GONE TURK? LOYALTY AND ORTHODOXY IN A DISPUTE BETWEEN TWO JESUITS IN THE LEVANT

ROBERT CLINES

A while back, I was having a chat with a friend-cum-marketing professor. After a few litres of good German beer, Köstritzer Schwarzbier to be precise, our intellectual peregrinations led us to Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*. One passage that stood out for us was when Geertz explained, in crafting a thick description of culture, how anthropological writings themselves are "interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a "native" makes first order ones: it's *his* culture.) They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are "something made," "something fashioned" - the original meaning of *fictio* - not that they are false, unfactual, or merely "as if" thought experiments."[1]

Our chat centered not on the role of the interpreter in providing truth, however. Rather, we debated the level of truth coming from the interpreted – first-order truths. It was at this point that my friend said to me: "Rob, you can learn a lot about a culture and its people based on the lies they tell." I wasn't entirely sure what to do with this little tidbit at the time. Surely, my friend had a point; he always has a point. But how, as interpreters, would we be in a position to determine what was and wasn't a first-order lie? Then, a few months back, I came across an interesting case. In 1578, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Everard Mercurian, sent two Jesuits, Giovanni Battista Eliano and Tommaso Raggio, as missionaries to the Maronite Catholics at Mount Lebanon. The mission was to reform their liturgical practices and support Catholic doctrine, which was under attack from Muslims and Orthodox Christians. However, it soon became clear that Eliano and Raggio had different views on the goals and objectives of the mission. Whereas Eliano held it to be central, Raggio viewed it as a peripheral mission, seeing work in Constantinople as far more significant. Eliano condemned Raggio's views not on

[1] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Id., *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 15.

principle, but because Raggio sought to convert Greeks and Turks. His placing priority with the "heretical" Greeks and "infidel" Turks demonstrated that Raggio had missed the point of the mission: to assist endangered Catholics. Raggio denied the claim, suggesting instead he desired to work with Constantinople's Latin Catholics. Someone was telling a lie; the documentary evidence suggests that it was Raggio. This case study illuminates that the fear of deception and cultural ambiguity was a major component of cross-cultural interaction in the early modern Mediterranean World. Raggio's desire to work with Greeks and Turks, who posed a threat to the Maronites, seemed to undermine the mission. Because he could become a threat to the mission itself, he came under scrutiny; he had potentially "gone Turk." The fear of a Jesuit abandoning the Catholicity of a mission captures the essence of Catholicism in the Levant. It was a minority faith under attack from the enemies of the Church; working with those enemies, even with benevolent intentions, could have a disastrous impact on the presence of Catholicism in the Levant.

The fear of cultural deception in the eastern Mediterranean

Before we get into the specifics of Raggio's lie, the significance of cross-cultural interaction and the fear of national transgression in the early modern Mediterranean should be considered. By nation, I am not referring to the modern nation-state which Benedict Anderson emphasizes in *Imagined Communities*. Yet, I believe Anderson's explication of an "imagined community" is somewhat useful. He explains that "the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them… has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations."[2] For example, the Venetian community of merchants and their families living in Constantinople would have been part of the Venetian nation, yet their immersion in a foreign land seemingly belies Anderson's definition. While the Venetian nation within Constantinople had its own laws

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 7.

and jurisdiction, there were no definite political boundaries. Moreover, it was often difficult to tell who was a subject of the Sultan and who was not.[3] Eric Dursteler suggests that the question of identity in Constantinople should be viewed as a process and a continuum in which we avoid binaries. Identity was multi-layered and complex, more nuanced and sophisticated than we would preliminarily believe.[4] Also, Dursteler explains that Latin Rite did not necessarily admit one to Venetianness. He argues that as the Latin Christian subjects of the Turks began to speak more and more Greek in the sixteenth century, appearing less and less "Latin," the Venetians did not fully trust them; and their being subjects of the Sultan hardly helped. This suggests that identity is far too muddled to uncover which identity is most important or to find a hierarchy of identities.[5] However, because the Venetians feared the fluidity in identity in itself, the types of "elastic" boundaries to which Anderson referred must have been perceived as real. In this sense, while imagined, they were very much real in the hearts and minds of our historical subjects.

