Bridging Faiths and Empires: The Assumptionists and the Mission d’Orient (1863–1923)

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Abstract: This paper examines the Assumptionists’ mission, known as the Mission d’Orient, initiated in 1862 with the aim of uniting the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches against the backdrop of a changing political and religious landscape. Despite their aspirations, the mission encountered numerous challenges and obstacles, leading to its ultimate failure. The paper focuses on the Ottoman response to Roman Catholic missions, using the Assumptionists as a case study. It explores the factors contributing to the Mission d’Orient’s failure and scrutinizes the Assumptionists’ efforts to foster unity between the two churches. The study argues that the failure can be attributed to complex power dynamics between the Ottoman Empire and Western powers, resulting in a hostile environment for Christian communities. The Ottoman response encompassed state-level actions driven by political conflicts and the direct targeting of Catholic missions as symbols of Western imperialism. The paper examines historical sources and primary documents to shed light on the challenges faced by the Assumptionists and their impact on interfaith relations and diplomacy during this significant chapter in Christian missions’ history.

Keywords: Christian missions; Roman Catholic; France; Ottoman Empire; Vatican

1. Introduction

In 1862, amidst a rapidly changing political and religious landscape, the Assumptionists, a French religious order, embarked on a mission with a profound objective: to unite the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Against the historical backdrop, the Mission d’Orient, initiated under the auspices of Pope Pius IX, sought to bridge the divide between these two branches of Christianity. However, despite their aspirations, the mission encountered numerous challenges and obstacles along the way, hindering its realization.

This paper seeks to delve into the Ottoman response to Roman Catholic missions, with a specific focus on the Assumptionists as a compelling case study. Its primary objective is to illuminate the role of the Assumptionist mission and the underlying factors contributing to the Mission d’Orient’s ultimate failure. Furthermore, it endeavors to scrutinize the Assumptionists’ endeavors in fostering unity between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

The establishment of the Mission d’Orient by the Assumptionists in 1862 was built upon a rich history of Roman Catholic missionary activities and the cordial relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Catholic West. This endeavor was influenced by the privileges granted through agreements such as the capitulations and the protégé system, which had previously been negotiated by France. Guided by the vision of Emmanuel d’Alzon, who founded the Augustinians of the Assumption in Nîmes in 1845, the mission aimed to address not only religious matters, but also political goals. These included countering Russia’s influence over the Orthodox communities within the Ottoman Empire and addressing the longstanding Photian Schism—an issue arising from disagreements between Rome and Constantinople.
regarding the appointment of Photius as the Patriarch of Constantinople during the fourth Council of Constantinople in the late ninth century.

The Ottoman response to the Mission d’Orient can be understood within two spheres: the state response and the Millets’ response. The state response was primarily indirect, manifesting in the targeting of Ottoman Christians as a consequence of political conflicts. On the other hand, the Millets’ response was more direct, taking aim at the Roman Catholic Missions as a symbol of Western imperialism and the Holy See’s proselytizing efforts.

By examining the presence of the Assumptionists in the Ottoman Empire, this study argues that the failure of the “Mission d’Orient” can be attributed to complex power dynamics between the Ottoman Empire and Western powers. These dynamics were characterized by rivalries and conflicting interests, ultimately creating a hostile environment for Christian communities. As a result, Christians in Anatolia faced deportation, expulsion, and forced relocation. Additionally, local populations with nationalist sentiments regarded the Catholic missions as tools of Rome’s proselytism, which led to suspicion and resistance towards their activities. This further contributed to the challenges faced by the Mission d’Orient.

To delve into the Assumptionists’ contribution to the Mission d’Orient, I will commence by scrutinizing interpretations offered by other historians. Following this, I will explore the intricate triangular relationship, shedding light on the interests of France, the Vatican, and the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Subsequently, I will delve into the Assumptionist activities. Lastly, I will conduct an analysis of the Assumptionists’ affiliation with the Vatican and France, along with their engagement in the Ottoman response to Roman Catholic influence spanning from 1863 to 1923.

Overall, the Ottoman response to the Mission d’Orient encompassed both state-level actions driven by political conflicts and the direct targeting of Catholic missions by the Millets. Understanding the intricate power dynamics and nationalist sentiments within the Ottoman Empire sheds light on the difficulties encountered by the Assumptionists and the resulting obstacles faced by Christian communities in the region.

Through a comprehensive examination of historical sources and primary documents, this paper aims to provide insights into the dynamics of the relationship between the Assumptionists and Ottoman communities. It highlights the challenges faced by the Assumptionists in their pursuit of religious and political objectives within the Ottoman context. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of this significant chapter in the history of Christian missions, as well as its broader implications for interfaith relations and diplomacy.

The Roman Catholics had a significant connection with Western powers, and as a result, the evolving developments in Europe, along with its religious, cultural, political, and economic relations with the Ottoman Empire, played a crucial role in shaping the status of Roman Catholics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Frazee 1983).

To delve into these transnational relations, it is essential to understand the Capitulations and the Protégé system (Belin 1894). The Capitulations were not merely privileges granted to foreigners, but also an integral part of the Ottoman Customs Law (van den Boogert 2005). The terms of their application were complex due to ongoing negotiations between the Sublime Porte and the respective states involved. The Capitulations of 1673 and 1740 granted France the protection of all Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. The French protectorate signified that France had the “right to protect the Catholic Church in the regions subject to the protectorate and receive special honors reserved in these same regions for the representative of France as the protector of the Catholic Church” (Un Prélat Romain 1904).

The protégé system, which offered benefits such as reduced taxation for the protégé, provided Western powers with the right to protect Ottoman subjects (Sonyel 1991). Furthermore, analyzing the Capitulations and the protégé system helps elucidate the reasons behind the collapse of the Ottoman economy, the non-Catholic interest in foreign protection, and the Ottoman Empire’s dependence on Western powers to maintain its integrity.
Consequently, these factors contributed to an increase in hostility towards Christians, resulting in significant discrimination among different religious groups.

Hajjar (1979) illustrates the significant benefits reaped by the Holy See through religious diplomacy, engaging Rome, Paris, and Istanbul. Employing a range of strategic approaches, the Vatican capitalized on the Capitulations, the protégé system, and the French protectorate of the Catholics to advance their objectives and extend their influence over the Eastern Orthodox Church. The rivalry between Russia and France for dominion over the Holy Places, coupled with Russian sway within the Orthodox community in contrast to the French guardianship of the Catholics, ignited a denominational conflict within Ottoman territories (Prudhomme 1994).

The overall success of Roman Catholic missions in the Orient hinged upon the collaboration between the Holy See and France, as well as their interactions with the Sublime Porte (the central government of the Ottoman Empire). The Mission d’Orient can be examined in light of the circumstances surrounding the Ottoman Christians. According to Fouilloux (2000), one of the main priorities of the mission was the Latinization of the Oriental Christians, emphasizing complete obedience to the Holy See. So, what exactly was the Mission d’Orient? Babot (2011) delves into the origins of Catholic missions, while Prudhomme (1994) focuses on the Holy See’s strategies under Leo XII shedding light on the relations of Roman Catholic missions with the Vatican and the Eastern rites. Did the Holy See intend to achieve ecumenism through Catholic missionaries? In other words, did the unification and communion among the Churches serve a religious or a political purpose for the Holy See? In his work, “Religion et politique en Méditerranée orientale (1878–1914)”, Fouilloux (1980) analyzes the politico-religious aspects of the missions and the Franco–Vatican relations concerning the Eastern Catholics. He also discusses the arguments presented by Hajjar (1970), suggesting that, until the nineteenth century, the European powers were primarily concerned with safeguarding the holy places rather than utilizing religious influence to gain economic advantages over each other and the Russian Empire.

