What Makes Turkish Islam Unique?

Mustafa Akyol

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

But why is Turkey exceptional? The official Turkish history, into which virtually all Turks have been educated, answers this question by referring to the perceived clean break with 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 regime in Afghanistan had they not been saved by the authoritarian and secularist modernisation project of the Kemalist regime. In other words, to the question ‘Why is Turkey the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world?’, the standard answer is ‘Because Atatürk created it ex nihilo’.

Historians who examine the origin of Turkey with a more critical eye, however, find reasons to think that the creation story should be reversed. It seems that it was in fact the Ottoman legacy that gave rise to both Atatürk and modern Turkey. The Kemalist period was undoubtedly a leap forward in several respects, but it was preceded and made possible by a rich heritage of Ottoman modernisation.

1 Ottoman Modernisation Revisited

To see how this is so, 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 thirteenth century, when the brilliant civilisation of the Arabs was nearly destroyed by one of the most devastating

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1 For a detailed study of the Ottoman political and social heritage of modern Turkey, see Karpat (2001).
conquests ever, the Mongol catastrophe. The shift in world trade routes, from ancient roads through 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 dynasty and especially the subsequent Ottoman dynasty. The Ottoman state extended its borders both towards the West and the East and, in the sixteenth and much of the seventeenth centuries, acted as the world’s foremost superpower.

The political power of the Turks, and their continual interaction with the West, led them to an important insight: they were facing 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 consequent 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 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 splendor of Versailles, its organisation of leisure activities and in particular the theatre. The precision of the tables of astronomical observatories also impressed them. (Mardin, 2005, pp. 149–150)

According to Mardin, such practices helped in the formation of ‘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 a product of the Turkish Republic, as is often thought, but was built on a long process of 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’ (Mardin, 2005, p. 145).

2 Tanzimat and Equal Citizenship

The eighteenth-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 the supremacy of law and modern citizenship to the empire.