:

They were not Arabs and had not mastered Arabic, although Ibrahim had learnt to speak it with a certain fluency; and their advocacy of an Arab national revival, wanting in the incentive of race and the eloquence of a rich language, lacked the force of spontaneity. (Antonius 2001, p. 27)

Antonius' notion of a “false start” points at an unbridgeable gap between the nature of Mehmet's and Ibrahim's political endeavor and their own personal, racial and cultural background. Al-Bustani did not mention this tension; on the contrary, he praised at length the “Bulaq Press in Cairo [developed with Mehmet Ali's support] which has enriched the Arab race with a diversity of books . . . Arabic works and translations” (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 38)¹⁵. Rifa'ah Tahtawi, the leading figure behind the press and the cultural changes in Mehmet Ali's time, developed—a generation earlier than the al-Bustani circle in Beirut—a patriotic notion of Egypt as a national homeland (*waṭaniyya*). He combined in this notion natural motives (the homeland is like a “nest for man in which he grows, and from which

he proceeds into the world”) and Islamic and historic motives (Egypt is “a land of honor and glory in ancient and modern times” and “an image of the eternal haven crafted on earth by the hands of divinity”) (Tahtawi 1973, p. 429). Antonius (2001, p. 32) denigrated Mehmet’s and Ibrahim’s attempt at carving an Arab empire because of “the lack of anything approaching national solidarity” among the elites as well as among the larger population. The author of *The Arab Awakening* saw in the decadence of the Muslim Arab empire in the Middle Ages and the later rise of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal rule “centuries of decadence and misrule” which “had debilitated the collective spirit of its population and loosened its former cohesion” and resulted in “disintegration” and “sectarian distinctions” (Antonius 2001, p. 31). An Ottoman Muslim, a non-Arab like Mehmet Ali or Ibrahim could not correct this fateful sectarianism, according to Antonius. Their “driving motive was personal ambition” (Antonius 2001, p. 27) and, likewise, the goals of the confessional communities remained particularistic. Throughout *The Arab Awakening*, Muslim religious and political reformism is not acknowledged as a possible form of modern universality and pluralism. In sharp contrast, the rediscovery and implementation of a general Arab notion is the story of the Arab national movement that Antonius chose to tell and achieve. Therefore, he framed Mehmet’s and Ibrahim’s conquest and reforms as a “false start”, a national change accomplished by the wrong actors: Mehmet Ali and the still confessionally minded populations.

This is not the only Muslim reformist case in which Antonius opposed the views of al-Bustani, while on the other hand crediting him and his associates with the real start of Arab nationalism. Indeed, al-Bustani closes his 1859 speech on Arab *adab* with praise for the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms:

His Sublime Highness the great Sultan Abd Al-Majid Khan is munificent toward ensuring happiness, comfort, safety, success, and progress in all the realms of his domain. His sound decrees and expanding these schools throughout his protected lands have inevitably stirred emotions among his subjects and moved them to love him and raise their calls to God Almighty to prolong his reign and reinforce the pillars of his state. (Al-Bustani 1859, p. 43)¹⁶

Such praise for the Tanzimat decrees of 1839 and 1856 would be hard to find in Antonius’ *Arab Awakening*. It deals with the Tanzimat period (1839–1875)¹⁷, but not with the contents and goals of the reforms. The book focuses only on the intellectual circles responsible for the birth of Arab nationalism. In contrast, Antonius devotes two chapters to later stages of Ottoman politics, regarding Abdul Hamid II and the role of the Young Turks in the early twentieth century, whose goal was to establish a notion of Turkish-Ottoman despotism over the Arabs, as well as the incompatibility of Turkish and Arab national revival (Antonius 2001, pp. 61–78, 101–25).