The Assumptionists emerged as a prominent French Catholic congregation due to their extensive engagement both within France and in the Orient. Their Mission d’Orient, which encompassed the Balkans and Anatolia, showcased their connections with local communities, their educational endeavors, and their interactions with various states (Walter 1980, pp. 7–55). However, the detailed investigation of their role within the modern borders of Turkey has predominantly been conducted by Babot (2011), who concentrates on the Assumptionist mission in Eskisehir; (Plunian 2010), who examines their presence in Kadıköy; and Jacob (2000), who delves into their activities in Turkey. Moreover, the most comprehensive research on the Assumptionists was conducted by Babot (2000) in her Ph.D. dissertation entitled Les Missions Jésuites Et Assomptionnistes En Anatolie À La Fin De L’Empire Ottoman Et Au Début De La République Turque.

Previous research on the Mission d’Orient, particularly focusing on the Ottoman Empire, provides valuable insights into religious diplomacy and its consequences for the Assumptionists. However, aside from Babot and Jacob, the research primarily aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the mission, which extends beyond the modern borders of Turkey. Consequently, my objective is to utilize the Assumptionists as a case study to explore the dynamics of state-to-state relationships (such as Turkey–France, France–Holy See, and Turkey–Holy See), state-to-community interactions (including Catholics in Turkey), and community-to-community connections (such as Catholics, Armenians, Greeks, and Turks) on a transnational level. I will also analyze the various responses of different religious groups (Catholics, Armenians, Greeks, and Muslims) to the missionary activities undertaken by the Assumptionists. Additionally, the cross-analysis of the Assumptionists’ interactions with the Ottoman Empire, France, and the Holy See will shed light on their role during the Ottoman Empire’s response to French Catholic religious-cultural imperialism.
2. The Ottoman Empire, France, and the Holy See triangle

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Assumptionist mission in the Ottoman Orient, it is essential to examine the interplay between France, the Holy See, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as their respective interests concerning the Ottoman Christians. These interconnected relationships significantly influenced the privileges granted through the capitulations and the Protége system, ultimately shaping the trajectory of the Assumptionist mission.

2.1. The French Interest

In the nineteenth century, French interest in the Ottoman Empire can be examined within the context of two distinct periods: the Second Empire (1852–1870) and the Third Republic (1870–1940). This interest encompassed three key areas: the political sphere, the economic realm, and the religious-cultural domain. Regarding the religious-cultural aspect, the French focus on the Ottoman Empire revolved around safeguarding the holy sites, protecting Catholics, and promoting the expansion of French cultural influence through Catholic missions. In this regard, France enjoyed certain advantages over its competitors, namely, Russia, England, Germany, Italy, and Austria. This advantage can be attributed to the Capitulations of 1740, which granted France the responsibility of safeguarding the rights of all Catholics. “The implications for the future of Catholicism in the sultan’s domain were most important, for under the shield of the Capitulations, it was possible for the church to send missionaries into Ottoman lands to provide for Catholic Christians (Frazee 1983, p. 67)”.

The Capitulations granted the French ambassador a higher status compared to other states’ representatives, the Protégé system allowing France to recruit non-Catholic Christians, the quality of French Catholic education, and the healthcare provided by the French missionaries were the main tools for France to advance its interests in the Ottoman lands.

During the Second Empire, the competition between France and Russia to control the Holy Places led to France siding with the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War (1853–1856). France strategically leveraged these circumstances, as it had done in 1831 when Mahmud II granted the Armenian Catholics the status of Millet due to French efforts. The imperial reform edict of 1856, which promised equality to all Ottoman subjects irrespective of their religion, language, or ethnicity, coupled with economic incentives, resulted in a significant influx of Catholics into Ottoman territories (See Raccagni 1980). Moreover, Napoleon III ardently pursued a strategic policy aimed at bolstering French influence within the Ottoman Empire. Central to this approach was his unwavering support for the Ottoman military and administrative modernization endeavors, which served to preserve and enhance France’s economic and political advantages. One notable step in this direction was the introduction of a law in 1867 that permitted foreign citizens to acquire land within the Ottoman Empire. This legislative measure substantially expanded the presence of foreign institutions in the region, thus fostering a deeper interplay between international actors and the Ottoman Empire (Solomonovich and Kark 2015, p. 229).

After the declaration of the French Third Republic, France, along with other European powers, sought to enhance its diplomatic, economic, and religious-cultural engagements with the Ottoman Empire. However, tensions arose between the French Republic and the Catholic Church due to the clash between the republic’s secular and republican values and the church’s desire to preserve its influence and traditional privileges. The church perceived the republic as a threat to its authority and resisted its secularizing tendencies.

Despite these conflicts, Catholic missions in the Orient continued to serve as conduits for French cultural influence, promoting the French language and culture in their interactions with local communities. French missionary establishments in the Levant received regular financial support from France, highlighting their distinct French identity. These establishments served France’s cultural and diplomatic interests, garnering ongoing support from both imperial and republican France. The French authorities openly acknowledged and endorsed these establishments until the rupture of the relations between...
France and the Vatican in 1905 (see Shorrock 1974). The French nature of the religious establishments in the Ottoman Empire was serving French religious-cultural imperialism. The missionary schools taught French and engaged in charitable endeavors. For instance, Douville-Maillefeu, a parliament member in 1890, stressed that all congregations, regardless of gender or attire, were devoted to France (Gül 2015, p. 126). Moreover, they also supported the French government during World War I by providing social services such as healthcare and education while maintaining their operations in these regions. Although hostility towards Catholicism grew in France, the missions in the Ottoman Empire carried on with their activities uninterrupted until World War I, when the Capitulations were unilaterally abolished, leading to sanctions against all French institutions. After World War I, France intensified its influence over the Ottoman territories by supporting the Armenians in Southeast Turkey. Additionally, between 1918 and 1923, France made several attempts to regain control over the Holy Places and the Ottoman Catholics, which ultimately ended with the permanent abolition of the Capitulations following the Treaty of Lausanne.

2.2. Vatican’s Interest

The Holy See primarily pursued its interests in the Ottoman Empire through France, as it lacked official recognition. Rome aimed to enhance its relations with the Sublime Porte and expand its missionary activities between 1848 and 1923 in order to regain influence over the Eastern Christians. The reign of Abdulmecid and the papacy of Pius IX marked a significant turning point in Ottoman–Holy See relations. On 16 February 1847, Che Kib-Effendi, the Ottoman Ambassador to Vienna, was received in a private audience by the Pope, establishing the first friendly relations between the two states (Türkan 2015, pp. 148–63). The years from 1850 to 1859 were the final years of Catholic power in Europe (Chadwick 2003, p. 95).

