

The Ulema Matter



The ulema of the late Ottoman period did not fare particularly well in the historiography of modern Turkey. Only a handful of books and articles in European languages have concentrated on the intellectual production, actions, and institutions of ulema. Perhaps this relative lack of interest should not come as a surprise considering that ulema wound up getting the short end of the stick in the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey. In a matter of a few years after the establishment of the new regime in late 1923, the religious establishment was downsized and peripheralized, most of its institutions were abolished, its jurisdiction was severely curtailed, and even the appellation ulema was virtually purged from the Turkish language. When discussed in the historiography of the period, the ulema have often been described, at times dismissively or even derisively, as the essential “other” to a modernized and Westernized new elite that came to dominate the empire and the republic from the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 to the mid-twentieth century. Often they have been presented as a rather uniform socioreligious group that had run its course by the early twentieth century and was thus tossed into the dustbin of history. As such, they did not appear to merit much interest in academic studies until quite recently.¹

Enter any Islamic bookstore in Turkey or visit the Web sites of Turkish booksellers and a very different picture emerges. Late-Ottoman ulema and the institutions associated with them are the subjects of dozens of books published in recent years. In some cases, these are new translations or revised renditions of texts originally published either in Arabic or in Ottoman script by late-Ottoman ulema. In many other instances, the publications consist of new studies about the late-Ottoman religious establishment, mostly by graduates and faculty of divinity schools that have mushroomed in Turkey in recent decades. These compilations are diverse: some are distinctly academic in tone whereas many

others are aimed at reaching a wider audience. The thriving market of Islamic journals and Islam-oriented dailies contributes to the trend with frequent articles, editorials, and book reviews. The general tone of these publications is appreciative of the ulema and their institutions. Quite often they are clearly aimed at producing a counternarrative to the negative assessments that have dominated historiography and the hegemonic discourse in Turkey since the early years of the republic. Coming on the backdrop of the increasing visibility and influence of Islamic movements in Turkey, particularly since the 1990s, these efforts at reassessment and rehabilitation of the image of Ottoman ulema and their institutions are unnerving and even foreboding for many self-ascribed guardians of the secular republic.

A recent public spat put on full display the sensitivity still attached to the topic more than eighty years after the establishment of the republic. The ulema reached the headlines in November 2005 following a decision by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to uphold the legality of the ban on women's headscarves in Turkish universities. Reacting to the verdict, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticized the ruling of the judges, explaining that "in this matter, the ulema, not the courts, should have the final say." His remarks sparked a firestorm of controversy. His censuring of the ruling was perhaps predictable, considering his party's Islamic roots and his previously stated views on the matter of headscarves. But what really ticked off his critics was what they described as his advocacy of "the ulema" as an alternative and preferable authority.

Critics accused the Prime Minister of revealing his true Islamist stripes even as he and his supporters dismissed his detractors as plainly ignorant. Opposition spokespersons and sympathetic commentators argued that Erdoğan harbored secret antiseccularist designs to restore power to the religious scholars, power such as they enjoyed in Ottoman times and still do in Islamic regimes like Saudi Arabia and Iran. Erdoğan and his supporters rejected these allegations out of hand as hysterical, insincere, and uninformed. The Prime Minister and his backers insisted that all he meant was that on such questions the court should have consulted with knowledgeable experts. They argued that even a glance in the dictionary will prove that the term ulema simply stands for "learned men," and thus it should not have aroused such indignation and criticism. And yet, rather than concentrating on the ECHR's controversial ruling itself, for several days some of the most prominent Turkish politicians, academics, and pundits debated and clashed in all available media venues over the exact meaning and implications of the Prime Minister's reference to "the ulema." For a time there were even discussions of an impending legal action against the Prime Minister.² The action did not pass at the time and

Erdoğan survived this short-lived crisis unscathed. The whole affair and the passions that arose from it nevertheless demonstrated that he touched a raw nerve by alluding to “the ulema.”

