

WHAT MADE THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT POSSIBLE?

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Abstract

Turkey's most powerful and popular Islamic community, the Fethullah Gülen movement, is also a very moderate one, which embraces liberal democracy and promotes inter-faith tolerance and dialogue. This paper asks what socio-political conditions enabled this movement to emerge, get established and grow as successfully as it has.

The legacy of late Ottoman modernisation, which sought a synthesis of Islamic and modern Western values, assisted the Muslims of Republican Turkey to embrace democracy and establish good relations with the West. Post-war Turkey's peaceful interaction with the West — via free markets and international institutions — must have been a factor. So too it must be relevant that Turkey was never colonised by Western powers or even occupied for a long time (military interventions by the West in other Muslim countries have provoked quite radical, not moderate, Islamic responses).

The paper discusses the historical roots and social dynamics in Turkey that enabled the kind of 'moderate Islam' represented by the Gülen movement. That effort could provide lessons for other Muslim countries. It is all but taken for granted that the Islamic world needs some kind of 'reform'. Élitist and autocratic calls for 'top-down' efforts to reshape Islam notwithstanding, what is really needed is to build the social environment (security, freedom, democracy, economic opportunity) that will enable a new kind of Muslim, who will, eventually, search for new meanings in traditional texts.

Ottoman Modernization Revisited

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 Şerif 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 (Amedî Odası) through which flowed all communication with Western states. The employees of this bureau were now increasingly exposed to information about the major European 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 splendour of Versailles, its organization of leisure activities and in particular the theatre. The precision of the tables of astronomical observatories also impressed them.¹

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 Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) and the type of synthesis between Islam and modernity that was promoted by an intellectual elite between 1908 and 1923.”²

1 Şerif Mardin, “Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes,” *Turkish Studies* 6, (2), Summer 2005, pp. 149-150

2 *Ibid.*, p. 145

Tanzimat and Equal Citizenship

The 18th century discovery of Europe by Ottoman bureaucrats resulted in the famous “Imperial Gulhane 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.³ 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 Roderick H. Davison:

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...⁴

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.⁵

In the 19th 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 . . .

3 Bat Ye’or, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*, (Trans. By Miriam Kochan and David Littman) Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses. 2002

4 Roderick H. Davison, *Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth Century*, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Jul., 1954), pp. 844-864

5 *Ibid.*

6 Selim Deringil, “There Is No Compulsion in Religion”: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839–18561,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (2000), 42: 547-575 Cambridge University Press

7 *Ibid.*

without distinction as to religion.”⁸

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.

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.⁹ Under the auspices of Sultan Abdulhamid II, 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 with the idea of updating the shariah according to “the requirements of the time.”¹⁰

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 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 Middle East, Albert Hourani, called the “liberal age” of the Arab world¹¹ — which was, basically, the Arabic counterpart of Ottoman modernization.

The Two Trends

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 Şükrü Hanioğlu, “was vehemently antireligious, viewing religion as the greatest obstacle to human progress.”¹² 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

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*, p. 189

11 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*, Cambridge University Press, 1983

12 Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 305

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 Fate of Terakkiperver Fırka

When the war was won and the Republic was announced in 1923, the First Group turned into the People’s Party (“Halk Fırkası”), which was directed by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and his closest ally, İsmet 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:

- i. 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.
- ii. The Progressive Party was friendly to religion. Its founding document included the famous Article six, which read, “We are respectful to religious ideas and sentiments.”
- iii. On political issues such as the fate of the Kurds, the Progressive Party was tolerant and liberal. Kazım 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 would not last long. On June 5, 1925 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, Kazım 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.

The Post-1925 Trauma

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.”¹³

13 M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito, “Islam in Turkey: Retreat from the Secular Path?” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, (ed. by M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito) Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. xvi

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.¹⁴ 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 the people, for the people, of 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 (the daily "ezan") 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

¹⁴ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984, pp. 80-84

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.”¹⁵

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 20th 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 centre-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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

The Rise of the Gülen Movement

After the death of Nursi in 1960, his followers (“nurcus”) divided into several camps with differing views on how to interpret his legacy and, also, how to engage with politics. In the 70’s a cleric in Izmir who had been influenced by some of Nursi’s ideas but also who had new approaches of his own, started to attract attention and following. He was Fethullah Gülen, whose popularity and influence would soon exceed those of all other Islamic movements in Turkey. According to Aktay,

