

## THE CURIOUS STORY OF TURKEY'S LIBERAL ISLAMISM

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If you happen to have a chance to spend some time in Turkey these days, you will find quite a startling political scene: Some of the traditionally pro-Western and modernist circles in the country have turned bitterly anti-European and anti-American. Most notably the «Kemalists» —the dedicated followers of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country's modernist founder— seem to have abandoned his ambitious ideal to make Turkey a part of Western civilization. Perceiving the latter as an imperialist conspiracy, they argue that Turkey should close its borders to international institutions, markets, and values. On the other hand, among the more Islamic parts of Turkish society, which traditionally have been antagonistic toward or at least suspicious of the West, there has been a converse u-turn. Some of the Islamic circles, most notably those who support the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) —which has its roots in an Islamist tradition but is now «conservative»— are the most enthusiastic proponents of Turkey's EU bid. They are also in favor of political freedoms, civil liberties, and free markets.

The u-turn in both sides is so bluntly evident in many ways. For example paranoid conspiracy theories about «International Jewry», which Turkey's Islamists used to buy into, now poison the minds of some secularists. In 2007, a best-seller by the die-hard Kemalist author Ergun Poyraz argued that AKP leader Tayyip Erdoğan and his turbaned wife are in fact crypto-Jews who secretly collaborate with the «elders of Zion» to destroy Atatürk's legacy. When hundreds of thousands of Kemalists marched in big cities for secularism, they chanted against Erdoğan and former AKP member President Abdullah Gül along with «the imperialist EU and US.»

What does this mean? Is this just an odd fluctuation in Turkey's ever-confusing political obscurity, or does it symbolize a deep and durable transformation? To find an answer, we must first take a look at history.

### **Ottoman modernization revisited**

For many Westerners, Turkey is the shining star of the Muslim world. It is a secular democracy, a NATO member, and a US ally. By all that, it defies the more radical interpretations of Islam which represent a theocratic political system and an anti-Western standpoint. Turks themselves note and appreciate the fact that they are different from other Muslims nations, and especially their neighbours in the Middle East.

But why Turkey is exceptional? The official Turkish history, into which virtually all Turks have been educated, answers this question by referring to the perceived clean break from the Ottoman (i.e., Islamic) heritage by the modern Turkish Republic, which was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. «We were in darkness», my primary school textbooks reiterated, «but then came

Atatürk who shone on us like the sun.» Consequently, many Turks believe they would have lived under something like the Taliban's Afghanistan had they not been saved by the authoritarian and secularist modernization project of the Kemalist regime. In other words, to the question, «Why Turkey is the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world», the standard answer is, «Because Atatürk created it *ex nihilo*.»

However, historians who look back to the origin of Turkey with a demythifying perspective find reasons to think that the creation story should be reversed. It seems that it was in fact the Ottoman legacy that gave rise both to Atatürk and modern Turkey.<sup>1</sup> The Kemalist period was undoubtedly a leap forward in several aspects, but it was preceded and made possible by a rich heritage of Ottoman modernization.

To see that, one should first examine the Turks' experience with Islam. Compared with the Arabs, the Turks were latecomers to the Muslim faith. The former were politically and intellectually more advanced until the 13th century, when the Arabs' brilliant civilization was nearly destroyed by one of the most devastating conquests ever, the Mongol catastrophe. The chance of world trade routes, from the Middle East and the Levant to the oceans, was an additional misfortune that would steadily impoverish the Arab world, which owed much of its wealth to trade. The long-term result was the stagnation of the Arab peoples.

Meanwhile, the leadership of Islam was passing to the Turks, who created powerful states under the Seljuk, and especially the subsequent Ottoman dynasty. The Ottoman state extended its borders both towards the West and the East, and in the 16th and much of the 17th centuries, acted as the world's foremost superpower.

The political power of the Turks, and their continual interaction with the West, gave them an important insight: They faced the rise of modernity. The Ottoman elite had to rule an empire, make practical decisions, adopt new technologies, and reform existing structures—all of which allowed them to understand and cope with secular realities. Sociologist Serif Mardin defines the consequential praxis as «Ottoman secularity», and gives examples of Ottoman bureaucrats who started to discover «Western ways», more than two centuries before the Turkish Republic:

[...] It is quite clear that the eighteenth century brought about a number of cumulative changes that promoted the «secularist» aspect of the discourse of Ottoman bureaucracy. One of these changes was the creation of a new bureau (Amedi Odasi) through which flowed all communication with Western states. The employees of this bureau were now increasingly exposed to information about the major Euro-

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of the Ottoman political and social heritage in modern Turkey, see Kemal Karpat, (2001). *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*. New York: Oxford University Press.

pean states. Antedating this change already in the 1730s there had been an increase in the number of bureaucrats who were sent to various European capitals to observe Western «ways.» An innovation of the same years was the practice of these envoys to write reports about their missions upon their return. What is striking about these reports is the «materiality» of their content. The reports did not contrast the religious or political institutions they found in the West with their Ottoman equivalents, but focused on the material elements of life. They detailed technological advances such as the construction of stone buildings, both military and civilian, and they described the splendor of Versailles, its organization of leisure activities and in particular the theatre. The precision of the tables of astronomical observatories also impressed them.<sup>2</sup>

