UDK:27-05-64:28-05(497.7)"18"

HORIZONS OF EXPECTATION AND RELIGIOUS INTERACTION IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY OTTOMAN MACEDONIA: A GADAMERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This paper dives into how different religious groups got along in Ottoman Macedonia during the first half of the 19th century. Our main goal is to figure out how people's long-held beliefs and their hopes for the future shaped relationships between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, and also the tensions that popped up among Christian groups themselves (like Greeks and Slavs). We're looking at this through the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his concept of "fusion of horizons"—which helps us see how past experiences and present understandings blend together. We're also bringing in Reinhart Koselleck's idea of a "horizon of expectation" to show how future dreams actually influenced how these communities interacted day-to-day. The study starts by explaining Gadamer's way of thinking about understanding, where conversations mix old and new viewpoints. Then, it explores the historical setting, describing the millet system that allowed for different religions to coexist, how people lived side-by-side, and even shared holy places. We also look at the growing friction between the powerful Greek Orthodox Church and the rising Slavic Orthodox communities. We'll dig into specific historical moments – like Muslims and Christians together honoring the Orthodox Monastery of Saint Naum, and the mid-19th- century Tanzimat reforms that promised everyone equal rights – using this particular way of looking at things. Our main point is that these religious interactions weren't fixed; they were more like ongoing conversations, full of both understanding and misunderstanding, all driven by each community's unique past and their hopes for what was to come. Ultimately, using Gadamer's perspective helps us get a richer, more detailed understanding of inter-religious relations in 19th-century Ottoman Macedonia, moving past simple stories to see the complex ways different views were handled and sometimes even brought together.*

Keywords: *fusion of horizons, Erwartungshorizont, Rum millet, Tanzimat, syncretism.*

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Introduction

The historiography of the Balkans during the Ottoman period has long oscillated between two polarized narratives: on one side, a vision of stable coexistence within the millet system; on the other, a narrative of primordial conflict culminating in nationalism. Both frameworks oversimplify the unstable and transitional character of life in nineteenth-century Ottoman Macedonia. Positioned between the legacy of the *Pax Ottomana* and the rise of modern nationalism, this period was marked by profound flux in which imperial reforms, inherited privileges, and new European ideas of sovereignty collided (Jelavich, 1983).

The central question is how to analyze this fluidity without reducing it to either harmony or hostility. What is needed is a conceptual lens that captures not just social conditions, but the very processes of historical change. How did competing expectations of the future—ranging from a revitalized Ottomanism to the imagined nation-state—shape religious coexistence and conflict in the present?

This study proposes a combined framework drawn from two German thinkers: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Reinhart Koselleck. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the concept of the *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*), allows religious interaction to be understood as a dialogical process through which different traditions seek understanding, however fragile. Koselleck's conceptual history introduces the temporal dimension, especially the dialectic of *space of experience* (*Erfahrungsraum*) and *horizon of expectation* (*Erwartungshorizont*). Together, these concepts explain how the tension between inherited imperial structures and emerging nationalist futures conditioned the dynamics of interfaith life.

By combining hermeneutics with conceptual history, this paper reframes religious interaction in nineteenth-century Ottoman Macedonia as a process of negotiation under temporal constraint. The following analysis proceeds in three stages: first, a theoretical outline of Gadamer and Koselleck's approaches; second, a historical overview of the Ottoman setting; and third, case studies—including the Naousa Uprising, intra-Orthodox language disputes, and shared shrines—that illustrate the spectrum from rupture to coexistence. The aim is to move beyond static binaries and reveal how religious relations were contingent outcomes of dialogue shaped by both tradition and expectation.

1. Theoretical Framework

Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, challenges the Enlightenment dogma that objectivity requires neutralizing all prejudices (*Vorurteile*). Instead, he argues that prejudice, defined as the pre-judgment inherent in all human understanding, is the necessary starting condition for any meaningful inquiry. Prejudice is rooted in tradition—the inherited linguistic and cultural framework that constitutes one's horizon (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 291–307).

Understanding, particularly historical understanding, is achieved through a dialogical process aimed at the fusion of horizons. This fusion is not syncretism or forced assimilation, but the emergence of a common horizon achieved when two separate interpretive traditions genuinely engage in a question-and-answer dynamic. Applied to Ottoman Macedonia, this means the possibility of coexistence relies on the capacity for the Christian interpretive tradition to understand the legitimacy of the Muslim social space, and vice-versa, despite fundamental theological differences. The inherited structure of the *millet* system, which regulated status and provided legal predictability, can thus be understood as a working, institutionalized, albeit hierarchical, fusion of horizons based on shared acceptance of imperial authority. The crises of the 19th century represent the moment this inherited traditional fusion began to fail.