Fethullah Hoca, as a preacher famed in İzmir, following the same path of the Nurcu movement in that sense, seems to have been discovered by the state at least since the mid-eighties. He left the mainstream Nurcu movement at the early seventies and began to publish a monthly named, *Sızıntı*. The underlying idea of the name implies that it represents the leakage of the essence of the absolute truth, of the revelation. The major themes in the journal turn around catching the dispatches from the God which is embodied through a striking and mysterious order of the world. Undoubtedly a relevant discourse analysis of the journal may clarify various aspects of the community in terms of also the constitution of the self-identity in relation with the nature, religion and

15 Yasin Aktay, *Body, Text, Identity: The Islamist Discourse Of Authenticity In Modern Turkey*, PhD Thesis, 1997, The Graduate School Of Social Sciences of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara

16 M. Hakan Yavuz, “Islam in the Public Square: The Case of the Nur Movement,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, (ed. by M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito) Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 11

17 Aktay, *Ibid*.

the political body. After leaving the mainstream movement he found an alternative community which depended on his personal charisma achieved by his strong ability in preaching and organizing, and of course, on his deep intelligence.¹⁸

Gülen had a vision that would take him and his followers to a point where no other Muslim community in Turkey even dreamed of. Instead of simply trying to create a limited living space for itself in public life, like many other Islamic groups do, Gülen movement decided to engage with society and create publications and institutions that would appeal to people from all walks of life. Their newspapers and TV channels, such as Zaman or STV, are not in-house community outlets but they speak to the whole society. Their schools, which are famed for their high education quality and moral integrity, have students with diverse backgrounds. Their initiatives such as the Abant Platform or Intercultural Dialogue Platform — which are both supported by the Journalists and Writers Foundation, whose honorary president is Fethullah Gülen — address not sectarian issues, but deal with virtually all social problems of Turkey.

Moreover, since the mid-90's, Gülen movement started to become a global phenomenon. They first started by opening schools in ex-Soviet Republics, which proved to be a very successful enterprise. Soon the schools spread out to four corners of the world, ranging from South Africa to Mongolia, or from Australia to Denmark. Gülen's move to United States in late 90's also contributed to the globalism of the movement. And while the movement was hoping to help changing the world for the better with all these activities, they were also being changed by the world for the better: Their engagement with different cultures, and especially that of the West, helped Gülen's followers to develop a more liberal and cosmopolitan mindset and discourse.

Incorporating Capitalism

Today the Gülen movement represents the most powerful element of the rising “Muslimhood” of Turkey, as sociologist Jenny B. White defines as an alternative to Islamism.¹⁹ This Muslimhood is in favour of democracy, secularity, pluralism and even capitalism — something which even many modern Muslims perceive as alien to Islam.

Some striking examples of the latter phenomenon have emerged in Turkey in the past two decades. Turkey is not the richest country the Islamic world, but it is arguably the most developed. The richest are the oil-rich Arab nations, most of which, despite their petro-dollars, remain socially pre-modern and tribal. Regrettably, oil brings wealth, but it does not modernize. Modernization comes through rationality, which can be achieved only through organization, order, exchange, and risk-taking in pursuit of goals. The late Turgut Özal, one of Turkey's wiser Presidents, once said, “We are lucky that we don't have oil; we have to work hard to make money.”

Özal was a pro-Western politician and a Muslim believer. His revolutionary, Reaganesque reforms during the 1980s transformed the Turkish economy from import subsidization to free markets. In this new setting the conservative Muslim masses of Anatolia have found fertile ground for a socio-economic boom. Thanks to their astounding successes in business, they have been called “Anatolian Tigers.” They constitute a new class that rivals

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jenny B. White, “The End of Islamism? Turkey's Muslimhood Model”, *Modern Muslim Politics*, Robert Hefner, ed., Princeton University Press, 2005

the long-established, privileged, highly secularized and utterly condescending “Istanbul bourgeoisie.”

The European Stability Initiative (ESI), a Berlin-based think tank, conducted an extensive study of the “Anatolian tigers” in 2005. ESI researchers interviewed hundreds of conservative businessmen in the central Anatolian city of Kayseri. They 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.”²⁰

Some of these “Islamic Calvinists”, apparently, are also the followers of Fethullah Gülen.²¹ Gülen movement is well known for its success in business, which create financial support for the movement’s cultural and educational institutions.

