For our heart is sorely afflicted and sawn asunder, after the many efforts that we have not failed to expend since the day of our elevation to this most holy Ecumenical height by the grace of God, to see the insane wickedness of the arch-villain Satan as emboldened as ever. Misbelieving heretics have belligerently fomented an undeclared war against the Orthodox ecumene in recent years, assailing it like a torrent ...

– Encyclical to the Bishops of the Ionian Islands, 1838

A most superior person: the Phanar, 1837

On 13 July 1837, as part of his journeys through the Near East in search of rare Greek manuscripts, the English scholar and adventurer Robert Curzon obtained an audience from the patriarch of Constantinople. His particular object was to obtain permission to tour the monasteries of Mt Athos, but Curzon was also keen to meet a prelate who was simultaneously the highest-ranking figure in the Orthodox Church and the most important non-Muslim official in the Ottoman Empire. As leader of the ‘Nation of the Romans’ (in Turkish, Rum Millet-i; in Greek, Éthnos ton Romaíon), Patriarch Grigórios VI Fourtouniádis exercised broad temporal authority over almost one-third of the sultan’s subjects, while as a ‘pasha of three horse-tails’ he enjoyed a rank among Ottoman servitors almost on par with the grand vizier himself. Curzon did not wish to meet such an eminent personage without credentials, so he brought along several friends from the British embassy and a letter of recommendation from the archbishop of Canterbury.
When Curzon’s party arrived at the patriarchal headquarters in the
Phanar district of Istanbul, he found the monks ‘surprised and perhaps
a little alarmed at a visit from so numerous a company of gentlemen
belonging to the British Embassy’. They received the visitors politely
nevertheless and ushered Curzon into a large reception room, furnished
on three sides with a cushioned divan. The patriarch, a handsome man
in his late thirties, then made his appearance. Curzon recalled: ‘He was
dressed in purple silk robes, like all Greek bishops, and took his seat in
the corner of the divan, and said nothing, and stroked his beard as a
pasha might have done’.3

Curzon and his company made their bows and salutations, after
which a host of priestly servants brought them sweets, coffee, and
spring water on a fine silver and crystal service. Long, thin Turkish
pipes followed these refreshments. ‘When we had smoked our pipes for
awhile, and all the servants had gone away’, Curzon presented his let-
ter of recommendation, which was read aloud to the patriarch, first in
English and then in Greek. Cuzon’s host appeared bemused:

‘And who’, quoth the Patriarch of Constantinople, the supreme head
and primate of the Greek Church of Asia – ‘who is the Archbishop
of Canterbury?’
‘What?’, said I, a little astonished at the question.
‘Who’, said he, ‘is this Archbishop?’
‘Why, the Archbishop of Canterbury.’
‘Archbishop of what?’ said the Patriarch.
‘Canterbury’, said I.
‘Oh’, said the Patriarch. ‘Ah! Yes! And who is he?’

Curzon, mastering his surprise, informed Grigórios that the archbishop
of Canterbury was:

the primate and chief of the great reformed Church of England, and
a personage of such high degree, that he ranked next to the blood-
royal; that from time immemorial the Archbishop of Canterbury
was the great dignitary who placed the crown upon the head of our
kings – those kings whose power swayed the destinies of Europe and
of the world; and that this present Archbishop and Primate had him-
self placed the crown upon the head of King William IV., and that he
would also soon crown our young Queen [Victoria].

The red-bearded figure on the divan remained visibly unimpressed.