According to Mardin, such practices helped formulating «Turkish-Islamic exceptionalism», which is overlooked by most contemporary Western scholars on Islam because of their «concentration on Arab or Salafi Islam.» Mardin adds that the exceptionalism is not solely produced by the Turkish Republic, as it is often thought, but was built in a long historical evolution thanks to milestones such as «the earlier rise of a Turkish bureaucratic class (circa 1780)... the type of institution building policy that goes back to the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) and the type of synthesis between Islam and modernity that was promoted by an intellectual elite between 1908 and 1923.»<sup>3</sup>

### Tanzimat and equal citizenship

The 18<sup>th</sup> century discovery of Europe by Ottoman bureaucrats resulted in the famous «Imperial Gülhane Decree of 1839», also known as the *Tanzimat* Edict, which introduced the idea of supremacy of law and modern citizenship to the empire. In a second substantive reform edict, in 1856, the *dhimmi* («protected») status was abolished, and Jews and Christians gained equal citizenship rights.

That *dhimmi* status that Islamic states have traditionally given to Jews and Christians –and actually any other traditional faith except Arab idolaters– has been the subject of much criticism recently. There are writers who present it as a slavish life that Islam imposes on non-Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Although it is true that the *dhimma* was an unequal status that grew out from and should remain in pre-modern times, it was actually quite generous according to norms of that period. One interesting fact which would support that conclusion is that many non-Muslims of the Ottoman State were actually content with the *dhimma* so that they resisted its abolition. According to historian Roderic H. Davison:

<sup>2</sup> Serif Mardin (2005). «Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes.» *Turkish Studies* 6, (2), Summer 2005, pp. 149-150.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Bat Ye'or (2002). *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*, (Trans. by Miriam Kochan and David Littman). Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses.

The program of equality between Christian and Muslim in the empire remained largely unrealized not because of bad faith on the part of leading Ottoman statesmen but because many of the Christians wanted it to fail... The ecclesiastical hierarchies that ruled the Christian millet's also opposed equality. Osmanlilik [Ottomanhood] would both decrease their authority and lighten their purses. This was especially true of the Greek Orthodox hierarchy, which had the most extensive prerogatives and by far the largest flock. When the Hatt-i Sherif [Tanzimat Edict] was solemnly read in 1839 and then put back into its red satin pouch it is reported that the Greek Orthodox patriarch, who was present among the notables, said, «Inshallah-God grant that it not be taken out of this bag again.» In short, the doctrine of equality faced formidable opposition from Christians of the empire who were leaders in the churches and the nationalist movements.<sup>5</sup>

Davidson also notes, both in 1839 and 1856 the sultan proclaimed that his Christian subjects should be equally privileged to serve in the armed forces along with the Muslims, instead of paying an exemption tax as they had previously done. It soon became obvious that the Christians would rather continue to pay than serve, despite the step toward equality which military service might mean.<sup>6</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman state also started to accept the principle of religious freedom. As early as May 1844, an official Ottoman edict read, «No subject of the Sublime [Ottoman] State shall be forced by anyone to convert to Islam against their wishes.»<sup>7</sup> In the Reform Edict of 1856 the Sultan proclaimed, «All forms of religion are and shall be freely professed in my dominions. No subject of my empire shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes.»<sup>8</sup> The Ottoman Constitution of 1876 established a limited monarchy all of whose subjects were considered «*Osmanli* (Ottoman), whatever religion or creed they hold.» The constitution further affirmed that «all *Osmanli* are equal before the law... without distinction as to religion.»<sup>9</sup>

What is striking about these events is the fact that the Ottoman Empire – an Islamic state which many Muslims around the world still respect– gave full citizenship rights to Jews and Christians. These would create a precedent for the ecumenical approach towards Jews and Christians that would be articulated in Turkey's Republican era by scholars like Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen.

5 Roderic H. Davison (1954). «Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth Century», *American Historical Review*, (59), 4, pp. 844-864.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 Selim Deringil (2000). «There Is No Compulsion in Religion: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839-1856. » *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Cambridge University Press (42), 547-575.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 *Ídem*.

One crucial point was that the Ottoman Empire wasn't abandoning Islam by reforming the sharia laws. It was rather modernizing itself from within the tradition. The Qur'anic verse «There is no compulsion in religion» was stressed by the Ottoman religious elite to justify the reforms.<sup>10</sup>

### Young ottomans: the forerunners of islamic liberalism

An important agent of reform in the Ottoman Empire was the intellectuals of the late *Tanzimat* era known as Young Ottomans. They were different from the more renown Young Turks, which came later, and which were more secularist, nationalist and revolutionary in nature. The Young Ottomans were Islamic rather than secular, «Ottomanist» rather than nationalist and progressive rather than revolutionary. They supported the *Tanzimat* reforms, and criticized the government only for not being steadfast or principled enough in implementing them. When Sultan Abdülaziz gave a speech in 1868 and spoke of the liberal reforms as if they were a part of his generosity to his people, the most prominent Young Ottoman, Namik Kemal wrote the following: «If the purpose is to imply that up to this day the people in the Ottoman Empire were the slaves of the sultan, who, out of the goodness of his heart, confirmed their liberty, this is something to which we can never agree, because, according to our beliefs, the rights of the people, just like divine justice, are immutable.»<sup>11</sup>