With the support of France, Pius IX turned towards the Orient to strengthen the Vatican’s authority and extend its control over the Oriental Christians. He aimed to centralize the power of Eastern Christian churches while continuing the unification policies initiated by Benedict XIV. In his letter “In Suprema Petri Apostoli Sede” (1848) addressed to the Christian clergy of the Orient, he referred to Benedict XIV’s “Allatae Sunt” (1755) while inviting them to reunite with Rome and respect the Roman Pontiffs as their ancestral figures. The Assumptionist mission also commenced during the papacy of Pius IX, who ardently supported the centralization of ecclesiastical power within the papacy, as well as Roman primacy and infallibility. He enacted more laws concerning the Eastern churches than any previous pontiff, aiming to align them with Western practices (Frazee 1983, p. 232). His goal was to restore the power and influence of the Holy See by achieving a union with all Eastern Christian Churches. To accomplish this, these churches had to renounce their errors and embrace the one true faith of Catholicism (Fouilloux 2000, p. 72). This proselytism necessitated the Latinization of Christian populations in the Orient.

In his Levate on the Affiliations of Church (1867), Pius IX emphasized the Russian threat to Catholicism. During the reign of Pope Leo XIII, the Holy See demonstrated a heightened interest in the Eastern Church and took steps to curb Russian influence in the southern region. The Russian expansion into the Balkans following the War of 1877–1878 brought the Holy See and the Ottoman Empire together as they faced a common adversary. Leo XIII adopted a more open and diplomatic approach in his dealings with the Eastern rites, setting him apart from his predecessor. While both popes did not recognize the Italian government and relied on French support, Leo XIII pursued different policies compared to Pius IX. One significant departure from Pius IX’s strict centralization policies
can be seen in the *Reversurus* of 1867, which addressed the election of Eastern Catholic Bishops. However, the most notable change during Leo XIII’s papacy was the Vatican’s shift in attitude towards Orthodoxy. Instead of viewing the Orthodox as schismatics, they were now addressed as dissidents (Fouilloux 2000, p. 73).

During the papacy of Pius X, which extended from 1903 to 1914, several significant events unfolded within the Ottoman Empire. These encompassed the rise of Turkish nationalism, the pivotal Young Turk Revolution in 1908, and the unfolding of the Balkan Wars between 1912 and 1913. Meanwhile, France underwent a period characterized by tension with the Catholic Church, ultimately culminating in the separation of state and church in 1905.

These political developments had an impact on both the Assumptionists and the Mission d’Orient. The Assumptionists faced challenges stemming from their opposition to the French Republic, while simultaneously grappling with the political conflicts arising from the nationalist inclinations of the Ottoman Millets. In his dealings with the Ottoman Empire, Pius X’s stance was a complex blend of support for reform and concern for the welfare of Ottoman Christians.

Benedict XV’s papacy (1914–1922) marked a significant period of revision for the Mission d’Orient, primarily driven by France’s loss of its protectorate over the Ottoman Catholics. In response to these changes, Benedict XV took decisive action on 1 May 1917, by granting autonomy to the Congregation for the Oriental Churches through the Motu Proprio *Dei Providentis*3, officially establishing it as the *Congregatio pro-Ecclesia Orientali*:4 He faced the daunting task of finding a diplomatic solution to end World War I. As the situation worsened, his concerns extended to the plight of Christianity in the Orient, particularly the protection of Holy Places and the well-being of Christians residing there. (See Pollard 1999). In pursuing his new policies, the Holy See relied on the support of the Catholic missions, such as the Assumptionists, who proved to be a crucial asset in maintaining peace within their institutions and aligning with French policies. Their interaction played an instrumental role in implementing the Holy See’s objectives during this transformative period.

2.3. The Ottoman Interest

The Ottoman Empire had two equally important interests. The first one was to keep its territorial integrity and the second one was to prevent its ethnic and religious minorities from having nationalist separatist tendencies. The Sublime Porte had to choose between Russia and France/England to maintain the Empire’s territorial integrity. Russia aimed to expand its empire toward the Balkans and the Mediterranean while France and England sought to increase the scope of their economic and religious benefits already granted with the Capitulations and the Protégé system even though this meant interfering in Ottoman internal affairs.

The Treaty of Berlin in 1878 was a turning point in the Eastern Question and the future of Ottoman Christians and the Catholic Missions. As a result of the Treaty, the European powers demanded equal rights for the Ottoman Christians (especially the Armenians). On the other hand, the relations between Abdulhamid II and Leo XIII were friendlier than any other monarch, even though the Ottoman Empire did not officially recognize the Holy See due to France being the determining power in their relations. Abdulhamid II used these amicable relations to prevent the Russian influence on the Ottoman Orthodox. The response to the Russian expansion was the increase in Catholic Missions, strengthened French influence over the Sublime Porte, and the attempt to consolidate the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the role of the Holy See’s representative in Istanbul became more critical after 1878.

However, with the rise of nationalism and revolutionary thoughts among the Ottoman communities, Abdulhamid II’s authoritarian regime combined with the Empire’s weak economy and dependence on the West brought about the revolution of 1908. The most
important revolutionary groups working towards the overthrow of the absolutist regime of Abdulhamid II were the Committee of Union and Progress and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Kansu 1997, p. 78). As with Turkism and Ottomanism, the CUP regarded relations with foreign powers as a realpolitik game and a tool useful in helping them achieve their goal of saving the empire (Hanioglu 2001, p. 305). The loss of the Balkans after 1913 prompted the CUP to shift its focus toward maintaining the remaining parts of the Empire. It is important to highlight that the Ottoman government, mindful of the potential repercussions of Catholic influence, exercised caution in relation to missionary activities in Anatolia. For example, the presence of the Greek Catholic community in Istanbul, backed by the Assumptionists, raised concerns for the Porte, as it aimed to avoid conflicts with the Orthodox Church (Macar 2002, pp. 31–38). Consequently, the anti-imperialist discourse was followed by efforts to homogenize Anatolia through policies, coinciding with a period of heightened hostility towards Christians between 1913 and 1922.

3. The Assumptionists’ Activities in the Ottoman Empire

In 1862, the Assumptionists inaugurated the Mission d’Orient with the overarching objective of fostering ecumenical harmony between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches (Hazir 2023). The term “Mission d’Orient” conveys the apostolic undertaking initiated in the Orient by Father Victorin Galabert in the waning days of December 1862, following explicit directives from Father Emmanuel d’Alzon and a specific request from Pius IX on 3 June 1862, whereby he invoked divine blessings upon their endeavors in both the Orient and the Occident (Perier-Muzet 2010, pp. 9–33).

Originating in Nîmes and established by Emmanuel d’Alzon in 1845, the Augustinians of the Assumption pursued a dual mission encapsulating religious and geopolitical dimensions. Their aspirations encompassed mitigating Russia’s sway over Ottoman Orthodox Christians and addressing the enduring schism arising from the Photian controversy (Hazir 2023). The triumph of this mission became inextricably linked to the stability of the Ottoman Empire. The missionary pursuits of the Assumptionists are discernible within three distinct regions within the Ottoman dominion: The Balkans, Istanbul, and Anatolia.