Erdoğan’s supporters and critics had very little in common on the subject, save for mutual deployment of dissembling arguments and ahistorical assertions. The Prime Minister could not have been unaware that the mere mention of the term ulema in the context of such a controversial issue as the ban on headscarves would be construed by the opposition as a provocative antiseccularist statement. A seasoned politician like Erdoğan could have easily used a neutral term from daily speech rather than a loaded word that might strike a chord with his political base but also unavoidably trigger harsh backlash from his opponents. His critics, meanwhile, reacted as if the word ulema per se represents a one-dimensional and inherently negative designation across time and space.

The heated public debate surrounding his statement was reflective of current political cleavages in Turkey. At the same time, it was also indicative of unresolved issues dating back to the early days of the republic. Turkey is a secular state. This fact has been enshrined in its constitution since the late 1930s. Nevertheless, there is no complete separation between the government and religious institutions, and unsettled questions about the roles and jurisdiction of the official religious administration have remained a vexing topic. The early republican leadership, staunchly secularist as it was, did not completely disestablish the Islamic religious administration and Muslim institutions. Instead, it suppressed some, restricted the functions and diminished the importance of others, and endeavored to place all of them under stricter government control. A new state agency, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Reisliği*), or *Diyanet*, was put in charge of a much smaller, leaner, and less autonomous religious administration than existed in late Ottoman times.³ Like the republic itself, the new administration was expected to signify a break with the Ottoman past. It never really did, however, for several important reasons. For one thing, former Ottoman ulema continued to dominate the *Diyanet* for decades after the establishment of the republic. For another thing, the transition to democracy after World War II set in motion a process by which certain groups in society could more freely campaign for the rehabilitation of the tarnished legacies of the Ottoman ulema and their institutions. The harsh responses to Erdoğan’s statement are in line with similar, almost knee-jerk hostile reactions in some Kemalist circles to almost any favorable mention of anything to do with the ulema since the early days of the republic. Similar simplified and essentialized depictions also affected and handicapped studies of the religious establishment in the late Ottoman period and the early

republic. Until not so long ago, the dominant historiography of these periods often reduced the ulema and their institutions to caricatures of backwardness, stagnation, traditionalism, and reaction. Islamist publications, meanwhile, frequently represented them as innocent victims of antireligious plots, persecutions, and slanders. As is often the case, such monochromatic depictions tended to be more illustrative of the observers than of the group and institutions they purport to observe. Ulema in fact responded to the challenges and opportunities of the late Ottoman period and the early republic in a variety of ways and forms.

Ulema had played important official roles in the Ottoman state since its formative period. The transformation of the state from an Anatolian principality into a world empire by the sixteenth century involved efforts to regulate and institutionalize their official position. A state-sponsored hierarchical religious establishment (*ilmiye*) was organized with the Sheikh ul-Islam (*Şeyhülislam*) at the helm. He was considered answerable directly to the Sultan and symbolically the equal of the Grand Vizier. The Ottoman religious establishment was a Sunni institution and dominated by practitioners of the Hanafi school of law. Shiites in general and Alevis in particular were not recognized or formally represented in it. They were considered to be deviators from the straight path of Islam and a politically unreliable element, particularly during the long wars with the Shiite Safavid dynasty of Iran in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ottoman official religious establishment included primarily judges, professors in the important religious seminaries (*medreses*), and other senior religious functionaries, mainly in the major urban centers. Many other ulema, particularly in rural areas and frontier regions, had only tenuous ties, if any at all, with the official religious establishment and were considered “unofficial.” Senior ulema were part and parcel of the Ottoman elites, perhaps more than in any other premodern Islamic empire, whereas many “unofficial” ulema were associated with the lower classes. Upward mobility within the religious establishment as the result of merit and good fortune was not rare, however. On the symbolic level the religious establishment was accorded a formal recognition as a major pillar of the Islamic empire, which in practical terms translated to perquisites, prestige, and political influence for those in important positions in the learned hierarchy.⁴