We also see these cultural walls built up by the Jesuits traveling throughout the Mediterranean. They articulated specific types of binaries that Dursteler sought to downplay as purely perceived. Whereas the Venetians often saw political allegiance as a means of cultural affinity, the Jesuits saw Catholic orthodoxy as the means by which loyalty could be procured. Jennifer Selywn explains that the Jesuits saw the Neapolitans as culturally backward, in need of being civilized and religiously purified.[6] The fact that Naples could be seen as somehow not European is particularly striking. Similarly, Cristobal Rodriguez articulated like concerns. He wrote to fellow Jesuit Diego Laínez in September 1561 that Venice was full of Lutherans and

---

[3] Eric Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 23-40.

[4] Ibid., 18-20.

[5] Ibid., 143-146. Also see Dursteler's "Education and identity in Constantinople's Latin Rite community, c. 1600," *Renaissance Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 287-303.

[6] Jennifer D. Selwyn, *A Paradise Inhabited by Devils: The Jesuits' Civilizing Mission in Early Modern Naples* (Aldershot; Rome: Ashgate; Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2004).

"Jews, Moors, Greeks, and men of almost every nation."[7] In November, now in Alexandria, he explained that he feared "the danger of being turned Turk."[8] A month later, now in Cairo working amongst the Coptic nation, Rodriguez encountered a Portuguese slave who claimed to be a Jesuit. Clearly a European, the slave's assertions were nonetheless suspect. Rodriguez did not discount that the Lusitanian could be a Jesuit, but how could he know for sure? As the slave of a Muslim master, his loyalty was anyone's guess – Rodriguez explained that he'd need to do more investigative work to determine the man's true identity.[9] Anecdotes like this – ambiguities and questions of national identity – are consistent in the letters of the Jesuits traveling in the Mediterranean. Giovanni Battista Eliano was impressed by the perseverance of the Maronites, as they lived and worshipped God "amidst infidels and so many different schismatic nations."[10] Thus, as we move into the dispute between Eliano and Raggio, it's clear nation and identity were in fact quite important and needed to be defended and preserved for the very reason Dursteler deemphasizes them: they *were* "imagined communities" far too fluid to preserve themselves.

The Maronite mission

The Maronite mission had its roots in the Society's earliest years. A close companion of Ignatius Loyola, Luís Gonçalves da Cámara, wrote that Ignatius was greatly consoled by seeing the city of Jerusalem upon his approach to it.[11] Likewise Ignatius's secretary, Juan de Polanco,

---

[7] Antoine Rabbath, ed., *Documents inédits poir servir à l'histoire du Christianisme en Orient (XVI – XIX siècle)*, 2 vols. (Paris: AMS Press, 1905), 228.

[8] Ibid., 250. "il pericolo di tornarsi turcho"

[9] ibid., 255-256.

[10] Kuri, Sami, ed. *Monumenta Proximi-Orientis*, Vol I. Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1989. (Hereafter MPO)

[11] MPO I: 4-5.

explained that Ignatius's goal was to "stay in Jerusalem, and then preach, if it be permitted, to the infidels, or die for the faith of Jesus Christ."[12] Throughout the course of the 1550s and 1560s there were countless attempts to missionize in the east, but these never bore much fruit. By 1577, matters had changed, as Mihail Ar-Ruzzy, Patriarch of the Maronites, wrote to Pope Gregory XIII that the Turks seized goods and priests under the auspices that they had built an unapproved church.[13] The Patriarch humbled himself as the prodigal son and beseeched Gregory to send help.[14] Shortly thereafter, Cardinal Antonio Carafa wrote to the Patriarch and explained that Rome would always assist the Maronites, strengthen their bonds and keep them in communion. Carafa explained that he was the protector of Jerusalem, a title given to him by the pope, and as such would do everything within his power to assist the Maronites in their plight against the heretical Christian sects and infidel Turks pressing on Mount Lebanon.[15]