Assisted by the Oblates, their female counterparts, the Assumptionists dedicated their efforts to the training of indigenous clergy, the establishment of medical dispensaries and orphanages, and the foundation of educational institutions founded upon Western pedagogy. These endeavors were undertaken with a judicious respect for indigenous customs and values. It is essential, however, to acknowledge that the Assumptionists simultaneously embodied elements of French Roman Catholic religious-cultural influence, potentially susceptible to interpretation as a manifestation of cultural imperialism. Furthermore, their presence facilitated an inflow of French investments.

The Assumptionists and other Roman Catholic orders within the Ottoman Empire exhibit both commonalities and distinctions. Firstly, the Assumptionists emerged in the nineteenth century, a departure from their counterparts such as the Jesuits or Franciscans, whose origins trace back to the medieval epoch. Secondly, they wielded considerable political clout. Notably, the Assumptionist publication La Croix, established in 1883 by François Picard (the superior general of the Mission d’Orient), earned renown as an ardently ultramontane periodical. Moreover, Father Bailly, successor to Father Picard as superior general, also assumed the role of La Croix’s editor, employing fervent journalistic zeal to ardently contest prevailing governmental policies. La Croix fervently championed the anti-Dreyfusard cause, marking an unprecedented and radical facet of journalistic expression within the annals of Christendom (Chadwick 2003, p. 384).

Thirdly, in 1882, responding to persistent entreaties from Apostolic Vicars, particularly Mgr Vanutelli, Father Galabert established the Assumptionists’ headquarters in Istanbul’s Kumkapı district, establishing their distinction as the foremost Roman Catholic order to establish a permanent presence within the historic city (a domain shared by Muslims, Greeks, and Armenians) subsequent to the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul (Piolet 1900–1903, p. 82).
Fourthly, the Assumptionists and the Oblates engendered the empowerment of diverse Ottoman communities and the advancement of gender emancipation within their establishments. Notably, at the Oblate Sisters’ institution in Haydarpaşa, the student body comprised individuals of diverse national origins, including English, French, German, Italian, Austrian, Greek, Armenian, Bulgarian, Swiss, and Maltese descent. Within the confines of the Sainte-Hélène School of the Oblate Sisters in Edirne, a notable segment of the student body consisted of Armenians, noteworthy among them being the offspring of the Pasha (Jacob 2000, p. 275). Moreover, the inaugural Assumptionist visitation to Ankara, orchestrated by Father Marcellin Guyot during the late nineteenth century, highlighted a significant developmental stride within Anatolia—the establishment of educational institutions for young girls, thereby challenging prevailing norms that had previously dismissed formal education for females (Jacob 2000, p. 273).

Fifthly, the Assumptionists stood apart from their contemporaries through their concerted endeavors to establish rapport with indigenous populations, delving into their cultural, historical, and traditional nuances. On 2 July 1895, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the Adnentibus nobis, thereby entrusting the Assumptionists with the task of erecting churches and seminaries adhering to the Greek rite. This encompassed the establishment of schools designed to educate children within the framework of their specific customs, language, and national heritage. Subsequently, on 20 March 1896, Leo XIII granted approval for the incorporation of the Greek or Slavic rite within the seminaries situated in Kumkapı, Kadıköy, and Edirne. Furthermore, the Superior General was vested with the authority to oversee the transition of Latin rite priests to the Greek rite under specific circumstances (Piolet 1900–1903, p. 85).

Primarily directing their efforts towards Greek and Bulgarian communities, the Assumptionists concurrently extended their services to the broader Ottoman populace. The Saint Leon Seminary of Kadıköy (1895–1937) evolved into the Institute of Byzantine Studies, serving as a hub for the scholarly exploration of the history of the Byzantine Church. In Kadıköy, the Assumptionists nurtured local clergy capable of conducting Byzantine liturgical rites while deeply immersing themselves within the historical, linguistic, and liturgical heritage of Eastern Christian traditions. Consequently, the institution chiefly functioned as a faculty of erudite mentors tasked with training priests from Greek and Slavic backgrounds (Failler 1995, p. 7).

The Saint Leon Seminary played a pivotal role in the transnational historical narrative through the Assumptionists’ notable publications, including Échos d’Orient and Missions des Augustins de l’Assomption, and the scholarly contributions of luminaries such as Father Martin Jugie (1878–1954), renowned for his specialization in Byzantine Studies (Laurent 1953, pp. 7–18), Father Raymond Janin (1882–1972), distinguished for his focus on the topography and ecclesiastical geography of the Byzantine era (Laurent 1961, pp. 7–13), Louis Petit (1868–1927), the founding figure of Échos d’Orient and later the Latin Archbishop of Athens (Salaville 1928, pp. 2–137), and Sévérien Salaville, whose scholarly pursuits centered upon the Christian Orient (Laurent 1958, pp. 7–14).

Collectively, the Assumptionists and the Oblates embarked on the overarching mission of cultivating indigenous clergy, educating local Christian populations, and delving into the cultural, historical, and traditional tapestry of the Byzantine and Ottoman realms. Their ardent ultramontane spirit, intellectual fervor, and nationalistic ethos offered both beneficial and at times conflicting outcomes. Consequently, their underlying commitment to the advancement of knowledge remained paramount, a thematic underpinning evinced within the trajectory of the Institute of Byzantine Studies (Failler 1995, p. 7).

4. The Ottoman Response to the Assumptionists: Unveiling Causes and Examining Consequences

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire was the outcome of a combination of internal and external factors, including economic decline, military weakness, political instability, and nationalist movements. The empire also faced pressure from European powers seeking eco-
nomic, political, and religious dominance in the region. Additionally, the Ottoman Empire encountered demands for social and political reforms from its Christian communities, who aspired to achieve equal status with the ruling majority. The Ottoman government viewed the Western powers’ influence and protection over the Ottoman Christians as foreign interference in its internal affairs. Lastly, the collapse of the empire, the rise of nationalism among Balkan/Anatolian Christians, and the establishment of nation-states contributed to the Ottoman response. In light of these circumstances, the role of the Assumptionists in the Ottoman response to Western Roman Catholic influence became significant.

4.1. The Assumptionist Relations with France and the Holy See

The French background proved advantageous for the missionaries, aiding them in overcoming various challenges. One of the motivations for establishing the Church in Kumkapı in 1882 was its proximity to the French Embassy (Piolet 1900–1903, p. 81). The French establishments also gained advantages from the protection offered by France, which shielded them from local authorities, other religious groups, and competing missionary organizations. This protection strengthened notably during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The affiliation with France held significant symbolic importance in the Orient, surpassing mere geographical distance. It commanded both respect and apprehension within the Muslim community while providing substantial protection to Christians.

The Assumptionist collaboration with France and the Holy See played a crucial role in how missionary activities were conducted and in understanding the Ottoman response to them. After the Congress of Berlin, France retained the exclusive religious privilege of guarding the Latin sanctuaries in Jerusalem’s Holy Sepulchre Basilica and Bethlehem, as outlined in the capitulations. Catholic communities in Turkey, regardless of their nationality, have remained loyal to France and sought its diplomatic and consular protection based on instructions from the Apostolic See. French ambassadors and consuls in the Levant were granted special honors during religious services, following regulations established by the Propagation of the Faith in 1742. This privilege was not extended to other ambassadors and consuls in Turkey. The Holy See emphasized France’s exceptional value in the Levant and instructed all Catholic communities, irrespective of their rite or nationality, to seek protection exclusively from French ambassadors and consuls. Apart from the holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, France’s unique rights of religious protection in the Levant, as mentioned in Article 62 of the Congress of Berlin, stemmed from the Holy See’s will rather than the Ottoman capitulations (Babot 2011, p. 32).