Al-Bustani, on the contrary, perceived a complementarity between the reemerging *adab al-arab* and the Tanzimat reforms (Abu-Maneh 1980). Beyond the 1839 commitment of the new Ottoman Sultan guaranteeing a set of rights and norms of procedure to all his subjects, in his 1859 speech on *adab*, al-Bustani referred more specifically to the 1856 confirmation and reform of the legal status of the different religious communities¹⁸. Indeed, following the 1856 Islahat Firman of the Sultan,

Patriarchs, Metropolitans, Archbishops, Bishops, and Rabbis shall take an oath on their entrance into office according to a form agreed upon in common by my Sublime Porte and the spiritual heads of the different religious communities [Bâb-ı Âli’ mizle cemaat-ı muhtelifenin rüesa-yı rûhaniyesi beyninde karargâr olacak bir sûrette]. (Bailey 1942, p. 287)

The formalization of the relationship of each non-Muslim community with the Sultan went hand in hand with the declared will to reform and harmonize the powers previously conceded to the community with “the progress of civilization and knowledge” [*medeniyet ve malûmat*] and with the new “generous and beneficent intentions” of the monarch (Bailey 1942, p. 287). It meant among other things the creation of new representative assemblies

composed of both “ecclesiastics and laymen” (Bailey 1942, p. 288). Thus, the *firman* of 1856 sketches new relationships between creeds in mixed cities:

In the towns, small boroughs, and villages where different sects [*edyân-ı muhtelifede*] are mingled together, each community [*bir cemaatin*], inhabiting a distinct quarter, shall, by conforming to the above-mentioned ordinances, have equal power [*muktedir olabilmesi*] to repair and improve its churches, its hospitals, its schools, and its cemeteries. When there is a question of the erection of new buildings, the necessary authority must be asked for through the Sublime Porte [Bâb-ı Âlî]. (Bailey 1942, p. 288)

In this mixed urban center, the authority of the Sultan presents itself innovatively as warranting a new civic equality between religious communities. This new civic urban space serves as a model for the entire empire in which “no subject [. . .] shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes, nor shall be in any way annoyed on this account [*tebea-i şâhânemden hiçbir kimesne bulunduğ u dinin âyininini icrâdan men’ olunmaması*]” (Bailey 1942, p. 288). A similar principle is applied to the administration of the empire, to the civil and military schools of the government and to taxation and military recruitment.

The *firman* also established mixed tribunals to address “all commercial, correctional, and criminal suits between Muslims and Christian or other non-Muslim subjects, or between Christians or other non-Muslims of different sects” (Bailey 1942, p. 289). It went so far as to make it “lawful for foreigners to possess landed property” (Bailey 1942, p. 290).

The last two decrees of the *firman* sum up its spirit:

Steps shall also be taken for the formation of roads and canals to increase the facilities of communication and increase the sources of the wealth of the country. Everything that can impede commerce or agriculture shall be abolished. To accomplish these objects means shall be sought to profit by the science, the art, and the funds of Europe [*bunun maarif ve ulûm ve sermaye-i Avrupa’dan istifadeye*], and thus gradually to execute them. (Bailey 1942, p. 291)

The series of measures taken by the Muslim ruler to effect a new free civic, commercial, communicational and scientific space did not rely so much on the overcoming of the religious and ethnic divisions as upon their acknowledgment and more liberal arrangement in order to facilitate as many exchanges as possible. Therefore, the *firman* states that “every community is authorized to establish Public Schools of Science, Art, and Industry” (Bailey 1942, p. 288). This was the background for the establishment of many Christian educational establishments in the Ottoman Empire, among them the educational institutions in which al-Bustani and his colleagues worked. It seems easy to understand why Mehmet Ali’s reforms and the Tanzimat were perceived by al-Bustani as a new Muslim political framework facilitating an Arab renaissance. In concealed opposition to the views of this “founding father”, Antonius constructed a selective history of the “national movement” in which the *nahda* of al-Bustani and the political, economic and cultural reforms led by the Muslim rulers in Egypt and Istanbul were concurrent and even conflicting evolutions.

