

Ottoman Ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition

Amit Bein

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Much has been written about religion and secularism in Turkey over the past decades, but detailed histories of the late Ottoman and modern Turkish ulema have been few and far between. Therefore, this recent book by Amit Bein is a welcome and a much needed contribution to the literature on the Turkish ulema and to the literature on religion in modern Turkey in general. It charts the vicissitudes of the ulema during a period of dramatic change from the late nineteenth century until roughly 1960. Bein shows the multiple challenges the ulema faced during successive rounds of political and social reform and the various approaches that they took in response. The diversity of opinion and political orientation within the ulema corps are on full display – from the most ardent nationalist figures, who supported state reforms in all respects, to the staunchest enemies of the republican regime. This book conveys a nuanced understanding of who the Turkish ulema were and how they navigated the empire-to-republic transition.

Over the course of this history, Bein charts out the key issues for the marginalization of the ulema with attention to both rhetoric and actual initiatives. Chapter 2 demonstrates how French Revolutionary anticlerical attitudes informed public perceptions of the ulema in late Ottoman times. Much of the Ottoman intelligentsia came to see the ulema as the primary obstacle to modernization and progress, an attitude which continued into and intensified during the Turkish Republic. After the 1908 Revolution, the ulema experienced unprecedented public attacks in the media, which the author illustrates here with diverse primary materials. It was not only secular nationalists but also devout “Islamic intellectuals” – non-ulema intelligentsia – who criticized the ulema and demanded a thoroughgoing reform of religious education. Moreover, Islamic intellectuals viewed the government as the primary mechanism for modernizing and imposing reform upon the men of religion. In fact, both

reform-minded ulema as well as more defensive members shared this state-centric view, in which the ulema had a role within the state. Yet it was not only from without but also from within that calls for reform originated. Some members of the ulema themselves embraced the criticisms and pushed for change. However, Bein separates rhetoric from action and makes it clear that, despite the voluminous conversations in the post-1908 public sphere, no “comprehensive reforms” occurred in any Islamic institutions prior to 1914. This is a helpful distinction as some accounts place more emphasis on what was written or said rather than on actual initiatives.

The book spells out the reform of ulema institutions with clarity. Bein provides not only the facts but also the meaning of these facts within the context of late Ottoman and modern Turkish political life. The portion on the modernization of the late Ottoman madrasahs is particularly interesting as it shows the fissures between various ulema factions particularly between the actual students in the madrasahs, who largely favored the reformed system, and the conservative ulema, who wanted to reverse the reforms and oppose all challenges to the ulema’s political and social position. Bein closely traces the tumultuous career of the leader of the conservative ulema, Mustafa Sabri, who served twice the Ottoman Shaykh al-Islam. Sabri represented the most extreme position of ulema opposition to nationalism and the reform of Islamic institutions. He publicly resigned from the Turkish nation and repeatedly argued that colonial rule was preferable to independence that entailed religious reform. Sabri lived the latter portion of his life in exile, an indefatigable critic of the Turkish Republic. Bein shows us that most ulema charted a more centrist course and remained in Turkey. Some very important ulema leaders worked with the Ankara government of Mustafa Kemal not because they favored secularizing, nationalist reforms, but rather, because they wanted to influence the reforms and ensure that the Ottoman Islamic heritage was not completely lost. Bein calls their mode of working with the new regime “qualified cooperation,” whereby they gave legitimacy to the reforms and the new religious hierarchy – *Diyanet* – in exchange for a degree of control over those reforms. Scholars like Ahmet Akseki and Muhammed Hamdi Elmalılı did their utmost to impede radical reform and transmit traditional scholarship and Islamic sensibilities into the new nation-state. Despite their weak political position, the ulema were successful in preventing and moderating many aspects of the nationalist agenda.

Bein’s study is fine-grained and buttressed by ample archival research. It opens up new vistas on Turkish history and enriches the study of the modern ulema.

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