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A 16th-Century German Traveller's Perspective on Discrimination and Tolerance in the Ottoman Empire

MARK HÄBERLEIN
University of Bamberg

ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the perception of religious plurality in the work of the Augsburg physician and traveller Leonhard Rauwolf (1535?-1596). From 1573 to 1576, Rauwolf lived in the Levant as an employee of the Augsburg merchant firm of Melchior Manlich and his associates and visited the Syrian and Mesopotamian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. During his travels he acquired first-hand knowledge of the religious heterogeneity that characterized the Near East. The study argues that Rauwolf was impressed by this plurality and seized the opportunity to observe the religious rites and customs of diverse groups but in the final analysis was unable to overcome the religious intolerance of 16th-century Europe and the anti-Catholic, anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish stereotypes of his time.

Der Beitrag untersucht die Wahrnehmung religiöser Vielfalt im Werk des Augsburger Arztes und Orientreisenden Leonhard Rauwolf (1535?-1596). Rauwolf hielt sich im Auftrag des Handelshauses „Melchior Manlich und Mitverwandte“ zwischen 1573 und 1576 in der Levante auf und bereiste die syrischen und mesopotamischen Provinzen des Osmanischen Reiches. Dabei lernte er die religiöse Heterogenität, die dort herrschte, aus eigener Anschauung kennen. Der Beitrag argumentiert, dass Rauwolf zwar von dieser Vielfalt beeindruckt war und von der Möglichkeit, die religiösen Riten und Gebräuche unterschiedlicher Bevölkerungsgruppen zu beobachten, regen Gebrauch machte, aber letztlich nicht in der Lage war, die anti-katholischen, anti-muslimischen und anti-jüdischen Stereotypen seiner Zeit zu überwinden.

During his stay in the Syrian city of Aleppo in the mid-1570s, the German traveller Leonhard Rauwolf, a physician from the imperial city of Augsburg, heard a remarkable story about the Ottoman sultan Suleyman. According to Rauwolf, Suleyman once discussed with his advisers whether the Jews in his territories should be tolerated or exterminated. Most members of his council expressed the opinion that the Jews did not merit toleration since they burdened the people with their abominable usurious practices. The sultan then asked his councillors to regard the forms and colours of the flowers that were arranged in a bouquet in their midst. Did they share his opinion that each flower in its particular shape and colour added to the beauty of the others? When the councillors agreed, the sultan pointed out to them that he ruled over many different nations – Turks, Moors, Greeks and others. Each of these nations contributed to the wealth and reputation of his kingdom, and in order to continue this happy situation, he deemed it wise to continue to tolerate those who were already living together under his rule. His advisers liked this proposition so well that they unanimously accepted it¹.

Viewed in isolation, this remarkable parable on religious toleration and the coexistence of various nations in one realm reads like an early precursor of 17th and 18th-century writings that pointed to religious diversity in extra-European empires in order to confront European readers with their own intolerance². Indeed the variety of religious beliefs in 16th and 17th-century western and central European monarchies was much more restricted than in the contemporary empires of the Ottoman sultans or the Indian moguls. European rulers typically sought to impose confessional conformity on their subjects, and where conformity proved impossible to enforce, granted only a grudging tolerance to certain Christian minorities. Jews were still banned from many European countries, and where they were accepted they often faced severe legal, political and economic restrictions³.

Here I will explore Leonhard Rauwolf's observations on religious diversity, discrimination and tolerance in the Ottoman Empire. To put his views into perspective, I will begin by briefly pointing out his social and cultural background. Then I will turn to his travel narrative, focussing on his references to the situation of Christian minorities and Jews. In conclusion, I will examine how Rauwolf's confrontation with religious diversity affected his own views on discrimination and tolerance.

Leonhard Rauwolf, probably born in 1535, grew up as a Lutheran Protestant in the imperial city of Augsburg. While most inhabitants of Augsburg had become Protestants during the Reformation, an influential minority remained Catholic, and the Peace of Augsburg (1555) confirmed the city's bi-confessional nature⁴. Rauwolf studied medicine at the universities of Tübingen (1554) and Wittenberg (1556) and continued his education at the French universities of Montpellier and Valence at a time of rising confessional tensions between Catholics and Huguenots. Back in Augsburg, he married Regina Jung, the daughter of a Protestant city physician, in 1565. After practicing medicine in the Catholic dukedom of Bavaria and the Protestant imperial city of Kempten, he secured the lucrative post of city physician in Augsburg in 1571. The reputation which Rauwolf had acquired by 1573 is illustrated by the fact that the city kept him on its payroll when he undertook his voyage to the Orient in the service of the Augsburg merchant Melchior Manlich, a relative of his wife⁵. A daring businessman, Manlich entered the Levant trade via Marseille on a large scale: he purchased seven ships and chartered two more. It was Rauwolf's task to provide medical services to Manlich's employees in the Levantine ports and explore new trading opportunities⁶.