5. The Dreamed Harmony of Reforms and Colonial Influence

In a recent article revisiting the complex cultural and historical background of the 1839 edict of the Tanzimat, Edhem Eldem (2021) deploys a vast range of sources to explain the intriguing articulation of the Islamic and Ottoman background of the *firman* with new ideas and projects elaborated in contact with the expanding colonial empires of England and France. Thus, he opens a fascinating window into the complexity and even contradictions of Islamic reforms. The edict, according to this reconstruction, is neither a new elaboration of former Islamic and Ottoman trends nor a direct adaption of identifiable European ideas. A certain lack of sources renders opaque the transition from Islamic and Ottoman conceptions of the state and its reform to the liberal notions of the rule of law, protection of individual property, the modern economy, the state budget and the army implemented in the Tanzimat decrees. In the middle of the article, Eldem analyzes an uncanny, secret 1839 memorandum

of Rashid Pacha (the leading figure behind the Tanzimat) to Lord Palmerston (Bailey 1942, pp. 271–76). There, Rashid Pacha develops the idea of a combined interest of the European states and the Ottomans in the regeneration of the Ottoman Empire:

If we refuse to recognize the imminence of the peril, in order to deal only with pacification with Egypt, along with the sole issues of the Empire’s integrity and independence of the Empire, we would miss our intended goal, that is to say, the powers who wish to maintain the Empire, would see their desire only imperfectly fulfilled. (Bailey 1942, p. 273)

Rashid Pacha envisions this joined aspiration of the Europeans and the Ottomans, the regeneration of the Ottoman Empire, as a kind of voluntary colonization by a series of European states:

But it may be said that the remedy to this evil would be a sort of invasion of the Sublime Porte’s internal administration, as such conduct would be contrary to the respective rights of nations.

To answer this objection, it would suffice to ask whether this invasion of the rights of nations would intend any action harmful to a people, and whether, when its preservation is necessary for the equilibrium of Europe, there cannot be any harm or disadvantage in attaching oneself to everything that must make up the strength and prosperity of this people, even if this can only be achieved by interfering in its internal administration within certain limits. (Bailey 1942, pp. 273–74)

In a striking moment of lucidity, the soon-to-be leader of the Tanzimat acknowledges that the reforms would imply not only the adoption of general principles already in use in Europe but also a set of direct influences on the young Sultan who would “enable the friendly powers to show him the road to be taken”; on the Divan, which would welcome “the proposals made by Europe”; and on the “populations [...] eagerly awaiting [...] improvements” (Bailey 1942, p. 274). Notwithstanding the dangers, Rashid Pacha indulges in a fantasy of a successful reform–invasion:

As soon as the [European] powers would only hint at their generous attention, the heads of government, appreciating for themselves the full importance of such a conquest, would hasten to complete protective laws, whose benefits would extend to the Christian subjects of the Sublime Porte, which would find in this work of justice the most powerful element of its regeneration. (Bailey 1942, p. 275)

The reform of state administration and the establishment of a new rule of law are envisioned as a perfect complementarity of European generosity and Ottoman gratefulness, resulting in a diplomatic integration of the Ottoman Empire within Europe and in civic equality between Muslim and Christian Ottomans. Reform, pervasive European influence, civic and economic regeneration and international and interreligious harmony are fusing together in an esthetic moment of reconciliation and appeasement of antagonism and tensions.

About twenty years after Rashid Pacha’s astonishing memorandum, the joint endeavor of the European powers and the Ottoman Empire reappears in a far less irenic context:

News of the spell of atrocities and abominations committed this summer by the troublemakers in our midst has reached the corners of the Earth. (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 65)

Al-Bustani refers in his 1860 pamphlet *The Clarion of Syria* to the civil and interreligious war in 1860 in Syria, mostly between Druzes and Christians¹⁹. “The destruction and damage [...] unparalleled in historical chronicles” provoked general concerns (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 66). “All over the civilized world, it has drawn pity and gloom” (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 65). Similarly, “Sultan ‘Abd al-Majid [...] was deeply moved” (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 68).