Namik Kemal also found the basis for representative government in the Koranic principle of *shura* which requires that matters concerning the community should be decided by mutual consultation. To date, this argument has been one of the basic tools for defending democracy in an Islamic frame of references. According to Namik Kemal, the *Tanzimat* Edict of 1839 was good, but not enough. A real «charter for the Islamic Caliphate», was needed, which would fully establish «freedom of thought, sovereignty of the people, and the system of government by consultation.»<sup>12</sup>

In 1868 the Young Ottomans started to publish their own newspaper. Its name was *Hürriyet*, or, freedom. They articulated, in the words of Bernard Lewis, «an unmistakable liberal critique of government action, and a programme of constitutional reform.»<sup>13</sup> The crucial point was that they were proposing all this not as a secular, but Islamic agenda. The earliest decades of Islam, they argued, had seen a proto-democracy and proto-liberalism, and Europe's success was in developing these ideas while the Muslim world unwisely abandoned them. Now was the time to move forward by taking inspiration from the early Islamic past. They believed,

<sup>10</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>11</sup> Serif Mardin (1962). *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibret*, n.º 46 of 1872, cited in Bernard Lewis (1961). *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Lewis (1961). *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 149.

in the words of an American historian, «that the empire could be reformed and revived within the framework of Muslim tradition and religious law, which they thought was sound enough, and progressive and elastic enough, to allow also the adaptation of new institutions from Europe.»<sup>14</sup>

The Young Ottomans are known to be the first movement in the Muslim world to devise a modern ideology inspired from Islam. And, quite notably, this ideology was a very liberal one.

In 1876, the Ottoman Empire accepted a constitution. Unlike some contemporary Islamists, the Ottomans did not say, «The Koran is the constitution.» Instead, they created a document that respected the Koran, but recognized and adapted to temporal realities. «All subjects of the empire are called Ottomans», one article of the constitution read, and the next one declared: «Every Ottoman enjoys personal liberty on condition of non interfering with the liberty of others.» Another article guaranteed that «all Ottomans are equal before law; they have the same rights... without prejudice to religion.»

Unfortunately the constitution was suspended for three decades under the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II, who nevertheless continued to modernize the empire through new schools, universities, telegraph systems and railroads. Under his auspices, Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, an Ottoman bureaucrat and an Islamic scholar, prepared the *Mecelle*, a new legal code which was based on traditional Islamic law but which also included many important modifications thanks to the notion, «as time changes, the laws should also change.»

In 1908, the Ottoman Parliament opened with dozens of Greek, Armenian and Jewish members. At the time, the most popular maxim among the Ottoman intelligentsia, which included many devoutly religious figures, was «freedom.» Prince Sabahattin, Abdulhamid's nephew, promoted the principles of individual entrepreneurship and a limited, decentralized government. The compatibility of Islam and popular sovereignty had long been declared by Islamic modernists such as Namik Kemal. In the last decades of the empire, societies emerged with names like *Taal-i Nisvan*, *Mudafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan*, or «The Advancement of Women» and «The Defense of the Rights of Women.» In 1910 Ottoman feminist Fatma Nesibe, a follower of both Islam and John Stuart Mill, argued that the Empire was the eve of a «feminine revolution.»

The Ottoman Islamic modernization ended with the demise of the empire in the First World War. From its ruins, what we now call the Middle East arose—with a doomed legacy: All post-Ottoman states, except Turkey, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, were colonized by European powers, a phenomenon that would soon breed anti-colonialism and anti-Westernism throughout the entire region. That was also one of the reasons of the end of what the great historian of the Mid-

<sup>14</sup> Roderick H. Davison (1954). «Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth Century». *Op. Cit.* p. 862.

dle East, Albert Hourani, called the «liberal age» of the Arab world<sup>15</sup> –which was, basically, the Arabic counterpart of Ottoman modernization.

The Ottoman reforms were articulated and carried out by the intellectual elite of the empire. Most of these men –and some women– spoke English and French, and were very well versed in European thought, not to mention the Islamic tradition. Among them were different trends, but to generalize, we can speak of two main camps. One of these was what one can call the «modernization within the tradition» camp. Its proponents realized the need for reforms, but were hoping to realize these without abandoning traditional values, and especially the religious ones.

The second trend was what one can call the «modernization despite the tradition» line, which found its most radical expressions among some radical Young Turks such as Abdullah Cevdet. «The Young Turk *Weltanschauung*, as it developed between 1889 and 1902», according to historian Sükrü Hanioglu, «was vehemently antireligious, viewing religion as the greatest obstacle to human progress.»<sup>16</sup> In later years, the Young Turks played down their secularist views for political purposes, but the *Weltanschauung* remained intact.

During Turkey's War of Liberation (1919-22), both of these intellectual trends –and all other segments of the society, which included Islamic clerics, Kurdish leaders, and local notables– were united against the occupying powers and under the roof of the Turkish Parliament. But even during those years, the two different political lines became evident within Parliament. «The First Group» consisted of the enthusiastic supporters of Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the War of Liberation who was also a follower of the secularist and revolutionary line of thinking. «The Second Group», on the other hand, included those who had reservations about Mustafa Kemal's increasing political power.

