

Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi: Kaybolan Dünyadan Nurlu Bir Sima

*Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu
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The growing field of the intellectual and social history of the interwar period is richer for this biography of Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi, written by his son, Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, and titled *Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi: Kaybolan Dünyadan Nurlu Bir Sima* (Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi: An Illuminated Face from a Lost World). The title of the book lends itself to layered interpretation: the word *sîmâ* (face, but also sign) indicates that it is about a historical persona, Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi: Islamic scholar, dedicated teacher and a member of the late Ottoman *ulama*, as well as a witness to the dramatic changes of the early 20th century. On the other hand, Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi appears as deeply human, in roles that are not readily visible in other historical sources: devoted son, caring father to his own family, and a mentor to many students who passed through Cairo.

In his research, İhsanoğlu has drawn on a range of methods and textual sources. Alongside private letters, excerpts from biographies and autobiographies (and notably, Ali Ulvi Kurucu's memories), his rich documentary material includes photographs and interviews with those who knew Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi personally, providing unique insights into his life and work. The book is temporally organized, progressing from the alim's early years in Yozgat and beginnings in Istanbul, to his scholarly years in Cairo. It is divided into ten chapters, together with İhsanoğlu's own reflections on the method of and motivation for the book, supplemented by additional material such as a timeline, a family tree diagram and a description of his sources.

Through the focus of the book on Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi's scholarly career and intellectual networks, it is possible to observe changes and transformations in the age of dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and establishment of the Republic of Turkey. İhsanoğlu starts by depicting the processes of modernization of education in the last decades of the Empire, always shifting back and forth from the larger and more general framework to details about the formative years of Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi himself. In that regard, this book recalls Roy Mottahedeh's *Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, as well as complementing İhsanoğlu's own recent

monograph on Dar al-Funun, showing once again how the exploration of the life of a single (albeit exceptional) scholar brings together considerations of religion, culture and the historical vicissitudes that impact them.

Education led Yozgatlı Ihsan Efendi first to Istanbul (71-77), where he spent some time visiting the famous Kelâmi Dergâh and possibly meeting Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873-1936), which would mark the beginning of their lifelong friendship. However, the passing of the new law on education (Tevhîdi-tedrisât Kanunu) forced Yozgatlı Ihsan Efendi to a new hijra, this time to Cairo. For the greater part of the 20th century, al-Azhar was a place of refuge for Islamic scholars from faraway places across the Muslim World, including other Turkish émigrés. In many ways, Cairo attracted those scholars who wanted to grapple with problems of the modern age, such as nationalism, secularism, or translation of the Qur'an in the "age of steam and print". After Istanbul, the young Ihsan Efendi found himself in a Turkish *revak* in Cairo, where Turkish, Bosnian, Albanian and other students lived. Throughout the book, İhsanoğlu provides different types of documents that highlight Yozgatlı Ihsan Efendi's educational path, notably including *ijâzât*, including the one by Shaykh Muḥammad Bakhîṭ al-Muṭī'î, the Grand Mufti of Egypt (134). His role as a student in time changed into his role as a teacher, starting in 1934 at the Sultan Mahmud Madrassa, where he provided guidance for many different 'ulama. While the system of *ijâzât* proved to be crucial for Ihsan Efendi's academic and intellectual credentials, he himself never issued them, for reasons that could be ascribed both to his meticulous approach to knowledge and the demands of the new age that compressed education temporally and directed it towards gaining a diploma, rather than building the persona of the *'âlim* (138-139). This shows how he did not just passively accept classical learned conventions, but moved beyond them. The situation was further complicated by postwar instability and the problematic position of graduates from Egyptian universities in their homelands.

While studying and teaching in Cairo, Ihsan Efendi showed diligence and persistence; his academic career also demonstrated, however, his inability to conform to the drastically changed educational system of the new Turkish Republic, and also his lack of scholarly integration into the hierarchies of al-Azhar, now increasingly bound to Egyptian nationality. In other words, the nation-state now imposed limitations on belonging, and Yozgatlı Ihsan Efendi was unwilling to compromise on the key elements of his identity. It was only years later that the situation changed for the better,

when Ihsan Efendi was employed at the newly-opened Ayn Shams University as a professor of Turkish language and literature, as well as during his service to the Egyptian National Library towards the end of his life. This also reflected on his literary output and interest in commentaries (*sharḥ*) and translations.

However, living betwixt two rapidly diverging societies had its advantages as well. In Cairo, which became a hub for ‘ulama and thinkers disillusioned with aggressive modernity, post-Ottoman scholarly networks were developing, emphasizing differences between the ‘ulama (such as Mustafa Sabri and Zahid El-Kevserî Efendi) but also fostering lifelong friendships, such as that with Mehmet Akif Ersoy, to whom the author devotes a whole chapter (“Mehmet Akif Ersoy ile dostluk ve Kur’ân-i Kerîm meâli”). Mehmet Akif Ersoy’s translation of the Qur’an—a hugely contested issue at the time—constitutes the strongest token of their friendship. Ersoy’s translation, and his reluctance to make it available to the public, symbolizes the fears of the ‘ulama that, just like the Turkish adhan, it would be misappropriated for nationalist purposes. Ersoy left the translation in the hands of Yozgatlı Ihsan Efendi and, in a series of dramatic passages supported by notes and letters, we discover that the translation was burnt after Ihsan Efendi’s death by his own instruction.

The book provides glimpses into important aspects of intellectual and social life in interwar and postwar Cairo, describing gatherings of Turkish students therein, also attended by those from elsewhere, including many who were expelled from their homelands. In a chapter titled “Memleketten, Doğu’dan ve Batı’dan sedalar” (Echoes from the Homeland, East and West) İhsanoğlu produces documents, letters and photographs showing how Ihsan Efendi’s contact with his family, friends, and students continued beyond Cairo.

The book is recommended to intellectual and social historians and students, and will be a delightful read for anyone interested in the late and post-Ottoman world. We also hope that it will soon be translated into English.

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