Koselleck's contribution provides the conceptual foundation for identifying not only when but also how inherited orders began to falter. He frames history through a fundamental tension: the past made present versus the future made present (Koselleck, 2004, pp. 255–275).

To capture the first of these poles, he introduces the category of *Space of Experience* (*Erfahrungsraum*)—the sedimented past as it continues to shape present life through memory, custom, and institution. In nineteenth-century Macedonia, this space was embodied in the entrenched realities of the millet system, local practices, and the political hierarchy of the Ottoman state. It was dense, repetitive, and immediate, anchoring daily life in structures that appeared stable and familiar.

Yet historical actors did not live only within this inherited past; they also oriented themselves toward what lay ahead. Koselleck's notion of the *Horizon of Expectation* (*Erwartungshorizont*) captures this forward-looking dimension: the hopes, fears, and plans through which people projected possible futures. In the early nineteenth century, this horizon was no longer bound tightly to the rhythms of tradition. Intellectual currents from the Enlightenment and the rise of national sovereignty expanded it dramatically, producing an unprecedented sense of novelty and acceleration (Koselleck, 1998, pp. 132–154).

Koselleck argues that the acceleration of historical time—the period he calls the *Sattelzeit*—is characterized by the increasing asymmetry between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. The tradition-bound *millet* space was increasingly overwhelmed by the rapid proliferation of new, often mutually exclusive, horizons of expectation (e.g., an independent Greek state, a reformed Ottoman state, a Bulgarian national church). The interaction between religious groups is thus determined by the degree of alignment (fusion), asymmetry (divergence), or conflict (collision) between their respective temporal horizons.

The combined framework offers a useful analytical tool. The conflict or coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Macedonia is reinterpreted as the outcome of their attempt to navigate the tension between the enduring authority of their shared local space of experience and the abstract, often ideological, demands of their competing horizons of expectation for the future. The degree of success in achieving a fusion of horizons is directly proportional to the extent to which actors can prioritize the lived experience over the ideological blueprint of the future.

2. Historical Context

The millet system provided the foundational *space of experience* for Ottoman Macedonia. Identity was primarily confessional and politically hierarchical, with Muslims holding superior status over the *rayah*. For Orthodox Christians, authority was mediated through the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which exercised wide-ranging religious and administrative power as the head of the Rum millet (Braude & Lewis, 1982). This framework institutionalized inequality yet offered predictability: coexistence was possible because each community occupied a clearly defined place within the imperial order. The Patriarchate's role as intermediary reinforced an interpretive tradition—*Romiosini*—that equated Orthodox identity with a Greek-speaking cultural framework, regardless of vernacular language (Kitromilides, 2006). This system, anchored in tradition, created stability but was ill-equipped to absorb radically new claims based on national self-determination.

The Tanzimat reforms, introduced with the 1839 Gülhane Decree, were the empire's attempt to create a new *horizon of expectation*. They promised legal equality and aimed to turn subjects into citizens united under the idea of Ottomanism (*Osmanlılık*), in order to preserve imperial stability (Tasevski, 2021). Yet this promise of equality stood in direct conflict with the older millet system, which was built on confessional hierarchy.

At the imperial center, the reforms were promoted as a step toward modernization and stability. In the provinces, however, they were understood very differently. For Christian nationalists, the reforms were taken as proof of imperial decline and as encouragement to push their own horizon of expectation toward independence. As Çiçek (2010) notes, the reforms in education did not lead to a common Ottoman system, but instead laid "the foundations, not of Ottoman national education, but of the separate national education of the Turks and of each of the non-Muslim minorities" (p. 227). Local Muslim notables resisted the reforms, fearing a loss of privilege, while parts of the Christian hierarchy mistrusted them for weakening their communal authority.

Because the reforms were applied unevenly, the gap between the official promise of equality and the lived reality of inequality grew wider. This gap created frustration and mistrust, and it fueled new alternative futures that further weakened the empire's integrative order.