That its author was a commercial employee, physician and dedicated botanist distinguishes Rauwolf's travel narrative from the majority of 16th-century European reports on the Ottoman Empire, which were written in the context of diplomatic missions⁷. And in contrast to most other travellers, Rauwolf did not visit the capital of Constantinople but the Syrian and Mesopotamian provinces. His narrative, which is divided into three parts, basically follows his itinerary: the first part describes his voyage from Augsburg to Tripoli and Aleppo, the second chronicles the journey from Aleppo to Baghdad and the return voyage through Kurdish territory, and the third part is an account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and his return to Germany. Into this narrative the physician inserted descriptions of the Ottoman administrative and judicial system, of cities and markets, local customs and religious practices.

Rauwolf recorded numerous encounters with Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. He met French and Italian merchants in Tripoli and Aleppo and undertook the journey from Tripoli to Jerusalem in 1575 in the company of a Carmelite monk. A Franciscan guided him on his tour of the holy sites in Jerusalem⁸. While he abstained from extended polemics, Rauwolf clearly marked his own confessional stance. He noted that the pilgrimage to the Holy Land had declined sharply since, through God's grace, the Holy Gospel had been reintroduced in its clear and unadulterated form and now showed Christians a better way to salvation, the forgiveness of their sins and the recognition of truth – an unequivocal reference to the Protestant Reformation⁹. He criticized

the inquisitorial practices of the Jesuits in India, the granting of letters of indulgence in the Holy Land and the commercialisation of Catholic pilgrimages¹⁰. Moreover, he lamented that the Pope, who pretended to be God's representative on earth, wished to impose his will on all people. Since the idolatries and errors of the "papists" had already been described by many learned authors and were common knowledge, he saw no need to dwell on them more extensively¹¹. Still, it is clear that Rauwolf had thoroughly absorbed Lutheran confessionality and was highly conscious of the fault lines separating Catholics and Protestants.

Moreover, Rauwolf's characterizations of Islam implicitly convey anti-Catholic sentiments as well¹². According to the German physician, Muslims tried to cleanse themselves of their sins through "outward ceremonies and good works" – precisely the criticism that Luther and his followers voiced against Catholicism. Muslims' belief in justification by works, he thought, manifested itself in the giving of alms, pilgrimages, fasting, sacrifices, avoidance of certain types of food and drink, ritual washing and prayers. And Rauwolf remarked that Muslims might become aware of their errors by studying Holy Scripture more diligently – exactly what Protestants were supposed to do in order to recognize the "papist" errors¹³.

Apart from Catholics, many other Christian minorities were present in the Ottoman provinces which Rauwolf visited. He encountered Syrian Christians and Maronites and travelled from Aleppo to Baghdad in the company of Armenian merchants¹⁴. Reports about Christian communities in Persia, who followed the teachings of Prester John, nourished his hopes for the spread of the Christian faith. In Lebanon the Augsburg physician treated a Maronite patriarch and visited his monastery, while in Jerusalem he found "Christians of various nations" – Catholics, Abyssinians, Greeks, Armenians, Georgians, Nestorians, Syrians, Jacobites – who were all free to practice their faith in their own chapels. The Turks did not attempt to convert these Christians to their faith but were content to extract an annual tribute from them¹⁵.

Rauwolf portrayed these Christian minorities in a series of short chapters, in which he obviously relied on earlier works¹⁶. He judged these groups both by general characteristics and by their affinity to Christianity, Islam or Judaism. Throughout he paralleled character traits and religious practices: the Armenians, for example, were associated with positive traits like devoutness, honesty and hospitality, while their religion seemed to agree with the Reformed faith in many points. Like central European Protestants, Armenians rejected papacy, the celibacy of priests, letters of indulgence and purgatory. Still, they retained certain "errors" and "annoying customs", like loud lamentations of the dead. Syrian Christians and Nestorians, on the other hand, appeared both "outwardly miserable" and "corrupt in their religion". The Abyssinian faith supposedly showed many similarities to Judaism, and the Maronite creed agreed with Roman Catholicism in many respects¹⁷.

While he repeatedly mentioned discrimination against Christians in the Ottoman Empire – mocking in the streets, subjection to high taxes and special tariffs, the selection of young boys for the Sultan's service and the enslavement of Christian prisoners¹⁸ – Rauwolf did not fail to mention that Christian groups like the Armenians and the Greeks had their own churches and that Christians and Jews were allowed to celebrate their religious holidays without much interference¹⁹. The contrast between this toleration of divergent religious observances and the intolerance of contemporary Europe, where Catholics and Protestants often clashed over public demonstrations of faith, can hardly have escaped Rauwolf. Yet there were clear limits to his acceptance of religious diversity. Nowhere are these limits more apparent than in his remarks on Jews in the Ottoman Empire.