The retooling of the Ottoman government in the nineteenth century had a profound impact on the religious establishment. The expansion of the size and reach of the state apparatus, and efforts to centralize the administration and finances of the state, affected the ulema and their institutions in various ways. On the one hand, the religious establishment was increasingly bureaucratized, placed more firmly than before under

the authority of the central government, faced increasing encroachments into its traditional jurisdictions, and lost most of its financial autonomy. On the other hand, the size and reach of the official religious establishment grew in real terms as the government sought to integrate into it “unofficial” Sunni ulema and Sufi sheikhs and extend its activity beyond the major urban centers. The results of these policies were varied and mixed. New statutory courts and new-style schools under the authority of specialized ministries definitely encroached on the jurisdiction of the Sheikh ul-Islam and the religious establishment. At the same time, many ulema were actually employed in the new courts, modern-style schools, institutions that were linked to the new Ministry of Islamic Endowments, and other government ministries. Administrative overlaps and institutional interweaving were evident. Still, because other government agencies grew much faster and were increasingly manned by graduates of the new-style schools by the late nineteenth century, the relative weight and importance of ulema within the state apparatus was on the decline by the turn of the twentieth century.⁵

These developments in the Ottoman Empire followed precedents set in Europe and were in line with similar developments in many other contemporary societies. The second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century witnessed in many lands similar rapid expansion in the size and functions of state apparatuses at the expense of religious establishments and institutions. In Roman Catholic countries in Europe and the Americas, governments’ efforts to curtail the power and influence of the Church were particularly noticeable, though with varied and mixed results. New nations established in the Balkans in lands lost to the Ottoman Empire witnessed similar trends in connection with their Orthodox Christian churches. Confiscation of church properties and efforts to diminish the jurisdiction and roles of newly reorganized “national churches” and curtail their involvement in politics were often a notable feature of the formative periods of new nation states in the Balkans. The Ottomans were not the only Islamic government to pursue a similar if not identical path. In Egypt before and after the British occupation and in Iran there were also efforts to establish government-controlled institutions that supplanted traditional religious ones or competed with them, and to strengthen the state’s hold over the administration and finances of Islamic institutions. In both cases, however, the results were mixed and the efforts mostly less effective than in the Ottoman Empire.⁶

In many countries, expediency considerations for strengthening central governments at the expense of religious establishments were supplemented by varying degrees of anticlericalism and antireligious sentiments. The spread of positivistic and materialistic ideas, popularized as progres-

sive and scientific, turned new middle classes, and in some places the masses, against traditional religious institutions. By the late nineteenth century, religious orthodoxies and the institutions associated with them became associated with backwardness and narrow-mindedness in the thought and writing of many an intellectual, official, and political leader. European countries were ahead of the curve in this respect. But emerging nationalist intelligentsias in some of the lands targeted by European imperialism were following suit. By the early years of the twentieth century, antireligious and secularist influences were becoming increasingly conspicuous and significant not only in many European countries but also in non-European societies that were under direct colonial control or informal modes of imperialism.⁷ Similar developments were increasingly evident in the views of Muslim intellectuals in Iran, the Caucasus, Egypt, the Levant, and the Ottoman heartlands by the late nineteenth century. Some intellectuals embraced antireligious inclinations while many more took aim not at religion *per se* but rather at traditional norms and practices associated with established Islamic orthodoxies. The ulema and the institutions associated with them were a prime target in this respect. As the twentieth century was setting in, however, the changes their critics advocated had yet to be translated fully and in most cases even partially into official policies or dramatic changes in the position and characteristics of religious establishments in most Muslim societies, including the Ottoman Empire.

The responses of clerical and religious establishments to the real and perceived challenges they faced varied considerably in different societies. Specific nuances and divergences in state policies and political circumstances as well as the make-up of society and specific historical, geographic, and economic variables produced distinct variations on the theme of changing relations between religion, state, and society. Conflicts, severe crises, and violent clashes in some times and at some places contrasted with negotiated compromises in others. Continued predominance of traditional orthodoxies in some settings coincided with the spread of reformist influences in many others, oftentimes pitting reform-minded clerics against their more conservative peers and traditional religious authorities. Each case was unique, but the rapid spread of new modes of communication such as the steamship, the railway, and the printed word both created an impression of a surging global phenomenon and augmented multilateral influences across political, geographic, and cultural divides.⁸ At the same time, developments in Europe were particularly significant because of European nations' outsized political, military, economic and, intellectual dominance throughout most of the world by the early twentieth century, and the belief of many an intellec-

tual the world over that specific European precedents signified a universal path to modernity.