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Holy See and France made efforts to support Uniat Churches. France and the Holy See benefitted from the Roman Catholic missionary activities to advance their interests in the Ottoman Empire. For instance, these missionaries, somewhat acting as French political agents, ventured into Bulgarian territory, promoting an alternative to the pro-Russian sentiments (Voillery 1980, pp. 31–47). For instance, the establishment of a Bulgarian Uniate Church, recognized by the Sublime Porte, was a political response to Russian pan-Slavism. This objective was the primary motivation behind Pius IX’s directive for the Assumptionists to initiate their mission in Plovdiv. Father d’Alzon’s unwavering loyalty to the Pope played a pivotal role in the Assumptionists’ Eastern mission. Initially planning to establish a seminary for the Maronites in Jerusalem, he was redirected to Bulgaria by Pius IX.

The “Greek mission” was officially entrusted to the Assumptionists by Pope Leo XIII in 1895, following the Bulgarian mission (Babot 2011, p. 79). As a result, the Assumptionists and the Oblates established various institutions from Edirne to Trabzon (Jacob 2000, p. 315). Consequently, numerous Assumptionists embraced Byzantine and Slavic rites. Following the Assumptionists, the Oblates expanded their presence in Anatolia through collaborations with other Roman Catholic orders under French protection. In particular, the Oblate branch of Nîmes, in partnership with the Jesuits, established four different institutions in Armenian-populated regions of Turkey: Marsivan (1889–1914), Trabzon (1889–1890), Tokat (1889–1914), and Amasya (1891–1905) (Perier-Muzet 2010, p. 12).
The French Embassy’s protection over the Assumptionists was generally advantageous because France assumed responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. However, due to their nationality and close ties to the French authorities in the Ottoman Empire, the Assumptionists were often perceived as representatives of France. An example of the negative consequences of French involvement can be seen in the local community’s response to the unauthorized Assumptionist construction in İzmit on 31 January 1895, which led to the intervention of the French ambassador. Hence, Father Picard directed the educators within Assumptionist educational institutions to eschew the manifestation of overt patriotism and any form of self-centered juxtaposition between the West and the East in the course of their instructional endeavors (Picard 1897, p. 5).

French diplomats actively safeguarded the missionary establishments by intervening whenever necessary. They viewed these establishments not only as missions but also as extensions of French influence. For instance, Fr. Charmetant expressed unwavering confidence in the resilience of French Catholic institutions in the Levant. He highlighted the strong association between Catholicism and Frenchness, emphasizing the numerous schools where thousands of students from diverse backgrounds were taught the French language and principles. Father Charmetant emphasized that the French religious establishments served as genuine protectors of French interests in the Levant, with French missionaries playing a vital role in advancing these interests. He also pointed out that the term “Frank” in oriental languages referred to both Christians and the French (Gül 2015, p. 127).

However, this intertwined relationship resulted in complications, as French ambassadors and councils would frequently intervene in times of trouble, causing resentment towards the French orders. Consequently, they shielded the missionaries from the influence of the Ottoman administration, Protestant missionaries, local church clergy, and the Muslim population. As a result, the Turkish authorities gradually lost control in Anatolia, and the Christian Millets faced difficulties in managing their communities due to the increasing number of conversions to Catholicism.

The French protection of the French Roman Catholic missions continued until the expulsion of all French missionaries in 1914 due to the opposing sides of the Ottoman Empire and France. Overall, the French protectorate, which was intended to ensure the success of the Mission d’Orient, paradoxically contributed to its failure (Jacob 2000, pp. 302–5).

4.2. The Indigenous Communities’ Response to the Assumptionist Presence

Since the year 1453 for the Greek community and 1461 for the Armenian community, they have been meticulously organized into discrete socio-religious entities denoted as “millets”. These millets were under the leadership of a designated patriarch, vested with comprehensive influence over both spiritual and secular affairs. The investiture of the patriarch was ultimately subject to the adjudication of the Sultan, who deliberated upon one or more candidates nominated by the episcopal hierarchy (Babot 2011, p. 22). Consequently, the Greek and Armenian Patriarchs assumed a pivotal role within the purview of the Sublime Porte, owing to the paramount authority held within their respective millets.

The declaration of Papal infallibility posed a significant obstacle to achieving union with the Orthodox, as Eastern Christians refused to accept Rome’s claim of superiority. This contentious issue was also discussed during the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Consequently, it is worth considering how the Greeks, Armenians, and Muslims responded to the activities of the Assumptionists in light of this tension. The success of the Mission d’Orient hinged significantly on maintaining amicable relations with various communities. However, tensions between the Ottoman state and its Christian communities and the disagreement between the Orthodox and Catholics over the ultramontane nature of Catholic orders intensified as the Eastern question approached an end. The stance of community leaders towards Catholics consistently influenced the dynamics at play. The way in which the Assumptionists interacted with non-Catholic communities varied based on factors such
as their Millet (Greek, Armenian, or Muslim), their position within the hierarchy (Church or believers), and the geographical context.

4.2.1. Armenians

The relations between the Ottoman Empire, the Holy See, and France regarding the Armenian Catholic community have been tense since the emergence of the first Armenian Catholic movements in the mid-seventeenth century (Türkan 2012, p. 3). In the early nineteenth century, Catholic Armenians faced persecution at the hands of Ottoman authorities, with the support of Gregorian Armenians. However, due to French influence over the Sublime Porte, a Catholic Armenian millet was established in 1830. This millet received official recognition from the Sultan and held civil authority over all non-Latin Catholic individuals who were not acknowledged by the Porte. Similarly, the Armenian Catholic patriarch gained civil authority over the Byzantine rite Greek Catholic community in the mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, the hostility of the Armenian Patriarchate towards Catholicism stemmed from the large number of Armenian conversions to Catholicism. For example, in 1888 in Bursa, the Armenian bishop complained to the local Ottoman authority (Vali) about the permission granted to convert Armenians to Catholicism (Jacob 2000, p. 282). Nevertheless, the Assumptionists continued to influence and build a rapprochement between the Armenian community and the Catholic West. For instance, the Assumptionists’ visit to Armenian patriarch Mgr. Armanian where they discussed the union, during the Greco–Ottoman War, ameliorated the relations between the Assumptionists and the Armenians (Assumptionists 1897, pp. 68–71). Conversely, in 1902 in Eskisehir, the leaders of the Armenian community entrusted their boys to the Assumptionists, and even the Gregorian priest sent his son to one of their schools (Jacob 2000, p. 283).

Furthermore, the Assumptionists played a significant role in matters related to Eastern Catholic Churches. For instance, during Pius X’s pontificate, the discreet unification of the legislation of the Eastern United Churches was initiated. The drafting of this legislation was assigned to Monsignor Petit, an Assumptionist who was appointed as the Latin Archbishop of Athens in 1912. Additionally, Pius X strengthened the powers of the Propaganda by establishing apostolic visits to monitor Eastern United monasticism. He even intervened authoritatively in the internal affairs of the Armenians by supporting Patriarch Terzian against his community (Babot 2011, p. 44).