### **The short-lived Progressive Party and post-1925 trauma**

When the war was won and the Republic was announced in 1923, the First Group turned into the People's Party (*Halk Firkasi*), which was directed by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and his closest ally, Ismet İnönü. About a year later, The Second Group established the Progressive Party (*Terakkiperver Fırka*), whose leaders were also war heroes such as Kazım Karabekir, Refet Bele or Rauf Orbay.

There were three main differences between the conservative Progressive Party and the revolutionary People's Party: (1) the Progressive Party believed in free markets and individual entrepreneurship, an idea that had been advanced by Prince Sabahattin, the nephew of the late Sultan Abdulhamid II. The People's Party, on the other hand, held a more «statist» approach towards the economy, which would carry corporatist tones in the 30's; (2) the Progressive Party was

<sup>15</sup> Albert Hourani (1983). *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Sükrü Hanioglu (2001). *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908*. Oxford University Press, p. 305.

friendly to religion. Its founding document included the famous Article six, which read, «We are respectful to religious ideas and sentiments»; (3) on political issues such as the fate of the Kurds, the Progressive Party was tolerant and liberal. Kazim Karabekir, its leader, prepared a detailed report arguing that Kurds needed to be integrated into Turkish society gradually by encouraging agriculture and trade, and by keeping the spirit of common Muslim values. The People's Party, on the other hand, believed in what its leader İsmet İnönü called the «Turkification» of the Kurds, by using authoritarian methods such as banning their language and destroying their culture.

Yet the disagreement between the parties wouldn't last long. On June 5, 1925 the The Progressive Party was closed down by the regime. The party was actually able to survive for only six months and two weeks. Then, not only was it destroyed, but also its leaders were excluded from politics. Its top figure, Kazim Karabekir, lived under house arrest for many years. All of his works were collected and burned on the orders of the government.

The announced reason was Article six in its program: the «We are respectful to religious ideas and sentiments» clause. For the new regime, this was a statement that encouraged «backward minded thought and action», and which could not be tolerated.

From 1925 to 1950, Turkey lived under a «single party regime», which was characterized by its self-style secularism. Unlike the separation between church and state, which defines the American version of secularism, the Kemalist model was «based on the radical Jacobin laicism that aimed to transform society through the power of the state and eliminate religion from the public sphere.»<sup>17</sup>

This effort had the negative effect of establishing the perception that religion and modernity are incompatible. Turkey's practicing Muslims felt themselves forced to abandon the former for the sake of the latter. The authoritarian secularist effort also drove Turkey into an acute version of the problem that Richard John Neuhaus points out to: The vacuum created by absent religion was filled by ersatz religion.<sup>18</sup> In just a decade, Islam was replaced by a new public faith based on Turkishness and the cult of personality created around Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. «Let the Ka'aba be for the Arabs», wrote poet Kemalettin Kamu, «for us, Çankaya is enough.» That new shrine was Atatürk's residence.

The people who bought into this new faith became known as the «secular elite.» They were a small minority in a very traditional society. That's why they have decided that they have no time to lose with democracy. The people needed not to be represented and served, but to be ruled and indoctrinated. That's why, unlike the American Republic which is traditionally defined as «a government by

<sup>17</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (2003). *Islam in Turkey: Retreat from the Secular Path?* In *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (ed). Syracuse University Press, p. XVI.

<sup>18</sup> Richard John Neuhaus (1984). *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, pp. 80-84.



the people, for the people», the Turkish Republic was defined in its early decades as a government «for the people, in spite of the people.»

The two main segments of the society that the Republic acted «in spite of» were practicing Muslims and Kurds. Both groups were suppressed. The former got their religious institutions destroyed, the latter got their language and identity banned. Not surprisingly, both of these alienated groups had a hard time in digesting this undemocratic republic, and instead hoped for a democracy through which they could realize their longing for freedom. In the first free and fair elections in 1950, they brought the Democrat Party in power, whose motto was, «Enough! The nation has the word.» The first thing the DP did was to set the Muslim call for prayer free, and to ease the burden in Kurdish areas. It also brought some suppressed Kurdish leaders to the parliament. Moreover it put Turkey into NATO, accepted the Marshall Plan, and brought in Western capital, which many «Republicans», who had socialist views, saw as «imperialism.»

The democratic honeymoon did not last long, tough. In 1960 the military staged a coup, closed down the DP, and, after a controversial show trial, executed Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his ministers.

### Said Nursi and his heritage

The iron hand of «the Republic» led some Kurds to initiate a terrorist war against it (carried out by the bloody PKK and its forerunners), but the reaction of the practicing Muslims has been peaceful. After all, Turkey does not have a tradition of Islamist violence and there is a synthesis of Islam and democracy that goes way back to the Ottoman Empire.

Thus, instead of fighting against «the Republic», practicing Muslims have preferred to vote for conservative parties that would soften its autocratic nature. Some of them hoped to bring an «Islamic rule» via elections, while others only demanded a democratic rule which would respect their religious freedom. A very prominent name in the latter camp would be Said Nursi (1878-1960), whose treaties on Islamic faith and morality has created Turkey's most important Islamic movement.