A further destabilizing force was the intellectual current of European Philhellenism. Rooted in Enlightenment and Romantic thought, it projected onto Macedonia a horizon of expectation based on the glorification of a classical Greek past (Kitromilides, 2006; Briant, 2017). This external gaze provided powerful conceptual resources—terms such as "nation," "citizen," and "freedom"—that allowed local elites to recast demands for recognition into claims for sovereignty. At the same time, it distorted historical reality by neglecting the complex, multi-confessional present of the Ottoman Balkans. Philhellenic discourse presented the empire as a break from an imagined national destiny. In doing so, it weakened the legitimacy of the existing order and gave support to efforts to dismantle the millet system (Briant, 2017). This confluence of pressures—the decaying experiential space of the millet, the contested reformist horizon of Ottomanism, and the rising national horizons nourished by European thought—produced an unstable environment. Religious and cultural interactions were constantly renegotiated under the weight of these mutually exclusive political futures, each attempting to redefine coexistence according to its own temporal logic.

3. Case Studies

The following three case studies demonstrate how the interplay between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation structured religious interaction, moving from political catastrophe to localized harmony.

3.1.- Naousa Uprising

The Naousa Uprising in Western Macedonia, occurring at a pivotal moment in the Greek War of Independence, serves as a tragic archetype of a catastrophic collision of horizons. The rebels, including local *armatoloi* and notables, articulated a radical horizon of expectation: the complete, violent overthrow of the Ottoman imperial order and the creation of a sovereign Greek state, embodying absolute freedom (Vakalopoulos, 1973). This future was fundamentally incompatible with the Ottoman state's space of experience, which was predicated on the continuation of its imperial authority and the absolute submission of its *rayah*.

The ensuing Ottoman military response, led by Ebu Lubut Pasha, sought the total annihilation of the rebellious horizon of expectation. The hermeneutic dialogue failed entirely because the political concepts at stake were zero-sum: one side's freedom meant the other side's destruction. The conflict swiftly descended into sectarian violence, as diplomatic reports noted the prevalence of "religious zeal" that **"**transfigured the conflict into an ostensible battle between Islam and Christianity**"** (Strangford, 2018, p. 173).

The historiography of Naousa is dominated by the themes of destruction and martyrdom. The Ottoman reprisals resulted in the killing and enslavement of thousands, turning the event into one of the darkest episodes of the Greek War of Independence. Contemporary Greek accounts, such as that of Spyridon Trikoupis in his *History of the Greek Revolution*, describe the near-total devastation of the city and the dispersal of its population through massacre, flight, or enslavement (Trikoupis, 1853–1857, vol. II). Later historians have built on this narrative, portraying Naousa as both a symbol of imperial violence and a foundational site of national sacrifice (Hatzopoulos, 1995).The event became a foundational narrative of national sacrifice and martyrdom (Koselleck), used to retroactively justify the political project. This narrative actively shaped the future national horizon of expectation for Greeks in Macedonia. The debate confirms the core insight: the conflict was not just between two religious groups, but between an accelerating, modern political horizon and a tradition-bound space that could only resolve the asymmetry through total political violence.

The Naousa Uprising represents the absolute failure of the fusion of horizons. The prejudice of the revolutionary national identity refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the imperial authority, and the imperial authority refused to grant any space to the emergent national concept of freedom. The resulting violence was the inevitable outcome of a hermeneutic breakdown driven by mutually exclusive political futures.

3.2. The Language Dispute (Patriarchate vs. Slavic Communities): Divergence of Horizons

The internal tensions within the Rum millet over the language of education and liturgy exemplify a profound **divergence of horizons** emerging from a shared religious **space of experience**. That space—juridically unified under the Ecumenical Patriarchate—had long naturalized Greek as the medium of ecclesiastical authority and higher learning, projecting a horizon of expectation oriented to **Pan-Orthodox Hellenic universalism**, in which Greek functioned as the privileged vessel of *Romiosini* (Kitromilides, 2006).

From the mid-19th century, a growing Slavic-speaking intelligentsia—nourished by vernacular schooling, parish networks, and the romantic valorization of the *Volk*—articulated a different horizon: the reordering of religious and communal life around the **vernacular**. What began as a **confessional-pedagogical** claim (use of the local language in schools and liturgy) quickly acquired political charge as language became a proxy for **cultural autonomy** within, and ultimately against, the Patriarchate's interpretive primacy (Roudometof, 2001).

The rift proved structurally **irreconcilable**. To Patriarchal elites, vernacularization threatened a sacralized tradition and the translocal cohesion of Orthodox universality; to Slavic advocates, Greek dominance appeared as **cultural hegemony** that suppressed communal recognition and curtailed the meaning of freedom within the millet order. Crucially, both sides appealed to the **same ecclesial past** but **re-semanticized** its future: one toward continuity through a cosmopolitan sacred language, the other toward recognition through local speech and schooling.