This Ottoman and European concern and common desire to put an end to interreligious violence inspires great expectations in al-Bustani:

Our country is world renowned for its water, air, and soil. It is the most proud and praiseworthy. Yet for a number of generations, it has been afflicted by the corruption of uncivilized segments of its people. That is why you see it increasingly lagging behind other countries and becoming even more backward following the recent unrest. But we hope that with the help of God, with the stamina of our Sublime State and the friendly Great Powers, this current setback, whose echoes have reached the corners of the inhabited Earth, will turn into the beginning of great goodness and usher in a new age for Syria. (Al-Bustani 2019, pp. 78–79)

Not unlike Rashid Pasha, Al-Bustani imagines out of the concrete collaboration of the Ottoman Sultan and the French and English empires a regeneration of Syria from its situation of corruption and uncivilization to achieving a new socio-political goal, which he described using the famous Arab term *waṭāniyya* (patriotic love for the homeland):

People of the homeland have rights vis-à-vis their country which in turn has obligations toward them. It goes without saying that the more these rights are fulfilled, the more people grow attached to their country, and the more desirous and pleased they are in rendering those duties. Among the obligations that a country owes its people is to secure their precious right to life, honor, and prosperity. These obligations also include upholding civil, moral, and religious freedoms, especially the freedom of conscience in confessional matters. (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 77)

Under the joined protection of the Sultan and Europe, al-Bustani imagines a transformation from religious sectarianism, particularism and antagonism into new civic ties and a general patriotic sense of belonging to the homeland. Al-Bustani's envisioned Syrian patriotic citizenship is an internal process meant to complete work started by the joint external intervention of the Sultan and European powers. Whereas the latter represent an external repression of sectarian violence and protection of each confessional community, the former launches a historical process of gradually dissuading Syrians from seeking sectarian goals and investing them in the open-ended task of increasing the general welfare of the country. The ability of the envisioned Syrian citizens "to take part in [the country's] affairs and to get involved in its welfare increases their desire for its success and their enthusiasm for its progress" (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 77). Yet, al-Bustani's civic transformation also generates a new antagonism with traditional religious denominations:

As for those who exchange patriotism for confessional fanaticism and who sacrifice the welfare of the homeland for personal interests, they do not deserve to belong to the homeland. They are its enemies. Those who do not expend any effort to prevent or alleviate incidences harmful to the country are equally its enemies. (Al-Bustani 2019, p. 78)

The 1861 "Règlement organique" issued by the Sublime Porte and the European powers to restore order did not follow the dream of al-Bustani: a joint Ottoman and European intervention completed by an inner civic transformation of the Syrians. On the contrary, a new confessional regime was created under Ottoman and European protection, which would lead to the later division of Syria and Lebanon after World War I and under the French Mandate. Nothing gives a better idea of this confessionalism than Article 2 of the "Règlement organique":

There shall be a central administrative Medjliss [Assembly] for the whole [Lebanon's] Mountain, composed of twelve members, namely: two Maronites, two Druses, two Greek Orthodox, two Greek Catholics, two Metualis and two Muslims, charged with distributing taxes, controlling the management of revenues and

expenditures, and giving its advisory opinion on all questions put to it by the Governor²⁰.

Rashid Pasha's 1839 memorandum and Al-Bustani's 1860 *Clarion of Syria* displayed a similar imagined complementarity of local reforms and external European influence. Yet, instead of this harmonious complementarity, historical evolution in the second half of the nineteenth century fueled colonial dependency and ethno-religious conflictuality, revealing a concealed face of humanism in the Middle Eastern context.