Turkish scholar Yasin Aktay defines Nursi as a «very apolitical, other-worldly and loyal character», the latter feature referring to his allegiance to Republican Turkey. Unlike Sheik Said, another Kurdish Islamic leader who led a popular but unsuccessful revolt against the secular Turkish Republic in 1925, Nursi rejected political radicalism and focused his energy to articulating a godly worldview and moral code compatible with the modern world. According to Aktay, he, in his books, developed «a very elective and appropriate combination of the elements of the popular culture, mystical discourses, orthodox Islam and science and rationality.»<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Yasin Aktay (1997). *Body, Text, Identity: The Islamist Discourse Of Authenticity In Modern Turkey*. PhD Thesis, Ankara: The Graduate School of Social Sciences of the Middle East Technical University.

In his thought, Nursi was closer to someone like C.S. Lewis—the Oxford professor who is widely regarded as one of the most important Christian apologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century— than to Muslim contemporaries such as Hassan al-Banna, the founder of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. His enemies were not Zionism or Western imperialism but materialist philosophy and communist ideology, and he saw the Christian West as an ally against both. In 1951, Nursi sent one of his books to the Vatican, along with a letter in which he called for an Islamo-Christian alliance against atheism. During the Korean War, which Turkey joined as an American ally, Nursi encouraged his followers to enlist in the army to fight against the communists.

Nursi’s millions of followers who constituted the Nur («Light») movement, have always steered away from Islamist political parties and voted for center-right parties which promised not shariah but religious freedom. According to Hakan Yavuz, Nursi, unlike the Young Turks and Kemalists who praised the state, «treated the state as the servant of the people and argued for a neutral state without any ideology.»<sup>20</sup> Moreover he was very much in favour of modernizing Turkey, and the Islamic world in general, by importing Western science and technology.

But even that modernist Islam was too much for the secularist establishment. «In spite of all [their] compatibility with the modernization process, Said Nursi and his movements have been prosecuted by the state», notes Yasin Aktay, «because... in order to constitute themselves as Western, Kemalists had to deny and repress any traces of the Orient.»<sup>21</sup>

And as Turkey’s secularist establishment worked hard to erase the Islamic tradition, which it considered «backward», it ironically contributed to its real backwardization with that very policy. «In Turkey, the closure of madrasahs... meant that the more educated, sober and responsible element in Islam declined», observes Karen Armstrong, one of the world-renowned experts on religion, in *A History of God*, and add, «the more extravagant forms of underground Sufism were the only form of religion left.» Today Turkey’s secularists watch those extravagant forms of folk Islam with disdain and regret that they haven’t suppressed them enough, without realizing their own role in the whole scheme of things.

But «the more educated, sober and responsible element» in Turkish Islam nonetheless survived, via Said Nursi, and his late follower Fethullah Gülen, whose followers have made stunning achievements in the media, modern education, and inter-faith dialogue. In other words, the tradition of Ottoman Islam persisted within Turkey. It was, of course, only in the periphery of society; but it would not remain there forever. The more Turkey would modernize, the more its Muslims would find chances to assert themselves and their values.

<sup>20</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and Jonh L. Esposito (2003). *Islam in Turkey: Retreat from the Secular Path? Op. Cit.*, II.

<sup>21</sup> Yasin Aktay (1997). *Body, Text, Identity: The Islamist Discourse of Authenticity in Modern Turkey. Op. Cit.*

### The rise of the unwashed

The biggest recent transformation in Turkish society has been the migration from villages and towns into the big cities, a process which began in the 50's and which is still ongoing. Most immigrants were religious, whereas the cities they poured into were secular citadels. The newcomers automatically became the underclass, naturally, and the secular city elite took this for granted. «The nation-state belonged more to us than to the religious poor», says Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's recent Nobel laureate in literature, in remembrance of his childhood in the 50's. But he adds that his secular folks were also afraid of «being outclassed by people who had no taste for secularism.»<sup>22</sup>

And that is exactly what happened. The sons and daughters of the «religious poor» began to flourish in business, intellectual life, and politics. It was not just major cities, such as Istanbul and Ankara, that were reclaimed by Muslims via mosques and headscarves, some conservative towns of Anatolia such as Kayseri or Konya also began to write their own success stories via their local entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. Especially under the revolutionary years of Turgut Ozal (1983-93), whose personality was a synthesis of liberalism and Islam, the idea of political, economic and religious freedom flourished in Turkey and empowered the marginalized and silenced elements of society, which included conservative Muslims and even the Kurds.

Meanwhile, the transition from the illiterate folk Islam of the countryside to the «high» literate Islam of the city was creating what sociologist Ernest Gellner called «neo-orthodoxy»: modern Muslims who are less traditional but more observant and devout than their parents. «The bourgeois Muslim woman... wears the veil or the headscarf not because her mother did so», notes David Martin Jones, «but precisely because she did not.»<sup>23</sup> The difference between the tight but modern «turban» of Istanbulers and the lax but unstylish «headgear» of villagers – a distinction much emphasized by Turkey's secularists – corresponded precisely to that. Gellner also correctly noted that neo-orthodoxy is the breeding ground for Islamism – which is a «modern» ideology that re-constructs Islam not only as a religion but also as a «system.»

But can't neo-orthodoxy also be the vehicle for creating a non-Islamist modern Islamic identity? Turkey's experience shows that it is possible.

### The fall of islamism and the birth of AKP

Indeed Turkey's traditional Islamic communities such as the Nur movement never adopted Islamism – even when they bred their own neo-orthodoxies. They remained loyal to democracy and supported center-right democratic parties such as Ozal's Motherland Party. But even this mild Islam was seen as a threat by

<sup>22</sup> Orhan Pamuk (2006). *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. Vintage, pp. 181-183.