It is doubtful whether Rauwolf had much contact with Jews before he set out on his journey to the Orient. Jews had been banned from the city of Augsburg in the late Middle Ages but had established several small settlements in nearby villages by the middle of the 16th century²⁰. Most

likely, he regarded them as a demographically and legally marginal group. In sharp contrast, he encountered a numerically strong and economically powerful Jewish population in the Ottoman Empire, where Jews had their own communities and were allowed to practice their faith in public. Upon his arrival in Tripoli in 1573, he noted that Jewish brokers, who were fluent in many languages and knew the exact value of trade goods, played an important role in economic life. In both Tripoli and Aleppo the Jews had built large, impressive synagogues²¹.

In the description of his journey from Aleppo to Baghdad on the Euphrates River in 1574, Rauwolf's depictions of the Jewish passengers on board the ship take on a decidedly negative note. He claimed that they denounced him and a fellow Dutch passenger for secretly drinking wine with the ship's captain²². On the return journey from Baghdad to Aleppo via Mosul in present-day northern Iraq, Rauwolf again found himself in the company of three Jewish merchants and observed some of their ceremonies, but when he mentioned Jesus Christ they mocked and cursed him²³. Nor did he refrain from traditional anti-Judaic stereotypes. Jews in the Ottoman Empire, he claimed, were worse defrauders and usurers than central European Jews. The fact that they farmed most tariffs from the sultan was supposed to do great harm to merchants. At the outset of his journey to the Holy Land, Rauwolf reminded his readers that the Jews had shamefully crucified their saviour on Mount Calvary, and in describing Jerusalem Rauwolf contrasted the former glory of Israel's capital and the fertility of biblical Canaan with the present ruin of the city and the barrenness of the countryside. He interpreted this decay as God's punishment for the Jews, which served as a warning to all Christians. In general, the former people of God had declined into blindness and superstition and they were hated and despised by everyone. The Turks would not have tolerated them, Rauwolf thought, if they had not purchased certain privileges with large sums of money²⁴. He did not mention that Jews in Christian European monarchies also had to pay for their privileges but pointed out that Muslims would neither eat their meals in the presence of Jews nor condone Jewish-Muslim marriages or accept conversions unless the Jew had converted to Christianity first²⁵. Jewish doctors, he conceded, were more skilled and more experienced practitioners than their Turkish colleagues, as they were able to study medical authorities like Galen and Avicenna. But despite their superior knowledge, Rauwolf believed, their medical successes were limited because Turkish patients did not trust them and they were more interested in their own fortunes than in the welfare of their patients. Here the common stereotype of the "Jewish doctor" becomes blended with that of the Jewish usurer²⁶.

We may conclude that the religious diversity which he encountered in the Ottoman Empire in the 1570s was intriguing, but also deeply unsettling to the German physician and traveller. He had the opportunity to observe the religious practices and lifestyles of Muslims, Christian minorities and Jews firsthand, and he encountered numerous examples of everyday contacts and cooperation between these religious groups. But notwithstanding his observations of practical tolerance, he was unable to overcome the anti-Catholic, anti-Muslim and especially the anti-Jewish prejudices of his times. In this context it is important to remember that religious confrontation, not tolerance, marked Rauwolf's life after his return from the Orient. In the 1580s, the decision of the Augsburg city council to adopt the new Gregorian calendar aroused fierce opposition from the city's Protestants, who refused to live and work according to a "popish" calendar. The city council banned the ringleaders of the Protestant opposition from the city and installed new Protestant ministers. Since they refused to attend the services of these new ministers, Rauwolf and his colleague Adolph Occo lost their positions as city physicians in 1588²⁷. Rauwolf then moved to the Austrian town of Linz. The only document we have from his stay there is a petition in which five physicians, including Rauwolf, protested against the medical practice of a "godless, incapable,

inexperienced, vain, avaricious Jew". The petition calls to mind popular stereotypes which are also present in his travel narrative²⁸. Rauwolf eventually became an army surgeon and died in an encampment of the Austrian army in Vác, Hungary, in the summer of 1596 – in a war against the Ottoman Empire which Rauwolf knew like few other Europeans of his time²⁹. In an age of intolerance, the religious diversity of the Ottoman Empire constituted a challenge which, in the final analysis, even an astute and learned observer like Leonhard Rauwolf was unwilling to embrace.