6. The Domination of Politics and the Collapse of Humanism

World War I and the post-war mandates of the British and French empires over the former Ottoman lands continued the nineteenth-century collaborative and colonial model of European external influence and internal civic and national regeneration. This collaboration was supposed, in the Greek, Egyptian, Ottoman and Syrian cases briefly studied above, to effect a harmonious cultural, economic and scientific revival within a favorable diplomatic environment. Yet, the two more ambitious projects of reforms, in Egypt and in Istanbul, ended with similar negative results: an enormous debt to European financial markets, which prompted British rule over Egypt from 1882, and direct involvement of European powers in the management of the Ottoman finances during Hamid II's reign (Gayffier-Bonneville 2016, pp. 127–43; Hanioglu 2010, pp. 135–38). This growing colonial influence, often associated with the socio-cultural ascent of Levantine Christians, sparked a series of Islamic reactions (the Urabi revolt in Egypt) and interreligious conflicts (anti-Armenian violence). To this disillusion of the *fin de siècle* was added a new national revival project, Zionism, which soon came to crystallize much of the earlier political tensions. This is surely one of the reasons why Antonius closes his magnum opus with the particular case of Palestine:

Once the fact is faced that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, or of a national home based on territorial sovereignty, cannot be accomplished without forcibly displacing the Arabs, the way to a solution becomes clearer. It is not beyond the capacity of British, Jewish and Arab statesmanship to devise one. There seems to be no valid reason why Palestine should not be constituted into an independent Arab state in which as many Jews as the country can hold without prejudice to its political and economic freedom would live in peace, security and dignity, and enjoy full rights of citizenship. Such an Arab state would naturally be tied to Great Britain by a freely-negotiated treaty which should contain provisions for the safeguarding of British strategic and economic interests, for ensuring the safety and the inviolability of the Holy Places of all faiths, for the protection of all minorities and minority rights, and for affording the Jewish community the widest freedom in the pursuit of their spiritual and cultural ideals. (Antonius 2001, p. 410)

As in 1860, Antonius envisions a local and European collaboration to settle interreligious and interethnic tensions and conflicts. Once again, he resorts to the model of the Tanzimat *firman* of 1856 granting equal civic rights to religious and ethnic minorities. Yet, the simple repetition of these earlier solutions and models acknowledges their former failure and the growing national and religious tensions, as famously expressed in the frightening closing words of the book:

But the logic of facts is inexorable. It shows that no room can be made in Palestine for a second nation except by dislodging or exterminating the nation in possession. (Antonius 2001, p. 412)

The reformist dream of interreligious, interethnic and international harmony, imagined for more than a century, turned into a dire logic of power.

The same political background, not at the eve of World War II but at the eve of the 1948 Arab–Israeli war, led Martin Buber (1878–1965) in his 1947 essay *Two Peoples in Palestine*

to rehabilitate a bi-national and interreligious model, partly similar to the late Ottoman communitarian model:

What is really needed by each of the two peoples living one alongside the other, and one within the other, in Palestine is self-determination, autonomy, the chance to decide for itself. But this most certainly does not mean that each is in need of a state in which it will be the sovereign. The Arab population does not need an Arab state in order to develop its potential freely, nor does the Jewish population need a Jewish state to accomplish this purpose. Its realization on both sides can be guaranteed within the framework of a joint bi-national socio-political entity, in which each side will be responsible for the particular matters pertaining to it, and both together will participate in the ordering of their common concerns. (Buber and Mendes-Flohr 1983, p. 199)

After fifty years in which many Zionists promised great benefits for the Arab populations and the Middle East from Zionist settlements, in 1947 Buber is contemplating with great anxiety the fact that “the continuous growth and domination of the political element has interfered to an ever-increasing extent with the creation of this mutual trust” between Jews and Arabs (Buber and Mendes-Flohr 1983, p. 199). The repeated ethnic and interreligious confrontations between Jews and Arabs in the 1920s and 1930s and the gloomy prospects of the end of the British Mandate in 1948 brought Buber to desire not the realization of Jewish or Arab nationalism with its ever-growing exclusivist consequences of sovereignty, but the suspension of it, the restraint of it and a return to an ethnic and religious solution similar to the post-1860 “Règlement organique”. Instead of identifying the state administration with Jewish or Arab national renaissance, Buber intended to dissociate it, leaving it only a foreign protector of the autonomy of each national–religious community, while leaving the national and religious revival as an internal communitarian process. This never-to-be-found benevolent protector, reminiscent of the nineteenth-century associations of the Ottoman Empire and its “European allies”, had several names, including an American or international trusteeship or a bi-national state. Yet, these names could with difficulty hide the fact that the expected civic overcoming of religious and ethnic divisions under Ottoman and European rule had not happened, and had rather evolved into fully fledged ethno-religious conflicts and a logic of communitarian identification and exclusion.