<sup>23</sup> David Martin Jones (2003). «Out of Bali: Cybercaliphate Rising.» *The National Interest* (71), pp. 75-86.

the secular state and thus was suppressed. The religious vacuum created in the society soon began to be filled with radical Islamist ideas pouring in from the Middle East. From the 70's on, Islamic bookstores began to feature more of the works of radical thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb of Egypt and Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi of Pakistan than those of Nursi. These new Islamists dismissed Nursi's views as «the Islam of flowers and bugs», since his major theme was natural theology, not political ideology.

The political Islamist movement led by Necmeddin Erbakan was a manifestation of this new radical current in Turkish Islam. Erbakan's rhetoric was never violent, but it was clearly anti-Western, anti-secular, and to a degree anti-Semitic. His first and only prime ministry in 1996 was forced to a quick end by a «post-modern coup» during which the armed forces forced the government to resign. That dramatic failure was both an important lesson and a sign for the reformist wing in this party, which would soon break away from his Islamist line to create the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in 2001. From the first day, AKP leaders emphasized that they abandoned Islamism. They did not even accept the term «Muslim democrats», suggested by some, and instead defined their party as «conservative.» In a sense, they reverted to Turkey's authentic Islamic tradition, according to which Erbakan was an anomaly.

In November 2002, the AKP won 34.3 percent of the votes and a clear majority in the parliament. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, soon became prime minister, and his government has introduced many liberal reforms, boldly advanced Turkey's EU admission process, and created an economic success story. The AKP proved to be, in the words of *Newsweek* columnist Fareed Zakaria, «the most open, modern and liberal political movement in Turkey's history.»<sup>24</sup>

In his article on Turkey's «conservative globalists» and «defensive nationalists», Ziya Önis, Professor of International Relations at Koç University in Istanbul, makes the following observation:

Turkey's recent Europeanization process is characterized by a number of paradoxical features. Civil society organizations, notably business associations, have played a more active role as members of the pro-EU/pro-reform coalition as compared with the principal political parties. «Islamists» appear to have been transformed more radically than their «secularist» counterparts. Indeed, a conservative party of Islamist origin, the AKP has become the principal agent for Turkey's European transformation following the general elections of 2002. Turkish politics in the post-Helsinki era can be better conceptualized as a contest between a globalists and defensive nationalists which cut across the left and right of the political spectrum.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Fareed Zakaria (2007). «A Quiet Prayer for Democracy.» *Newsweek*, May 14, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Ziya Önis (2007). «Conservative globalists versus defensive nationalists: political parties and paradoxes of Europeanization in Turkey.» *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 9 (3), pp. 247-261.

### The empire strikes back

Yet Turkey's secularists, especially the Kemalists, never really trusted AKP's transformation and waited anxiously for the time which it would unveil its «real face.» Meanwhile they trusted their man at the top of the state, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who famously said: «Kemalism is a state ideology that each citizen has to side with.» The breaking point came in May 2007, when Sezer's term came to an end and the AKP announced its candidate for the post: Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, who is widely respected in virtually all capitals of the world, but is deeply resented by some elders of Ankara for his Islamist past and the headscarf of his wife. The resentment led the Turkish military to issue a harsh «secularism warning» on the night of April 27, which led the Constitutional Court to cancel the presidential voting process based on a newly invented and very controversial argument about the quorum. Faced with a deadlock, the AKP announced early elections on July 22, which it won with a victory unseen in Turkish politics since the 60's.

AKP's triumph has disappointed Turkey's secularists, but they were determined to hold up their swords. And soon they acted: When the AKP brought in a constitutional amendment that would enable veiled girls join universities, the powers that be in Ankara decided to launch their crusade. The Chief Prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yağcinkaya, filed an indictment against the AKP and submitted to the Constitutional Court on March 15, 2008. He demanded that the party should be closed down, and 70 of its top members, including Prime Minister Erdogan and even President Gül should be banned from politics.

This closure case, not too surprisingly, created a huge controversy in Turkey was denounced as an attempt for a «judiciary coup d'etat» by many Turkish democrats. European Union officials also criticized the case. EU Commissioner for Olli Rehn was probably summarizing the general view in Europe when he said at Oxford University that the cleavage in Turkey is «between the secularists, especially the extreme rather than liberal secularists, on the one hand, and the Muslim democrats many of whom are reformed post-Islamists, on the other hand.»<sup>26</sup> And while such comments were making Turkey's «extreme secularists» increasingly anti-EU, it was also further pushing the «Muslim democrats» further towards the West.

Finally the «closure case» ended with a light punishment on the AKP: the party was not closed down, yet it was deprived from financial assistance from state budget for its «anti-secular activities», the most important being the move to set the headscarf free in university campuses. Hence the AKP is still in power, and is acting more liberal than its political opponents, including the ultra-secular, ultra-Kemalist CHP (People's Republican Party), in various issues such as the

<sup>26</sup> *Today's Zaman*, May 3, 2008.

rights of Kurds, non-Muslim minorities, and other EU-related reforms.

### **Muslim discovery of the west**

The main argument of Turkey's radical secularists that the AKP has a «hidden agenda» and will reveal its «true» (Taliban-like) face when it finds the right moment. Such conspiracy theories are very popular among Kemalist bureaucrats and pundits, but there is virtually no empirical evidence that they rely on. The evidence actually suggest otherwise.