Conceptually, the dispute was driven by a **Begriffsgeschichte** shift: "nation," "tradition," and even "freedom" were being redefined under accelerating time. As the gap widened between inherited practice (Greek as normative medium) and anticipated futures (vernacular institutions), the Patriarchate's capacity for **hermeneutic accommodation** failed. The outcome was the well-known **institutional fracture**, culminating in the **Bulgarian Exarchate** - wherein a political-cultural horizon overrode the previously shared religious space. In Gadamerian terms, prejudices on both sides hardened to the point that **fusion of horizons** became impossible; in Koselleckian terms, the **asymmetry** between **Erfahrungsraum** and **Erwartungshorizont** had become too great to be absorbed (Gadamer, 2004; Koselleck, 2004; cf. Kitromilides, 2006; Roudometof, 2001).

3.3. Shared Shrines (St. Naum, Saint George/Hızır): Fusion of Horizons

The phenomenon of shared sacred shrines, where Christians and Muslims venerated the same localized source of power (e.g., St. Naum on Lake Ohrid, identified by Bektashis as Sarı Saltuk; or the sharing of shrines dedicated to Saint George/Hızır), provides the most compelling evidence of a pragmatic, localized fusion of horizons.

These sites existed outside the formal legal and theological control of both the Ottoman *Ulema* and the Orthodox Patriarchate (Albera & Couroucli, 2012). The space of experience for the common people was defined by similar, immediate material needs: agrarian prosperity, healing, and protection from misfortune. The horizon of expectation was, therefore, a shared one: the immediate, practical intercession of the holy figure.

This convergence made possible a practical fusion of horizons. Both religious traditions kept their theological boundaries, yet they often set them aside in pursuit of common local needs such as healing, fertility, or protection. As F. W. Hasluck observed, such syncretic practices were widespread in the Balkans: Muslims adopted Christian saints, and Christians visited Muslim holy places with almost equal ease (Hasluck, 1929, vol. I).

At St. Naum/Sarı Saltuk, the practice of shared rituals, including sacrifice (*kurbani*), and the joint expectation of the saint's *baraka* (blessing) created a non-political form of dialogue (Jahić, 2020). The identity of the worshipper was characterized by a "relative unfixity" at these sites (Bowman, 2012), proving that genuine coexistence was possible when the abstract demands of political theology were ignored.

The debate over these sites focuses on whether they represent pure tolerance or "competitive sharing." Regardless of the precise label, these shrines demonstrate the extraordinary resilience of the local space of experience against the homogenizing, exclusive pressures of the emerging national and state-centric horizons of expectation. Shared shrines are non-political commemorations of a functional fusion of horizons. They reveal that the dialogue for coexistence was easiest where it was divorced from the rigid, ideological concepts of freedom and nation. The success was rooted in a practical hermeneutics: the lived reality of common needs provided a language that transcended the official, divisive discourses.

4. Discussion

The three case studies—Naousa, the intra-Orthodox language dispute, and the shared shrines—demonstrate that religious interaction in nineteenth-century Ottoman Macedonia was never predetermined. Outcomes depended on the distance between the entrenched **space of experience** and the projected **horizons of expectation (**Koselleck, 2004, pp. 255–265). Where this distance became unmanageable, conflict followed; where it narrowed around pragmatic needs, coexistence persisted. In Gadamerian terms, the key question is whether a **fusion of horizons** was possible or whether inherited prejudices remained mutually exclusive (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 302–307).

At the collision end of the spectrum stands the Naousa Uprising (1822). Here, the resemanticized ideal of freedom as national sovereignty confronted the imperial order that had structured confessional life under the millet. The two meanings could not be reconciled in a shared horizon (Koselleck, 1998, pp. 132–154; Braude & Lewis, 1982, pp. 1–35). The Ottoman response under Ebu Lubut Pasha produced devastation recorded by contemporary observers: Trikoupis describes near-total destruction and enslavement (1853–1857, Vol. II, pp. 200–205), while Lord Strangford reports that "religious zeal" reframed the struggle as Islam versus Christianity (2018 [1822], p. 173). In Gadamerian terms, the prejudices of both sides foreclosed dialogue; in Koselleckian terms, the asymmetry between in-

herited experience and revolutionary expectation was maximal, turning semantic transformation into political violence (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 305–306; Koselleck, 2004, pp. 262–265).