7. The Religious Restructuring of the Failed National Revival

The full meaning of Buber’s step back is not to be found in the evasive formulas of an international trusteeship or bi-nationalism, but in the growing religious restructuring of the failed national revival in the former Ottoman lands. The religious reformulation of the national and civic unification can be read in Rashid Rida’s famous *Muhammadan Revelation* of 1933, written after the failure of the attempted Syrian national state in the aftermath of World War I²¹:

The Qur’an is a book that was revealed to an unlettered man who grew up with a natural purity of self, possessed a sound mind, a virtuous soul, and a strong moral character; and who was, moreover, unaffected by any established religious tradition, or blind faith. The reason for this was that the one so chosen was to bring about a revolution, a major upheaval among the Arabs and the other peoples of the world, one that would sweep away the darkness of idolatry and ignorance. The purpose of this revolution was to liberate the human mind from servitude to those with the audacity to claim divinity for themselves, or to claim to represent the divine and carry out his or her will, thereby taking control of peoples’ lives, bodies, and wealth. The revolution brought about by Muhammad, upon him be peace, was aimed at the emancipation of the human soul, and the restoration of human dignity, through proclaiming that there is no god but Allah, and that all of humankind are equal before Him.

Such a revolution can only come about on the basis of the Qur'anic principle which says that: Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (13:11). (Rida 1996, p. 70)

The cultural, civic and national regeneration imagined and imperfectly performed in the late Ottoman Empire and in its colonial dismantling after World War I is re-invested here through the terminology of revolution, liberation, equality and humanity, in the Qur'anic revelation that once successfully transformed the Arab tribes and other nations, and which should now be repeated instead of the failing enlightenment and nationalism. Yet, the repeated religious revolution envisioned by Rida is no simple return to the past. It wants also to be the more successful continuation of the efforts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, combining the demand for justice, the search for civic agency and a renewed sense of religious mission. This combination of continuity with nineteenth-century nationalism and its religious correction is also visible in Rabbi Abraham Kook's religious-Zionist approach:

The Land of Israel is not something external, not an external national asset, a means to the end of collective solidarity and the strengthening of the nation's existence, physical or even spiritual. The Land of Israel is an essential unit bound by the bond-of-life to the People, united by inner characteristics to its existence. Therefore, it is impossible to appreciate the content of the sanctity of the Land of Israel and to actualize the depth of love for her by some rational human understanding—only by the spirit of God that is in the soul of Israel. This spirit radiates natural hues in all avenues of healthy feeling and shines according to the measure of supernal holy spirit, which fills with life and pleasantness the heart of the holy of thought and deep Jewish thinkers. [. . .] The true strengthening of the Jewish idea in exile will come about only through the depth of its immersion in the Land of Israel, and from the hope of the Land of Israel it will receive always its essential characteristics. The expectation of salvation is the force that preserves exilic Judaism; the Judaism of the Land of Israel is salvation itself. (Kook 1993, pp. 89–90)

As in the previous quote from Rida, Rabbi Kook positions himself after the early Zionist national awakening and its instrumentalization of the Land of Israel for affecting a national, economic and cultural transformation of Jews. In this text written during World War I, he clearly delimitates the value of cultural and political nationalism, making it a confused formulation of a theological, mystical and messianic bond between the Jewish people, the Land of Israel and God. The examples of Rida and Rabbi Kook highlight the shift from the nineteenth-century expectations of epistemic, civic and national transformation of the Ottoman population to their reformulation as a renewed religious opportunity to accomplish a religious mission abandoned over the centuries. The attractiveness of these religious reformulations relied on the fact that failed attempts to overcome confessional and ethnic divides resulted in growing religious and ethnic conflicts, which prompted renewed religious identification. Instead of the hope of making religious denominations parts of a new civic and national/imperial order, the civic and national reforms are only becoming elements of a renewed notion of a confessional society.