Take, for example, the survey titled «Religion, Society and Politics In a Changing Turkey.» It was carried out in 2006 by political scientists Binnaz Toprak and Ali Carkoglu and supported by Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), the country's leading think-tank. Based on interviews with thousands of individuals from all around Turkey, and in comparison to a similar survey they had carried out in 1999, Toprak and Carkoglu revealed that religiosity is thriving in Turkey, but is also moving away from political Islam. Indeed, in response to the question «Should there be political parties based on religion», the percentage of respondents answering «Yes» has dropped from 41 to 25 percent in the past 7 years. Moreover, demand for «a religious state based on *shariah* (Islamic law)» has dropped dramatically from 21 percent to 9 percent. And when harsh measures of the *shariah* were asked, such as stoning, only 2 percent turned out to be supportive.<sup>27</sup> The bottom line of the study is that Turkish Islam is flourishing, but is also undergoing a silent reformation.

Why is Turkey's vast Muslim majority on this democratic path? Why are they in favor of the EU bid? And why has the AKP persistently taken this new, pro-Western direction?

One answer certainly lies in the Ottoman modernization, which created a synthesis of Islam and democracy decades before the Turkish Republic. The latter's excessive secularism does not inspire religious Turks, but the Ottoman heritage does.

Another answer might come from a significant discovery that Turkey's observant Muslims had in the past quarter century: that the West is better than the Westernizers. What this means is that they recognized that Western democracies give their citizens all the religious freedoms that Turkey has withheld from its own. In fact, no country in the free world has a secularism as illiberal as Turkey's self-styled *laïcité*. Any society or club which has an Islamic name or purpose is illegal, and religious education is very limited. A woman wearing a Muslim headscarf has no chance of any kind of learning in Turkey, whether in public or private schools. There is also the bitter language used the by secular elite towards observant Muslims. Some call the women in headscarf «cockroaches.»

For many decades, devout Muslims in Turkey have perceived all this se-

<sup>27</sup> Cf. [http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD\\_OBJS/PDF/DEMP/RSP%20-%20Turkey.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD_OBJS/PDF/DEMP/RSP%20-%20Turkey.pdf)

cular fundamentalism as a product of the West, and hoped that de-Westernization would end their feelings of being «a pariah in their own land», as the late Islamic poet Necip Fazil once put it. Yet, the more they learned about the West, the more they realized that the problem is rooted in the mindset of Ankara –not of Washington, London, or Brussels. Having realized that the real West is preferable to the caricature of it they have at home, they have re-routed their search for freedom. Instead of trying to Islamize the state, they have decided to liberalize it –a policy which helped the AKP get support from Turkey's secular liberals, Kurds, and even Armenians.

### AKP and islamic capitalism

Another striking feature of the AKP is its unabashed championship of the free market, which quite different from the anti-capitalist stance that is shared by many Islamic movements in the Middle East, and even by some «modernist» Muslim intellectuals. Actually since the early 20th century, the Islamic world has been dominated by socialist thought. However, close study of the religious texts and the early history of the Islamic civilization could lead to the conclusion that Islam and free markets are indeed compatible –an argument outlined by Maxime Rodinson in his classic, *Islam and Capitalism*.

Which should also remind us of Max Weber, who argued for the role of religion in economic growth in his study of the «Protestant ethic» and the rise of capitalism in the West. In fact Weber was not very hopeful for Islam in this regard. For him Islam was an obstacle to capitalist development, for it could foster only aggressive militancy (*jihad*) or contemplative austerity. However, one of the greatest Turkish sociologists, Sabri F. Ülgener –both a student and a critic of Weber– argued that Weber, despite his genius in analyzing the origins of capitalism in the West, misjudged Islam and overlooked its inherent compatibility with a «liberal market system.»<sup>28</sup> (It is worth noting that Weber was very pessimistic about China and Japan as well.)

And now, in Turkey, Ülgener's prediction is coming true with the rise of an Islamic-inspired capitalism. The European Stability Initiative (ESI), a Berlin-based think tank, conducted an extensive study in 2005 of the «Anatolian tigers», booming Turkish companies in the heartland of conservative Turkey. ESI researchers interviewed hundreds of conservative businessmen in the central Anatolian city of Kayseri (most of whom voted for AKP), and discovered that «individualistic, pro-business currents have become prominent within Turkish Islam», and a «quiet Islamic Reformation» was taking place in the hands of Muslim entrepreneurs. The term they used to define these godly capitalists was also the title of their report: «Islamic Calvinists.»<sup>29</sup> Weber should have lived to read it.