It is at this point that our main characters, Giovanni Battista Eliano and Tomasso Raggio, enter the stage. In 1578, the two Jesuits arrived at Mount Lebanon. In separate letters from Carafa and Gregory, the two are ordered to correct the "errors and abuses" of the Maronites, and insist that they demonstrate benevolence (Gregory uses the expression "very loving resolutions"). The two Jesuits were sent to fix the errors in the Maronite bibles, to look for abuses and errors in the administration of the sacraments and focus on the unity of Christian brotherhood. The last order of business was to ensure that the Maronites would "render obedience" to Rome after each successful conclave.[16] Shortly after arriving in Tripoli in June 1578, Eliano wrote to Cardinal Carafa that he was eager to get to Qannubin, the seat of the

[12] Ibid., 7-8.

[13] Ibid., 43.

[14] Ibid., 47-49.

[15] Ibid., 60-61.

[16] *Documents inédits*, 141-143; MPO I: 63-66.

Maronite Patriarch, to begin his work preparing the translation and copying of important texts.[17] In a letter dated 22 July 1578, Eliano explained that the Maronites wished to reform and that he found "everyone universally confessing to be ignorant (as in effect they are), and that they desire to be taught as disciples. This gives us great satisfaction and much hope." He is further impressed how they live and worship God like the seven thousand Jews who never knelt before Baal, demonstrating their zeal and perseverance.[18] Eliano illuminated the grave state of the Maronites: they were in danger, not only from Turks, but from the "persecutions and appeals of the Greeks, or Jacobites, or Copts, or Armenians, or Nestorians, all of which hate them and torment them only because they show obedience to the Roman See." Lest the Maronites fall into apostasy, Eliano planned to translate a Bible for the Maronites and purge errors from other books. Eliano ascribed these errors to poor translations and the use of "Jacobite books." He reported that the Patriarch denied the errors, and reaffirmed faith and loyalty to Rome. Nonetheless, the situation was quite dire, as the protection of the Maronite nation would take much energy, and they needed to be defended from the seemingly countless nations seeking their demise.[19] This leads us to the lie. Imagine Eliano's ire when he discovers that Raggio, his supposed partner in this mission, was not particularly keen on helping the Maronites.

The lie

On 21 July 1578, Eliano wrote to Everard Mercurian deriding Raggio for not having "this mission at heart" and for desiring to work in Constantinople. He even claimed that Raggio "never does anything here" and "attends to nothing but his own comforts."[20] In a letter written only a few days later, Eliano took his criticisms of Raggio to a whole new level. No longer was

[17] MPO I:68-69.

[18] A reference to 1 Kings 19:18.

[19] Ibid., 75-79.

[20] Ibid., 72-73.

he lazy or longing for Constantinople. Raggio wanted to go convert "Turks and Greeks." Reiterating that Raggio saw the mission to the Maronites as "not the principle, but an accessory and that the principle was to Constantinople," he explained that Raggio had left for Constantinople to preach there during Lent, and that this "gave me very poor satisfaction." Eliano wrote that the mission was quite important and "these poor souls" needed the Jesuits more than heretical Greeks and infidel Turks. The Turk and the Greek are resistant, whereas the Maronite cooperates. The Patriarch and his prelates were going to put into place "everything that we wish" in regards to religious orthodoxy, so he couldn't grasp why Raggio would abandon the Maronites in their current state to work with the very groups threatening their existence.[21]

It is at this point, I suppose, that Raggio should defend himself. Raggio wrote to Mercurian that he was living with Franciscans in Tripoli. He explained that while Eliano stayed in Tripoli during the winter to translate an Arabic bible, he decided to go to Aleppo with the new Venetian consul to see what benefits would come of it. Here comes the lie: he still thought going to Constantinople was important; however he told Mercurian it was "to console the Frankish [Latin Rite] Christians of Galata." He made no mention of Turks or Greeks.[22] In another letter to Mercurian, Raggio explained that he didn't really like Eliano and that his work was useless.[23] This irked Mercurian, who ordered both men to put aside their differences. He reiterated that they should work together for the benefit of the Maronites, what he called "nostro volere" – our will.[24]

Eliano's reply to Mercurian in October 1578 explained that Raggio was continually studying Turkish. While Eliano was writing and translating works such as the catechism of Peter

[21] Ibid., 82-83.