8. Conclusions

The story of Byzantine scholar Chrysoloras' journey and stay in Florence at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has been celebrated in early modern and modern times as an event that decisively shaped the course of European humanism. The later return of Enlightenment humanism to Ottoman lands in the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries can be described as the return of Chrysoloras. This return is generally known in a fragmentary form as a regional history: the story of Greek, Arab, Turkish and Jewish nationalisms and the story of the Ottoman reforms. It is also framed historically as the evolution from a traditional and theological society to new forms of epistemic, literary,

civic and national communities, while often leaving aside failures and later contradictory transformations. The present essay has offered an integrative study of modern humanism in late Ottoman and post-Ottoman contexts. The migration of Enlightenment humanism to the Middle East raised a wide range of expectations, projecting a new national and imperial organization within a harmonious diplomatic relationship with Christian Europe and the Americas. Yet, the more the revivalist and reformist projects evolved toward their implementations, the more they involved ethnic and religious conflicts and colonial intervention. Neither the Ottoman reforms nor the territorial nationalisms succeeded in realizing the humanistic dream. The sets of scientific, literary, civic and national conditions borrowed from Europe by the humanists in Ottoman lands were insufficient to affect the grandiose transformation, while they became instrumental regarding both Europeans' colonial grip and interreligious and interethnic conflicts. The failure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European humanism is well-known, especially in connection with the two world wars and the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, which spread in the wars' aftermath. The failure of humanism in Ottoman lands, however, is rarely acknowledged as an important historical and intellectual evolution; also not known is its role in the reformulation of various religious–political projects attempting to continue and correct the humanistic expectations of the nineteenth century. The Middle Eastern dialectics of secularization and religious renewal is still considered as a regional particularism without broader signification. It is time to add humanism's rise and fall in the Middle East to its complex fate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the West—not to get rid of humanism, but to save it from itself.

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Notes

- 1 For an overview, see [Thomson \(2003\)](#). The list is the subject of debates.
- 2 For an overview, see [Abbamonte and Harrison \(2019\)](#).
- 3 For the Latin text, see [Baron \(1968\)](#), pp. 232–63.
- 4 For a critical perspective, see [Hankins \(2004\)](#).
- 5 For a partial overview, see [Hourani \(1983\)](#).
- 6 My translation, as are all the following translations from this book. For a broad overview of Greek enlightenment, see [Dimaras \(1972\)](#).
- 7 For an overview, see [Argyropoulos \(2014\)](#); [Dimaras \(1972\)](#), pp. 187–268.
- 8 For the historical background behind the publication of the book, see [Kramer \(1996\)](#).
- 9 For an overview of this broad transformation, see [Zachs \(2005\)](#).
- 10 For a broad overview, see [Mazower \(2022\)](#).
- 11 My translation, as are the subsequent quotations.
- 12 For an overview of this legend in European literature, see [Thiem \(1979\)](#).
- 13 Translation taken from [El-Ariss \(2018\)](#), pp. 11–12).
- 14 Translation taken from [El-Ariss \(2018\)](#), p. 11).
- 15 Translation taken from [El-Ariss \(2018\)](#), p. 8).
- 16 Translation taken from [El-Ariss \(2018\)](#), p. 12). For al-Bustani's views on the Ottoman reforms, see [Berkes \(1998\)](#).
- 17 For an overview of the Tanzimat period, see [Berkes \(1998\)](#).
- 18 For the texts of the two edicts of reforms, see [Bailey \(1942\)](#), pp. 277–79, 287–91).
- 19 For an overview of this conflict, see [Al-Bustani \(2019\)](#), pp. 13–22); [Salibi \(1965\)](#), pp. 106–19).

- ²⁰ For the complete French text of the “Règlement organique”, see <https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/constit/lb1861.htm> (accessed on 2 May 2024).
- ²¹ For an overview of Rashid Rida’s intellectual evolution, see Thompson (2020).

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