The Vatican and France’s interference in Armenian internal affairs, primarily through the deployment of Roman Catholic missionaries, faced strong opposition from the Gregorian Armenian Patriarchate. This opposition ultimately escalated, placing greater pressure on the Ottoman government to intervene. Nevertheless, the existence of an Armenian Catholic community, coupled with the significant presence of Armenian students enrolled in Assumptionist schools, and the close relations between the Armenian Catholic Clergy and the Assumptionists as well as other Roman Catholic missions, played a pivotal role in fostering a compromise between the Gregorian Armenian Patriarchate and the Roman Catholic Church.

4.2.2. Greeks

The situation concerning the Greek Orthodox was quite complex. The Patriarchate in Phanar held a hostile stance towards the Catholic Church and its representatives. This hostility was more pronounced in the capital compared to rural areas, where the local Greeks benefited from the services provided by the Assumptionists. Since the establishment of the Assumptionist institutions, the Orthodox Church actively worked to diminish Catholic influence over the Greeks. They would threaten ex-communication for those who sent their children to Catholic schools, lodge complaints with Ottoman authorities regarding conversion attempts, accuse the Assumptionists of spreading French nationalism, hinder recruitment to Assumptionist seminaries, and even prohibit local shops from selling products to the Assumptionists. However, starting with the Greco–Ottoman War of 1897, hostility towards the Ottoman Greeks began to intensify within the Muslim population.
The situation concerning Istanbul’s Greek population during the war was closely observed by the Assumptionists. They noted, “In recent days, establishing contact with the French consulate has proven to be exceedingly challenging. Their current primary concern is ensuring the safety of the Greek population affected by the displacement caused by Turkish actions in Turkey. Initially, the protective measures were only extended to Catholic Greeks, but now this assistance is being offered to all, contingent upon obtaining a visa from the French consulate using Greek passports. However, the situation is intricate due to the presence of over 50,000 Greek subjects in Constantinople. This underscores the significant social upheaval and confusion generated by these developments” (Assumptionists 1897, p. 68).

The Orthodox community, influenced by Greek nationalism and the secularization of the Empire after 1908, gradually transformed into a more nationalist and less religious community. "Most of the time, preaching and teaching are carried out by lay people, and with a hint of German rationalism influencing Greek professors, it becomes evident that faith is waning, especially among the upper class, who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians primarily because they are Greek (Nésiotès 1913, pp. 232–36)”. Nevertheless, the quality of education in Assumptionist and Oblate schools and the free healthcare in dispensaries attracted the local Greeks to interact with them. For instance, “according to a letter sent to Bishop Meletios by a member of Edirne’s town council, it was reported that ten thousand Rum (endonym referring to Byzantine Orthodox) expressed a desire to convert to Catholicism (Macar 2002, p. 39)”. Furthermore, in his correspondence with Mgr. Charmetant, Archimandrite Anastasiadis emphasized his firm belief in the objective of reuniting the Greeks with the Union through missionaries who share the same ethnicity, language, and liturgy. He also highlighted the importance of close collaboration with the Holy See in this endeavor. In the end, the Byzantine Catholics were present largely in the Ottoman Empire as there were certain laws forbidding the stay of Uniate priests in Greece (Janin 1915, p. 497).

The missionaries encountered numerous challenges in their ambitious endeavor to end the Photian Schism and bring Greeks back to the Catholic Church. Despite their efforts to convert Orthodox Greeks, they faced limited success, resulting in only a few conversions. Moreover, temporary factors often influenced these conversions and frequently led to a return to the schism. Consequently, these individual conversions had a negligible impact on the clergy, causing a loss of some devoted followers (Babot 2011, p. 95).

The Assumptionists encountered greater complexities in their interactions with the Greek population in comparison to their engagements with the Armenians. This disparity arose from the central focus of their conversion endeavors and the establishment of indigenous clergy, which predominantly targeted the Greek community. The initiatives undertaken by the Assumptionists were borne out of a collaborative partnership between the nation of France and the ecclesiastical authority of the Holy See.

A notable illustration of this ecclesiastical engagement is evidenced by the transformation of the Church of Anastasie situated in Kumkapı. The conversion of this ecclesiastical edifice into a Greek Orthodox church, transpiring on 7 June 1896, exemplifies the orchestrated efforts between the Assumptionists, France, and the Holy See. Notably, during the ceremonial procession of the Holy Sacrament, a contingent of police personnel was strategically stationed to forestall any potential demonstrations or disruptions.

Furthermore, the diplomatic envoy of France, Ambassador Mr. Cambon, undertook official visits to both Greek Orthodox and Latin churches, seminaries, and educational institutions. His comprehensive engagement, extending to a spectrum of religious and educational establishments, underscored the interconnectedness between the Assumptionists’ missionary endeavors and the diplomatic interests of the French state.

The culmination of these endeavors was marked by the inauguration of the Greek Orthodox church on 9 January 1897, with the solemn consecration presided over by Monsignor Bonetti. This ceremonial event stands as a poignant testimony to the multifaceted
collaboration between religious, diplomatic, and ecclesiastical stakeholders during this historical juncture (Piolet 1900–1903, p. 84; also see Sylvanos 1898).

Notwithstanding the theological divergences between various denominations, there existed a continuous engagement and interaction between Catholics and Orthodox Christians. In his contribution to the Missions des Augustins de l’Assomption, the Greek-Assumptionist Fr. Theopistos observed the efforts of rapprochement as “The schismatic Greeks, like us, pray daily for the Union of the Churches in their liturgical services: it would seem that they should wholeheartedly join an archconfraternity like ours, aimed at bridging the chasm that ignorance, fanaticism, and human passions have created for many centuries between the two great sister churches (Assumptionists 1898, p. 172)”.

Nevertheless, a momentous paradigm shift emerged in the form of Turkish nationalism, which served as a pivotal milestone for all Ottoman Christians. Even a Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate was founded under the Turkish national forces. “We, Anatolian Orthodox, are descended from the Turkish race and we remain Turks to this day. We do not know Greek. We pray in the Turkish language. Tomorrow, when we appear before the Almighty, it is in the language of Abdulhak Hamid that we give an account of our deeds. I am convinced that heaven can only speak to us in the language of Nafi and Fuzouli” says the Turkish Orthodox Patriarch Eftim in his declaration (Assumptionists 1922, p. 392). The previously manageable tensions underwent a profound metamorphosis, ultimately evolving into an inescapable reality in the aftermath of the First World War and the Greco–Turkish War (See Morris and Ze’evi 2019).

4.2.3. Muslims

Relations with the Turks, and, consequently, the Muslims, were generally better than those with non-Muslims, despite the unavailability of conversion as an option. The Assumptionists primarily engaged with Ottoman authorities, while the Oblates worked closely with the communities. The Ottoman authorities showed respect towards the Assumptionists and granted necessary permissions for new establishments, albeit sometimes with delays. However, the Muslim community in Anatolia occasionally provoked the priests and nuns, despite the overall positive interaction between religious leaders, particularly during religious holidays.

