

Aliah University
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Part C: Millet System

Millet (ملة) is an Arabic Word, which means: Nation, religion, sect, religious group, etc.

In the Islamic State there were two types of Nations, Muslims and Non-Muslims; Non-Muslims were called *Ahl al Zimma*, which means people of Agreement, who were legally protected under the Islamic government.

There is a point to be noted that Quran gives the specific status to Jews and Christians among the non-Muslims or *Ahle Zimma*, and calls them the people of the Book.

The word “*Millet*” applied for the religious minorities during Ottoman Empire. Under the millet system all religious minorities used to enjoy their culture, religion and values. The religious minorities were allowed to follow their own personal laws and were allowed to govern accordingly under separate legal courts.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “a *millet* was an autonomous self-governing religious community, each organized under its own laws and headed by a religious leader”.¹

The religious communities under the Ottoman Empire categorized into following groups.

1. Millet e Rum: denotes Greek orthodox Christians. Patriarch of Greece Orthodox Church, who was called *Millet Bashi* Also, used to represent this community in front of Sultan.
2. Millet e *Yahud*: i.e. Jews. The Chief Ribbi who was called *Hakham Bashi* used to represent the Jewish community in front of Sultan.
3. Millet e *Arminia*: i.e. Armenians living in the state. The Armenian Patriarch used to represent Arminian community in front of Sultan.
4. Millet e *Ashuri*: it means Assyrians who were belong to Church of East.

The Ottomans gave the title of Millet to the religious communities in their territories. The Ottoman Sultan used to appoint a religious leader from their specific communities who were responsible for representing their community before the Sultan. They were also in charge of collecting tax enforcing their personal laws, conciliation of personal community quarrels, in their respective legal courts.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/millet-religious-group>