The Ottoman Empire and other Muslim societies and communities from British-controlled Egypt and India to Iran and Russian-ruled Central Asia and the Caucasus were no exception in this respect. Accusations hurled at ulema—such as that their traditionalism, obscurantism, and antiscientific tendencies were obstacles to progress and modernization of Muslim societies—were also aimed at contemporaneous clergy, priests, and rabbis in Islamic states such as the Ottoman Empire. Likewise, the responses of Muslim religious establishments to real and perceived challenges to their traditional jurisdictions and functions varied along a spectrum stretching from entrenched traditionalism at the one end to enthusiastic reformism at the other. Ulema in each society faced particular challenges that had to do with specific local circumstances. Their positions and actions, however, just like their challengers' stances and initiatives, were also influenced by acute awareness that the pressures and issues they faced were not unique and localized but rather common to many other contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim societies around the globe.

Ottoman ulema in Istanbul and other major urban centers were particularly aware of the new challenges and their potential cost to the ulema. By the early twentieth century most of them were affiliated with the state, many as salaried officials. The rapidly expanding government bureaucracy of the second half of the nineteenth century opened new employment opportunities and career paths for ulema. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, new secularist ideas and increasing competition from graduates of the rapidly expanding new-style schools, often disguised as demands for professionalism and merit-based appointments, appeared to increasingly threaten their employment prospects in government service. There are indeed clear indications that many senior ulema increasingly preferred to place their children in the new-style schools rather than in traditional medreses, which, despite some demands for substantial reforms, witnessed only minor curricular changes during the nineteenth century.⁹ Subsequently, broad concerns about the potential political, societal, and cultural implications of demands for the curtailment of the roles and functions of the religious establishment and Islamic institutions were augmented by mundane concerns over livelihood. This was a particularly pressing concern for the tens of thousands of provincial young men who flocked to the medreses of Istanbul and a few other traditional centers of learning in search of both knowledge and future employment.

In the hegemonic discourse of the Ottoman elite, by the early twentieth century the ulema were increasingly described and perceived as a

distinct group. This was not a new phenomenon in itself. The Ottoman Empire went further than any other premodern Islamic state in institutionalizing the religious establishment. The reforms of the nineteenth century reaffirmed this distinction by gathering and reorganizing various institutions associated with the ulema as departments in the ministry-like office of the Sheikh ul-Islam (*Meşihat-i Islamiye*). External markers such as styles of facial hair, clothes, and headgear added another distinguishing aspect in a period of rapid changes in fashion and appearance among the Ottoman elites. The ulema were indeed very often referred to collectively as “men of the turban” (*sarıklılar*), as opposed to modern-educated Ottomans, who were referred to as “men of the fez” (*fezliler*). More than anything else, however, it was their educational background, forms of socialization, lifestyles, habits of leisure and entertainment, and conservative inclinations that increasingly distanced many of the ulema from a new generation of Ottoman intellectuals, officials, and army officers that came of age around the turn of the twentieth century. The lines of demarcation of the ulema could be quite soft in reality, but in the hegemonic discourse and public imagination they were real enough, for better or worse, to merit common allusions to the ulema as a collective with shared traits. The establishment of ulema associations and publications attest to the fact that a certain level of group identity, or at least a recognition of common interests, also existed among the ulema themselves.