The Assumptionists perceived a distinction between the youth and the older members of society. They argued that “religious fanaticism existed among the youth due to their education”, although this perspective can be seen as Orientalist in nature. These conflicts were mostly resolved through the direct intervention of local authorities or collaboration with the French embassy. The only issue between the Ottoman authorities and the Assumptionists concerned unauthorized construction, repairs, and foundations. In some cases, the Assumptionists acted without the required permission and against Ottoman laws, resulting in police intervention. Overall, the interaction with the Turks was positive, as evidenced by the increasing number of Turkish students attending Assumptionist schools until 1914 (Jacob 2000, pp. 292–302).

The Assumptionists received a largely positive response, as evidenced by the participation or presence of non-Catholics during religious events held in various locations. For instance, the October 1888 Confirmation in Bursa, the 1888–1889 Christmas celebration in Sultancayır, and the 1911 sacred procession of the Holy Sacrament in Kadıköy all saw non-Catholic individuals taking part (Jacob 2000, pp. 278–79). The Assumptionist and Oblate institutions gained a reputation for providing high-quality Western Roman Catholic education and healthcare, earning appreciation from people of all religious communities. Furthermore, reports from the Assumptionists regarding education and their annual reports indicate that they welcomed all communities without distinction while respecting their cultural and traditional backgrounds. Additionally, the Oblate dispensaries were highly regarded for serving everyone, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, language, or religion, which was greatly appreciated by both Muslim and non-Muslim communities.
4.3. The Decline of the Mission: The Assumptionists in a Period of War and Hostility

The period between Fr. Galabert’s arrival in Constantinople and the Treaty of Berlin marked the establishment of the Mission d’Orient for the Assumptionists. From 1878 onward, the Assumptionists shifted their focus to Anatolia, and the years between 1878 and 1912 represented the height of their mission in the Ottoman Empire. However, the mission’s decline began with the onset of the Balkan Wars, primarily due to two key reasons. Firstly, the rise of Turkish nationalism resulted from the homogenization policies of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which held a hostile attitude towards the Ottoman Christians. Secondly, the demographic landscape of Anatolia underwent significant changes due to the influx of a large number of Muslim refugees, particularly from the Balkans. Moreover, the emergence of national tendencies among the Greeks and Armenians led to increased opposition against the Vatican’s proselytism.

Furthermore, French missionaries encountered numerous challenges from Catholic missionaries of various nationalities (i.e., Italian), Orthodox missionaries supported by Russia, and Protestant missionaries backed by America, Britain, and Germany. In response, the French missionaries adopted a strategic approach, emphasizing both their French and religious identities. Their concerns escalated when the growing alliance between the Ottoman Empire and Germany threatened their influence in Ottoman territories, thus strengthening the presence of German missionaries.

Additionally, the Ottoman administration perceived foreign and non-Muslim schools as significant threats and sought ways to counter them. A significant development was the emergence of admitting Muslim and non-Muslim students simultaneously to Ottoman schools. The Ottoman authorities aimed to relocate non-Muslim students from foreign schools due to these institutions’ substantial influence on non-Muslim communities. It was believed that mixed schools would contribute significantly to the social and political unity of the Ottoman Empire (Gül 2015, p. 194).

During the nineteenth century, Ottoman Christians, inspired by French Revolutionary ideals, began demanding improved status in terms of legal and social equality. However, the Great Powers’ support for the Christians directly interfered with Ottoman internal affairs and posed a challenge to the supremacy of Islam, leading to increased hostility towards the Christian Millets. This intolerance towards other religions and ethnicities was closely tied to Islamic (Shari’a) Law, which stipulates that non-Muslim monotheists should be placed under the state’s protection and guaranteed the rights to life, property, and the practice of their religion, on the condition that they maintain peace and acknowledge the superiority of Islam (Akçam 2023, p. 2).

The millet system, although under Sultan’s control, represented quasi-independent entities within the state. However, as non-believers, the Sultan’s protected Christians were subjected to certain restrictions and were not regarded as equals to the surrounding Muslim population. Their status was characterized as one of “conditional toleration”. The Ottoman rulers, considering this principle as fundamental to their governance, along with the empire’s Muslim majority, were not receptive to the demands of various Christian communities for legal equality. They rejected the idea of living alongside Christians as social and legal equals.

For example, under Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty, the Sublime Porte was obligated to implement reforms in regions of Anatolia with Armenian populations and ensure the safety of the Armenians. However, when the Great Powers issued an ultimatum in 1895 to enforce these reforms, it resulted in increased hostility towards the Armenians. The Armenian massacres (Hamidiye) were a direct consequence of this hostility, as Abdulhamid II perceived the ultimatum as a direct interference in Ottoman internal affairs. This event marked the beginning of a period of hostilities towards Ottoman Christians. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 instilled hope in Ottoman Christians, as they viewed it as a step towards attaining equal rights. However, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), in its pursuit of Turkish nation-building following the Balkan wars and its desperate attempts to salvage the Empire, became focused on consolidating Anatolia through homogenization. The
CUP was concerned that Anatolian Greeks and Armenians might also demand autonomy, similar to the Slavs in the Balkans, due to an increase in their nationalist tendencies. The Assumptionists, in their schools, sought to avoid becoming targets and aimed to prevent all forms of discrimination. However, their close affiliation with France complicated their mission, as they strongly emphasized their French identity and the French nature of their activities. Furthermore, they took great pride in their French character (Picard 1897, pp. 5–7).

The demography of Anatolia underwent significant changes in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire’s heavy losses during the Balkan Wars. The Young Turks’ initiatives to establish social homogeneity in Anatolia, combined with the arrival of Muslim refugees from the Balkans, played a pivotal role in driving this transformation. Furthermore, the first population exchange between the Ottoman Empire, Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria occurred in 1913, followed by a second population exchange in 1914. For instance, Eskişehir (according to V. Cuinet’s records prior to the Balkan wars) had a total population of 67,074, comprising 38,200 Muslims, 28,774 Christians (including 6074 Armenians), and 100 Jews (Babot 2011, p. 63). However, in 1913, Father André Besset, the mission’s superior, reported a population of 36,000 in Eskişehir, consisting of 26,000 Muslims, among whom 13,000 were Tartars, Circassians, Bosniaks, or other immigrant groups with a fervent desire to retaliate against Christians. There were also approximately 9 to 10,000 Christians, including Greeks, Armenians, and Catholics (Babot 2011, p. 63).

The alliance between the Ottoman Empire and the German Empire had a significant impact on the treatment of Ottoman Christians by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) during World War I. The situation of Christian subjects under the Ottoman Empire worsened as a result of the Ottoman’s alignment with the Central Powers. German Ambassador Paul Graf Wolff Metternich zur Gracht, while advising Ottoman Minister Mehmet Talat Pasha on the matter of Greeks, presented two options: allowing their emigration to Greece or taking immediate measures against them, exploiting their perceived hostility as a pretext. Metternich’s predecessor, Hans von Wangenheim, similarly advocated for actions against individuals from enemy nations, suggesting their detention as hostages (Dordonas and Kalogrias 2023, pp. 94–101).