[22] Ibid., 89-91.

[23] Ibid., 92-93.

[24] Ibid., 104.

Canisius and Diego de Ledesma's *Christian Doctrine*, Raggio thought it all a waste of time and money, and would rather spend his time learning a language only useful if one were to work among heretics and infidels.[25] If Raggio were to work with the Latin Christians of Constantinople, as he suggested, Italian would suffice. And Eliano was particularly angered when, in his October-November 1578 visit to the Maronite Patriarch, Raggio refused to go along, opting to stay behind in Tripoli.[26] By this point, others had lodged complaints against Raggio. Fra Bernardino da Basilicata, a Franciscan, explained that many merchants were "scandalized" by Raggio's deeds and his poor actions, and that his behavior was especially bad when Eliano was away at Mount Lebanon.[27] Even Patriarch Mihail Ar-Ruzzy wrote to Mercurian that Eliano's care for "the health of our souls" was appreciated, but that Raggio had hardly helped them at all. He explained that "we know that he did not have the desire to remain in this country, since he doesn't know our language and he plans to go to Istanbul, as he has told us numerous timxes."[28]

Here, Raggio's lie becomes apparent. After losing the support of Mercurian, Ar-Ruzzy, and Eliano, Raggio gave up his plans to go to Constantinople. He explained to Mercurian on 25 November that he no longer wanted to go to Constantinople to work among "those Greeks."[29] This expression, "quei greci," is odd. Think back to his letter dated 25 July. Raggio said he'd work amongst "i christiani franchi" – Catholics. It seems that Raggio was caught in his own lie. He told Mercurian that he was undermining the Catholicity of the mission by desiring to work with the nations seeking to destroy the Maronites. And why was Raggio learning Turkish? This deeply troubled Carafa, Eliano, Ar-Ruzzy, and Mercurian. It troubles me as well because I lack an answer; the documentary evidence only explains that he was working on Turkish, not why.

[25] Ibid., 106.

[26] Ibid., 121.

[27] Ibid., 124-126.

[28] Ibid., 138-139.

[29] Ibid., 132.

However, I think I can offer some general suppositions about why Raggio learning Turkish or desiring to work with "quei greci" was problematic. As we've seen, the Maronites were often under attack from Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Nestorians, Jacobites, Jews, Syriacs, and Copts. And the general fear of the Turks and those loyal to them was evident beyond the Jesuits. Lorenzo Bernardo, writing to the Venetian Senate in 1592 explained: Turks have one goal – subdue Christianity. They want to dominate it; their state is driven by tyranny, violence, and usurpation.[30] Needless to say, appearing to have even the slightest sympathy for one of these groups could be seen as a grave transgression.

Conclusions

Thus, Raggio's desire to work with Greeks and Turks, even with benevolent of intentions, potentially threatened the Maronites. There is still the issue of why he lied. What he was attempting to cover up – if anything at all – may never be known. Had "the danger of turning Turk" voiced by Cristobal Rodriguez caught up with Raggio? The importance of this whole incident is not that Raggio lied – he could have denied it all and voiced his desire to stay with the Maronites. It was the lie that he told that brings us back to where we began – trying to use first-order lies to construct a second- or third-order interpretation about a given culture. Lies are usually told because they can be construed as true. Chances are, Raggio had no desire to leave the Catholic faith. However, this very fear, as Eliano, Ar-Ruzzy, Carafa, and Mercurian expressed, produced a lie that would keep him within the elasticity of his own nation. Thus, rather than differentiating lies from truths, we should contextualize them, attempt to locate them within their appropriate context. Then, as Quentin Skinner explains, "we are not merely

[30] Luigi Firpo, ed., *Relazioni di ambasciatori veneti al senato: XIII-XIV, Costantinopoli* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1965), 138.

providing historical 'background' for our interpretation; we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself."[31] Thus, Raggio's explanation that he desired to work with Latin Catholics in Constantinople, while still a lie, was, I believe, his means of preserving his true identity in the face of the gravest accusation: that he had turned Turk.

[31] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Vol.1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), xiv.