The rise of an Islamic entrepreneurial class is a remarkable phenome-

<sup>28</sup> Sabri Ülgener (2006). *Zihniyet ve Din* (Mindset and Religion). Istanbul: Derin Yayinlari, pp. 57-64.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. [http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document\\_ID=69](http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=69)

non, because it marks the beginning a whole new stage for Islamic civilization. People understand religion according not only to its textual teachings, but also their social environment. As for Islam, this environment has been feudal, imperial, or bureaucratic. But now, in Turkey and in a few other Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Islam is being transformed into a religion of the middle class and its rational, independent individuals. No wonder this social change generates new interpretations of religion. In the new Turkey, models parade down the catwalk in fancy headscarves and Koranic courses are promoted by clowns handing out ice cream. «Islamic feminists» argue against the «male-domination ideology within Islamic thought.» Just last year, the Turkish *Diyamet*, the official religious body which controls every mosque in the country, announced that it will cleanse the traditional collections of *hadiths* (sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad) from misogynistic statements. The head of the *Diyamet*, Dr. Ali Bardakoglu, a liberal theologian appointed by the AKP government in 2002, was more recently asked if missionary work was a threat to Turkey as some nationalist claim. «No», he replied, «it is their natural right to evangelize their faith; we must learn to respect even the personal choice of an atheist, let alone other religions.»<sup>30</sup>

### A light onto other muslim nations?

For many decades, Arabs and other Muslim nations saw Turkey as a lost cause, a country that had abandoned its own faith and civilization. This is why, despite the popular trope in the West, Turkey could never serve as an example of the compatibility of Islam and modernity. It represented instead the abandonment and even suppression of the former for the sake of the latter. Yet that's a bad message to send to the Islamic world: when a devout believer is forced to choose between religion and modernity, he will opt, and even fight, for the former. The right message is a synthesis of Islamic and modern values. With its Ottoman heritage and a deepening democracy, Turkey has the potential to create that synthesis and send that message. That potential was denied and marginalized for many decades, but it is coming back. That is good news not only for Turkey, but for the world.

Above all, the experience of Turkish Islam also suggests how the ultimate reform of the Islamic world will come about—through democracy and free markets. These are the social dynamics that create individuals and communities willing to embrace modernity and shape it to their own historical imaginations. When Muslim societies are forced instead to accept some elite's version of modernity—whether rough secularist tyrannies or Western military interventions—they invariably react against it, and the backlash just as invariably fuels an even more ferocious, reactionary religious radicalism.

Alas, there are no shortcuts to genuine social reform. The quick fixes and

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Hurriyet*, April 21, 2007.



forced marches of the impatient do not herald progress; they push it away. Turkey's Muslim liberalism is up and coming, roughly a century after its genesis in late Ottoman reform. Can our European friends take «yes» for an answer?

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#### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Mustafa Akyol is a commentator on Turkish politics, and especially on issues relating to religion and public life in Turkey. He is currently a columnist for *Hurriyet Daily News*, Turkey's foremost English-language daily. He also writes a regular column for the Turkish national daily, *Star*. His articles have also appeared on American publications such as *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *International Herald Tribune*, *The American Interest*, *First Things*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Washington Times*, *The American Enterprise Magazine*, *National Review Online*, *The Forward*, and others. Mustafa Akyol has a book in Turkish titled *Kürt Sorununu Yeniden Düşünmek: Yanlı Giden Neydi? Bundan Sonra Nereye?* [Rethinking The Kurdish Question: What Went Wrong? What Next?] (2006). He is currently working on a book in English titled *The Islamic Case For Freedom*.

#### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze the Turkish contemporary experience, taking as turning point the foundation of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001. For this, it has been necessary to revise historically the Ottoman legacy and its reform, emphasizing in particular the Tanzimat period and the role of the Young Ottomans in this process, and, on the other hand, the genesis of the modern Turkish Republic and the changes made by Kemal Atatürk. The experience of Turkish Islam, through democracy and free market, is an example that shows how different social and historical dynamics can lead to the creation of people and communities that can combine Islamic values with modernity.

#### KEYWORDS

Justice and Development Party (AKP), Islamic values, otomanism, Islamic modernization, Turkey.

#### RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la experiencia turca contemporánea, tomando como punto de inflexión la fundación del Partido de la Justicia y el Desarrollo (AKP) en 2001. Para ello ha sido necesario revisar históricamente aspectos como el legado otomano y su reforma, haciendo especial hincapié en el período de Tanzimat y el papel de los Jóvenes Otomanos en este proceso, así como la génesis de la República Turca moderna y las reformas de Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. La experiencia del islam turco, a través de la democracia y el libre mercado, es un ejemplo de cómo las distintas dinámicas históricas y sociales han llegado a crear individuos y comunidades que pueden combinar los valores islámicos con la mo-

dernidad.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Partido de la Justicia y el Desarrollo (AKP), otomanismo, valores islámicos, modernización islámica, Turquía.

#### المخلص

تهدف المقالة هذه إلى تحليل التجربة التركية المعاصرة انطلاقاً من تاريخ إنشاء حزب العدالة والتنمية عام 2001، مما يحتاج إلى إعادة النظر في عوامل عدة منها التراث العثماني وإصلاحه مبرزاً، على وجه الخصوص، مرحلة «التنظيمات» ودور العثمانيين الشبان فيها، إضافة إلى مسألة تأسيس الجمهورية التركية الحديثة والإصلاحات التي قام بها مصطفى كمال أتاتورك. وتجربة الإسلام في تركيا، من خلال الديمقراطية والسوق الحرة، مثال يبرهن كيف تمكنت الديناميات التاريخية والاجتماعية المختلفة من تكوين أفراد ومجتمعات تمتاز فيهم القيم الإسلامية بالحدثة.

#### الكلمات المفتاحية

حزب العدالة والتنمية، قيم إسلامية، تحديث إسلامي، تركيا، عثمانية