Mentchikoff came to Constantinople, and asked for the Koran. He looked at the book, marked several passages, and said – ‘Erase these’. The English and French then came, and asked also for the Koran. After reading, they said – ‘Throw this book into the Bosporus’.¹

– Saying reported among Ottoman Muslims in 1855–56

Ringing the changes: Pera, 1855

In the closing days of 1855, the Orthodox parish of the Presentation of the Virgin in Pera (modern Beyoğlu) dared to hope that their busy neighbourhood would soon reverberate with a sound not heard in Istanbul for four centuries: the peal of Orthodox church bells. The Ottoman authorities occasionally permitted Catholic and Protestant foreigners to possess bells, but the metallic clamour offended Muslim sensibilities and Orthodox churches were forbidden them. In December, however, the parish of the Presentation of the Virgin had received special permission to install bells. Even more striking was the fact that the community owed this victory to a most unexpected champion: the French ambassador, Édouard-Antoine Thouvenel.

Thouvenel had only been in Istanbul for a few months, but already he was creating a stir. Soft-spoken, charming, and intelligent, Thouvenel had a reputation of making new friends for France in all his previous diplomatic postings to London, Madrid, Brussels, Athens, and Munich. The son of a respectable bourgeois family from Lorraine, he had studied law at Metz before joining the political department of the Ministry of...
Foreign Affairs in 1842. He rose rapidly through the ranks to become head of its Political Directorate in 1851. By 1855, he was virtually a second foreign minister and a close advisor to Napoleon III, with whom he shared a commitment to liberal ideals (in foreign policy, at least) and a conviction that those ideals were best realized through *Realpolitik*.²

Thouvenel was one of the few European diplomats of his rank with extended experience of the East. He had spent two years exploring the eastern Mediterranean as a young man and a further five years in Greece as attaché to the French legation to Athens. Thouvenel had therefore immediately grasped the significance of the opportunity that presented itself when a committee from the Presentation of the Virgin approached him. Thouvenel informed his superior, Alexandre Colonna Walewski that:

> As Your Excellency knows, none of the Greek churches in Constantinople possess bells. The inhabitants of Galata [sic] came to me to expose all the grief that this ban caused them and I agreed to make myself the interpreter of their wishes to the Porte. My demarche has been well received and the first tolling of bells in a temple of the Eastern Rite in Constantinople will be due to the intervention of the Ambassador of France.³

The soundscape of one of Istanbul's most cosmopolitan neighbourhoods, in other words, was to provide aural testimony to the benefits of French patronage. In practice, the Ottoman authorities managed to delay the implementation of their promise for another three decades, but the bare fact of that promise – and how it was achieved – were significant in themselves.⁴ Only two short years before, Catholic France had been the bogeyman of the Orthodox Community and the villain of the Holy Places dispute. The situation had changed so dramatically in only two short years that some Orthodox Christians had come to see the French embassy as a potential ally. Even the patriarch of Constantinople, Thouvenel noted with satisfaction, had expressed a desire ‘to establish regular relations’.

Thouvenel took these overtures as further proof that one of his most important tasks was to parlay France's recent military successes in the Crimea into new political relationships and a new public image in the East. Thouvenel's visits to the region as a young man had convinced him that successive French governments were squandering their original advantages in the Near East. Domestic and European affairs had so distracted one ministry after another that French influence in the