This amalgamation of Islamic values with the practical rationality of the free market indeed reminds of the spirit of the real Calvinists, who, according to sociologist Max Weber, spearheaded the rise of capitalism in the West. Interestingly 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.”²²

The rise of an Islamic entrepreneurial class is a remarkable phenomenon, 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 counties such as Malaysia, Islam is being transformed into a religion of the middle class and its rational, independent individuals. And the Gülen movement plays a leading role in this silent yet crucial transformation. “Gülen is the engine behind the construction of a ‘new’ national Islam of Turkey,” argues Hakan Yavuz, “marked by the logic of a market economy and the Ottoman legacy.”²³

The Rediscovery of the West

A related aspect of the new “Muslimhood” in Turkey, and that of the Gülen movement, is its growing advocacy of Western-style democracy. One reason of this phenomenon is a significant discovery that Turkey’s observant Muslims — especially the ones who had a chance to know the West, such as the Gülen movement — had in the past quarter century: that the West is better than the Westernisers.

What this means is that they recognized that Western democracies give their citizens all the

20 European Stability Initiative, *Islamic Calvinists: Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia*, September 19, 2005; http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_69.pdf

21 Following a heated public discussion on the term “Islamic Calvinists” in Turkey, Gülen announced that he does not endorse the term, and, unlike the original Calvinists, he is not seeking a reform in religion. But this seems to be negation of the extravagant meanings that the Turkish media attributed to “Islamic Calvinism,” not the meaning that the ESI report suggested, which is the rise of a business-friendly and dynamic Muslim identity.

22 Sabri Ülgener, *Zihniyet ve Din (Mindset and Religion)*, Derin Yayınları, 2006, pp. 57-64

23 M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Gülen Movement: The Turkish Puritans,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, (ed. by M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito) Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 21

religious freedoms that Turkey has withheld from its own. In fact, no country in the free world has 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 by the secular elite towards observant Muslims.

For many decades, devout Muslims in Turkey have perceived this entire secular 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 Fazıl once put it. Yet, the more they learned about the West, the more they realized that the problem is in Ankara — not in Washington, London, or Brussels. In Europe and North America, one can establish Islamic centres, Sufi clubs, and independent mosques, none of which are allowed in their homeland. It is possible to attend American or European universities with the headscarf, while it is banned by law in Turkey.

All those facts transformed the way Turkish Muslims perceive the West. 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.

In this regard, Gülen's comments about his own discovery of the West, which he made during an interview in 2000, is quite illuminating:

We all change, don't we? There is no escape from change. By visiting the United States and many other European countries, I realized the virtues and the role of religion in these societies. Islam flourishes in America and Europe much better than in many Muslim countries. This means freedom and the rule of law are necessary for personal Islam. Moreover, Islam does not need the state to survive, but rather needs educated and financially rich communities to flourish. In a way, not the state but rather community is needed under a full democratic system.”

The line of reasoning that Gülen articulates — the argument for an Islam which demands a liberal democratic, not Islamic, state — also explains the remarkable alliance in today's Turkey between Muslim conservatives, and especially the Gülen movement, and the secular liberals. Their coalition is in favour of the EU bid and democratization, whereas the nationalist front—which includes die-hard secular Kemalists, ultra-right wing Turkish nationalists, and hardliner Islamists—abhors both of those objectives. It is no accident the daily *Zaman* and its English-language sister publication, *Today's Zaman* — which both belong to the Gülen movement — hosts many liberal columnists.

Conclusion

In today's Turkey the Gülen movement represents an Islam which is liberal and tolerant, which is in favour of the country's EU bid and democratizing reforms. And this means that it is a “modern” movement. Yet this modernity has not been achieved by the authoritarian secularist policies of the state. It has been achieved thanks to Turkey's heritage of Ottoman modernization, engagement with the Western world, and its social progress.

The experience of Turkish Islam also hints us how the much-sought renaissance of the Islamic world will come about: through the flourishing of democracy, freedom and economic opportunity. Only these social dynamics create individuals and communities who are willing to adapt to modernity. On the other hand, if Muslim societies are forced to accept modernity—through, say, secularist tyrannies or Western military interventions—they simply react to it,

and the backlash fuels radicalism.

Just remember the fact that Christianity surpassed its dark ages thanks to its godly—not secular—renovators. Islamic civilization needs to follow a similar route to accomplish its renewal. And the Turkish experience, and in particular the Gülen movement, hints that there are reasons to be hopeful.