Historical studies of the period often translated these facts into ideology-driven, one-dimensional generalizations about the ulema and their institutions. Kemalist commentators and scholars regularly associated the late Ottoman ulema with “extreme fanaticism and a crude interpretation of religion.”¹⁰ As a collective, they were thus linked to obstructionism and reactionary inclinations in the hegemonic historiography in Turkey, and charged with being a major obstacle to the modernization and regeneration of the Ottoman state.¹¹ They did not fare much better in Western historiography. One prominent historian opined that they “had delayed or frustrated the work of [Ottoman] reformers” during the last decades of the empire, and suggested that “in the sociological and political sense” they were “worthy of comparison with the Christian priesthoods.”¹² Another important historian agreed that “as a class, the ulema were conservative and an obstacle to reform, [and that] though there were individual exceptions, [. . . they] knew no other way except that of defending established tradition, [and] thus they opposed innovation.”¹³ Islamist writers, though deprived of any foothold in academia until quite recently, developed a diametrically opposed narrative to the dominant historiography. In publications that were often crude and po-

lemical they depicted the ulema mostly as helpless victims of antireligious forces that rose to dominance in the late Ottoman period and at the helm of the early republic.¹⁴ In a few exceptional cases, Islamist authors did more serious historical work, uncovering archival documents and obscure publications, to buttress their presentation of the late Ottoman ulema as divided into a small group of Freemasons and collaborators and a much larger majority of decent men and principled activists who were targeted and victimized in the early decades of the twentieth century by powerful and oppressive antireligious forces.¹⁵ However, the readership and influence of this type of publications were limited primarily to conservative audiences associated with Islamist movements in Turkey. They found very little traction in academic writings, which through the 1970s were dominated by Kemalist sensibilities and developmentalist assumptions.

More recent studies, particularly since the end of the Cold War, have explored new directions and opened new spaces for nondogmatic reevaluation of late Ottoman times and the early republic. Earlier perceptions and founding myths of the republic have been challenged and prevailing historical narratives have been revised. For example, more nuanced analyses have replaced, at least in academic publications, formerly dominant dichotomous descriptions of a constant struggle between a progressive modernizing vanguard on the one hand and traditional reactionary forces on the other. This development is particularly pertinent to the ulema and their institutions. Important publications in the last two decades have thrown new light on the involvement of ulema in political activities, educational endeavors, and public life in the late Ottoman period.¹⁶ For the most part, however, the religious establishment was only peripheral to the topic of these studies. In Turkey, meanwhile, dozens of books and articles that do concentrate on the ulema and their institutions have been published in recent years, primarily by graduates and faculty of divinity schools. Very few of these authors publish in any language other than Turkish and for the most part they produce works that are limited in their temporal and thematic scope.¹⁷

The late Ottoman ulema, their institutions, and their legacies merit a comprehensive study. Their multifaceted story is an important but under-researched part of the history of the late Ottoman Empire and the early decades of the republic. Their experiences and the challenges they faced have also escaped most general studies on ulema in the modern period.¹⁸ The book concentrates primarily, though not exclusively, on the activities and institutions of ulema in Istanbul, the imperial capital and historical center of Islamic learning since the late fifteenth century. Going beyond dichotomous and moralizing classifications of reformists versus

traditionalists or progressives versus reactionaries, the book discusses how, despite many shared concerns, Ottoman ulema were divided on key issues regarding the future of the state in general and the roles and functions of Islamic institutions in the state in particular. The story of the ulema and their institutions is a tale of realignments and transformations, not of rapid demise, irrelevancy, and inconsequence. The manners in which ulema reacted to changing circumstances, and in turn helped to shape them, created important legacies that have left their mark on modern Turkish history in more than one way. Late Ottoman ulema generally viewed themselves as both agents of change and guardians of tradition. But whether their primary role should be the former or the latter became a major bone of contention among them. In some respects, their experiences and responses mirror similar developments in other contemporaneous Muslim and non-Muslim societies. In other respects, the challenges they faced and their reactions to them were distinct because of the specific political and sociocultural circumstances within which they operated. Their story is an integral part of the history of the formative period of modern Turkey, and its consequences and legacies have continued to inform views of and debates about the relations between religion and state in Turkey to this day.