The Roman Catholic missionary establishments, which included schools, churches, dispensaries, hospitals, and orphanages, experienced consistent growth in the Ottoman Empire until 1914. The Assumptionists continued their activities with the Oblates even when they had to relocate their operations to the Balkans (i.e., Bulgarian Seminary in Karaağaç) in Istanbul due to the Balkan wars (Oeuvre pontificale missionnaire de la Propagation de la foi 1915). However, the period between 1914 and 1918 dealt a significant blow to the Mission d’Orient. Starting in November 1914, the official closure of French establishments in Constantinople and throughout Turkey, along with the compulsory expulsion of numerous residents from the Triple Entente nations, posed not only difficulties for the Assumptionist and Oblate endeavors but also hindered the submission of manuscripts or books that might have expedited the timely production of multiple editions of Échos d’Orient (Salaville 1915, p. 385).

Following the second population exchange with Greece, “the Armenian Genocide, which, between the years 1915–1918, resulted in the death and/or murder of more than one million individuals (Akçam 2018, p. 2)” “From the outbreak of the European War until the spring of 1916, the west Anatolian Greeks suffered relatively (Toynbee 1970, p. 142)”. As a response to the pro-Entente Greek movement, the Ottoman authorities started the deportations of the Greek populations of Western Turkey (Toynbee 1970, p. 142). The Assumptionist activities resumed shortly after the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros in 1918. In 1919, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith granted permission for the Assumptionists to return to the Orient (Jacob 2000, p. 316). Moreover, The Assumptionists and Oblates recovered the items confiscated by the Ottoman Empire during the war. However, there was a significant disparity between the country they had left and the one they found upon their return. The Christian population was dramat-

One year following the armistice, the Greek occupation of western Anatolia in 1919 marked the beginning of a new era of challenges for the Assumptionists. Supported by the French and the British, the Greek presence sparked a series of struggles for the religious order. Interestingly, the Vatican favored the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire, as Roman Catholic missions enjoyed more freedom in Ottoman territories compared to those under Greek Orthodox influence.

The Greco–Turkish War, which endured until 1922, further intensified the predicament for the Assumptionists. Throughout this period, the Assumptionist institutions fell under the occupation of French, British, Greek, and Turkish troops, severely disrupting their operations (Jacob 2000, p. 259). In 1921, the Pontus Greeks experienced forced relocations and “persecution” due to their perceived allegiance to Greece. (See Chatzikyriakidis 2023, pp. 19–42; Georganopoulos 2023, pp. 73–89). Revolts against Turkish national forces also intensified hostilities toward Christian communities during that time. Turkish atrocities were reported against Christian civilians in the Pontus region. These incidents of violence took place concurrently with Greece’s actions in Western Anatolia and Turkish national forces’ operations in the northeastern provinces. Both sides justified their actions as necessary military responses to perceived attacks (Toynbee 1970, p. 275).

The Greek invasion of western Anatolia inadvertently strengthened the nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Between 1919 and 1922, this pivotal period played a crucial role in unifying all Muslims under Turkish leadership, as they sought to regain the territories lost with the signing of the Treaty of Sevres in 1920. This unification process laid the foundation for the establishment of the Turkish nation-state.

Consequently, the Assumptionists faced a new chapter in their history following the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923. This treaty effectively concluded the Greco–Turkish War and marked the inception of the Turkish nation-state. However, the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1924 delivered a final blow to the Mission d’Orient. With a significant decline in the Christian population, the Assumptionists and the Oblates found themselves gradually closing their parishes, schools, and dispensaries. A request from the Holy See prompted them to maintain a presence in a few locations, such as Bursa for the Catholics and Konya for the Armenians. This left their sole remaining establishments in Istanbul, Zonguldak, and Ankara (Walter 1980, p. 45).

5. Conclusions

The Assumptionists initiated the “Mission d’Orient” in 1862, maintaining a continuous presence in Kadiköy. This undertaking aimed to bridge the gap between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, fostering religious and cultural exchange between the East and West within a swiftly changing political and religious context.

The Mission d’Orient’s establishment was built upon the historical context of Roman Catholic missionary activities and the amicable relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Catholic West. Beyond religious goals, the mission held political objectives, including countering Russia’s influence and resolving the longstanding Photian Schism.

However, the Mission d’Orient encountered formidable challenges that impeded its realization. Principal among these challenges were the intricate power dynamics characterizing interactions between the Ottoman Empire and Western powers. These dynamics adversely impacted Christian communities, leading to the deportation, expulsion, and forced relocation of Ottoman Christians.

Another significant hindrance was the perception among indigenous populations that Catholic missions propagated Rome’s proselytizing motives. This perception bred suspicion and resistance towards the Assumptionists’ activities. Overcoming these suspicions and
earning the trust of local communities proved arduous due to concerns about foreign influence eroding their cultural and religious identities.

Despite these setbacks, the Assumptionists, driven by their French identity, ultramontane zeal, and pursuit of knowledge, left an enduring mark on the annals of Christian missions. Their efforts underscored broader implications for interfaith relations and religious diplomacy. The *Mission d’Orient*, despite its ultimate unfulfillment, served as a poignant reminder of the intricate difficulties inherent in attempting to bridge divides and cultivate unity among diverse branches of Christianity.

Furthermore, the Assumptionists and the Oblates played pivotal roles in transforming perspectives through their educational institutions, healthcare endeavors, and publications. The Assumptionists, notably, contributed to improving relations between the Vatican and Phanar. The turbulent political and religious conflicts spanning from 1878 to 1923, encompassing population exchanges, expulsions, forced relocations, and massacres suffered by Ottoman Christians, paradoxically drew the two sides closer. Meanwhile, the Assumptionists’ magazines, such as the “*Échos d’Orient*” and “*Missions des Augustins de l’Assumption*”, evolved over time from politically oriented and judgmental platforms to more informative outlets exploring the cultural and religious history while conveying this knowledge to Europe.

In conclusion, the Assumptionists embarked on the *Mission d’Orient* with the noble aspiration of promoting religious and political harmony in a rapidly evolving world. While the mission fell short of achieving all its objectives, it remains historically significant and imparts valuable lessons applicable today. It underscores the intricacies of interfaith relations and emphasizes the importance of approaching such endeavors with cultural sensitivity, understanding, and respect. The enduring Assumptionist presence in Istanbul stands as a testament that more than 150 years of service continue to contribute to the rapprochement between the East and the West.

**Funding:** This publication was supported by the SVV project of the Institute of International Studies, FSV UK, No. 260726.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

4. The Congregation for the Eastern Churches was established by Pius IX in 1862, made autonomous by Benedict XV in 1917, and changed its name to *Congregatio pro Ecclesiis Orientalibus* by Paul VI in 1967. [https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/orientchurch/profilo/rc_con_corient_pro_20000724_profile_fr.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/orientchurch/profilo/rc_con_corient_pro_20000724_profile_fr.html) (accessed on 5 May 2023).
5. For the entire text addressed to the Assumptionists, see (Leo XIII 1895).
7. For instance, BOA, DH. ŞFR, 108/39, H/18/06/1338 (09.03.1920). The General Police Department’s (*Emniyet-i Umumiye Midiirliği*) telegraph to Konya’s Mayor (Vali) ordering the immediate return of Assumptionists and Oblates’ items taken to be used in the Ottoman schools during the war.

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