The language dispute within the Rum millet illustrates divergence rather than outright rupture. The Patriarchate's Hellenic universalism envisioned continuity through Greek as sacred and administrative language (Kitromilides, 2006). By contrast, Slavic intellectuals pressed for vernacular schooling and liturgy as the foundation of a distinct cultural—and increasingly political—identity (Roudometof, 2001, pp. 45–50). Both camps appealed to the same ecclesial past, yet oriented it toward incompatible futures. The institutional fracture that culminated in the Bulgarian Exarchate reflects a failed internal fusion of horizons: a single religious tradition unable to accommodate rival anticipations (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 302–303; Koselleck, 2004, pp. 260–265).

At the fusion end of the spectrum are the shared shrines—for example, St. Naum on Lake Ohrid, venerated by Christians as the saint's resting place and by Bektashis as Sarı Saltuk's tekke. Ethnographic and historical accounts record routine cross-veneration, shared sacrifices, and petitions for healing or fertility (Hasluck, 1929, Vol. I, pp. 403–404; Albera & Couroucli, 2012, pp. 1–15). Subsequent fieldwork underscores the "relative unfixity" of identities at such sites, where pragmatic ritual blurred doctrinal lines (Bowman, 2012, pp. 41–45). Even socialist interventions did not entirely erase dual practices at St. Naum (Jahić, 2020, pp. 225–227). Here, experience shaped expectation: horizons were immediate and local—health, protection—rather than abstract or programmatic. Because the temporal gap was minimal, Gadamer's dialogical understanding emerged as a lived, practical fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 303–304; Koselleck, 2004, pp. 255–259).

Across this spectrum, the nineteenth-century crisis appears as a **crisis of authority in the space of experience**. The millet's hierarchical but predictable order could not absorb accelerating, exclusive national and reformist expectations (Jelavich, 1983, pp. 210–235; Koselleck, 2004, pp. 262–265). The most revealing pressure points were conceptual. The meaning of *freedom* migrated from negotiated communal privilege to sovereign nationhood—an inherently destructive demand vis-à-vis the imperial framework (Koselleck, 1998, pp. 132–154). The category of *nation* redefined tradition, recoding Orthodox universality into vernacular particularity (Roudometof, 2001, pp. 47–49), while *tradition* itself proved resilient in local ritual practice, where pragmatic needs sustained coexistence (Hasluck, 1929, pp. 403–404; Bowman, 2012, pp. 41–45).

Seen through the combined lens of Gadamer and Koselleck, religious interaction in Ottoman Macedonia appears as **dialogue under temporal constraint**. Where absolute futures foreclosed questioning (Naousa), dialogue failed and violence ensued. Where rival expectations persisted within one tradition without accommodation (language dispute), institutions split. Where everyday needs kept horizons close to experience (shared shrines), coexistence was renewed in practice (Albera & Couroucli, 2012, pp. 1–15). The tragedy of the nineteenth century is that abstract, future-oriented national horizons ultimately overwhelmed local, tradition-bound practices of pragmatic dialogue (Jelavich, 1983, pp. 230–235; Koselleck, 2004, pp. 262–265).

Conclusion

Religious interaction in nineteenth-century Ottoman Macedonia cannot be reduced to narratives of perennial harmony or primordial hostility. Rather, it must be understood as a dynamic negotiation between the **space of experience** inherited from the millet order and the shifting **horizons of expectation** generated by reform, nationalism, and external ideological currents. Gadamer's hermeneutics highlights the fragile possibility of understanding, where coexistence depended on the willingness of communities to risk their prejudices in dialogue. Koselleck's conceptual history,

by contrast, underscores the structural pressures of modernity, in which accelerating expectations outstripped the integrative capacity of tradition.

The case studies demonstrate the spectrum of possible outcomes. At Naousa, the irreconcilability of revolutionary sovereignty with imperial order turned semantic change into political violence. Within the Rum millet, the language dispute illustrates how incompatible futures fractured even a shared religious framework, producing institutional schism. By contrast, the shared shrines of Ohrid and elsewhere reveal the resilience of pragmatic coexistence, where local needs generated a lived fusion of horizons despite doctrinal divides.

Taken together, these episodes reveal that interfaith life in the Ottoman Balkans was a form of **dialogue under temporal constraint**. Its fragility lay in the widening gap between tradition and expectation, a gap that national projects eventually widened beyond repair. Yet its resilience is equally significant: wherever horizons remained close to everyday practice, plural life could be sustained. The historiographical contribution of this study is thus twofold: to reframe "religious conflict" as a **hermeneutic failure** conditioned by temporal asymmetry, and to show that the possibilities of coexistence were historically real, even if ultimately overshadowed by the exclusivist futures of nationalism.

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