NOTES

- ¹ L. Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung der Raiß, so er vor diser zeit gegen Auffgang inn die Morgenländer, firmemlich Syriam, Iudaeam, Arabiam, Mesopotamiam, Babyloniam, Assyriam, Armeniam etc. nicht ohne geringe mühe vnd grosse gefahr selbs vollbracht: neben vermeldung vil anderer seltzamer vnd denckwürdiger sachen / die alle er auff solcher erkundiget / gesehen vnd obseruiert hat. Alles in drey vnderschiedliche Thail mit sonderem fleiß abgethailt ...*, Lauingen 1582, pp. 70-71; cf. K.H. Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf: Sixteenth-Century Physician, Botanist, and Traveler*, Cambridge, Mass. 1968, pp. 202-3.
- ² See G. Adams, *The Huguenots and French Opinion, 1685-1787. The Enlightenment Debate on Toleration*, Waterloo, Ontario 1991, pp. 63-64; W. Demel, *Als Fremde in China. Das Reich der Mitte im Spiegel frühneuzeitlicher europäischer Reiseberichte*, Munich 1992, pp. 192-198, 212-243; J. Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1998, pp. 77, 313.
- ³ On the limits of religious toleration in 16th- and 17th-century Europe, see O.P. Grell, B. Scribner (eds.), *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, Cambridge 1996. On the situation of Jews, see J.I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550-1750*, Oxford 1985.
- ⁴ On the bi-confessional nature of 16th-century Augsburg, see P. Warmbrunn, *Zwei Konfessionen in einer Stadt. Das Zusammenleben von Katholiken und Protestanten in den paritätischen Reichsstädten Augsburg, Biberach, Ravensburg und Dinkelsbühl von 1548 bis 1648*, Wiesbaden 1983; B. Roeck, *Eine Stadt in Krieg und Frieden. Studien zur Geschichte der Reichsstadt Augsburg zwischen Kalenderstreit und Parität*, 2 vols., Munich 1989.
- ⁵ For biographical sketeches, see Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 13-30; D. Henze, *Enzyklopädie der Entdecker und Erforscher der Erde*, vol. 4, Graz 2000, pp. 546-552; M. Häberlein, *Rauwolf, Leonhard*, in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 21, Berlin 2003, pp. 217-18.
- ⁶ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 9, 269, 463-64. On the Manlich company's Levant trade, see A.-E. Sayous, *Le commerce de Melchior Manlich et Compagnie d'Augsbourg à Marseille et dans toute la Méditerranée entre 1571 et 1574*, in "Revue historique", 1935, 176, pp. 389-411; G. Seibold, *Die Manlich. Geschichte einer Augsburger Kaufmannsfamilie*, Sigmaringen 1995, pp. 140-145.
- ⁷ See A. Höfert, *Den Feind beschreiben. "Türkengefahr" und europäisches Wissen über das Osmanische Reich 1450-1600*, Frankfurt am Main - New York 2003.
- ⁸ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 32-34, 93, 262-63, 266-300, 319-21; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 158-160, 166-67, 170.
- ⁹ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 377.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-27, 330-31, 355, 382, 385.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 428-29; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., p. 200.
- ¹² W. Neuber, *Grade der Fremdheit. Alteritätskonstruktion und experientia-Argumentation in deutschen Turcica der Renaissance*, in B. Guthmüller, W. Kühlmann (eds.), *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance*, Tübingen 2000, pp. 249-65, esp. p. 262.
- ¹³ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 357-58, 360-63; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 180, 193.
- ¹⁴ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 66, 137, 257.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-221, 273-284, 394-95; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 145-149, 195-96.
- ¹⁶ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 410-31. Here Rauwolf relied on works like Sebastian Franck's *Chronica und beschreibung der Türckey* (1530). See Neuber, *Grade der Fremdheit* cit., pp. 261-62; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 197-201.
- ¹⁷ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 414-26.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1, 132, 301, 395-405.

- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 367, 406-7; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 182-83.
- ²⁰ S. Ullmann, *Nachbarschaft und Konkurrenz. Juden und Christen in Dörfern der Markgrafschaft Burgau 1650 bis 1750*, Göttingen 1999, pp. 40-44.
- ²¹ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 34-35; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., p. 50.
- ²² Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 143, 147; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 83-85.
- ²³ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 237, 255, 258-60; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 130-31, 137-38, 140.
- ²⁴ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 35, 95, 299, 324-26, 405; Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf*, cit., p. 202.
- ²⁵ Rauwolf, *Aigentliche beschreibung* cit., pp. 405-6.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 263-64, 410.
- ²⁷ Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., pp. 231-32. On the conflict about the Gregorian calendar in Augsburg, see esp. Roeck, *Eine Stadt in Krieg und Frieden* cit., vol. 1, pp. 125-88; Warmbrunn, *Zwei Konfessionen* cit., pp. 360-75.
- ²⁸ J. Schuster, *Leonhart Rauwolff als Kämpfer gegen das Kurpfuschertum 1593*, "Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin" 1923, 14, pp. 125-26.
- ²⁹ Dannenfeldt, *Leonhard Rauwolf* cit., p. 232.

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