The Allure of the West

Kemalism, which has been accepted as official state ideology since the 1930s, represents a watershed moment in Turkish history. Although it fostered a radical displacement of Islamic and Ottoman sources of nationhood from the state structure, Kemalism did not entail a separation between state and religion. Rather, it embodied a specific reconfiguration of the state which allowed it to act with key agency in controlling the production and dissemination of religious knowledge. Religion was to be kept under state control by civil–military bureaucrats who would then inflict the state with a cultural homogeneity achieved through laiklik.

Kemalism personified an understanding of society through laiklik, but it required a shift from a society grounded in faith in the omnipotence of God to one comprising an aggregate of ‘free-willed’ individuals making rational choices. These individuals were expected to rely on scientific reason rather than faith as a means of knowing. This shift in the concept of society expresses the ideological dominance of liberalism found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European social thought (Hawthorn 1976). European liberalism also provided early twentieth-century Kemalism with a cultural schema to reconfigure society through westernization. Kemalist bureaucrats have also cast a shadow over religiously oriented individuals in regard to their cultural suitability for western modernity. This has fragmented society between those who subscribe to Kemalist laiklik and those who advance religious claims and discourses of state making and national culture formation. The Kemalist attempt to reproduce European modernity by fragmenting society continues to frame public life in Turkey, although it has been subject to significant modification.
The Kemalist vision of emulating the political, cultural, economic, and intellectual character of European societies was predicated on ‘hiding God’ in the privacy of the home. The moral stance behind this *Hidden God* (Goldmann 1976) also involved removing God from the public sphere of politics and the state. However, the Kemalist ideal of a liberal society has not proven entirely persuasive. The institutions of Kemalism were not completely successful in expanding the liberal principle of equal rights for everyone in society in all aspects of material and cultural relations. Behind the pretence of ‘emancipating’ citizens from the omnipotence of God in society, Kemalism masked the particularistic interests of a specific class and the domination of a bureaucratic elite. Further, it predisposed individuals and groups to a moral rethinking of social justice, as well as a rethinking of them as victims of Kemalism – which in turn opened them up to what Mike Davis (2001: 20), in a different context, calls ‘unequally endowed groups.’ This moral rethinking of Kemalist ‘injustice’ coincided with the possibility of change in Kemalist patterns. And it is emerging from within a heterogeneous collection of public narratives and explanatory systems rooted in cultural values, images, rituals and normative standards that continue to affect the lifestyle choices and customary practices of many Muslims.

The recent surfacing of political movements around Islamic references is seen by Kemalists as a threat to the integrity of the Turkish state and modern–secular ways of life. However, I believe that Kemalist *laiks* have got it wrong. Rather than being a regressive force moving Turkey towards a theocratic state, Islamic politics aims to rework the thinking and ethos fostered by Kemalism. It entails a change in the Kemalist state to be sure, but without being either against ‘secularism’ or overtly religious in public life.

Key questions arise from this conceptually critical Islamic moral and political rethinking: what kind of Islamic politics is emerging? What does it hope to achieve? Does it aim to cultivate a ‘public ethos of engagement,’ to evoke Connolly (1999: 5), between European and Islamic moral sensibilities and normative patterns? Or, does it constitute an illiberal movement? And how does it interact with conceptions of secular modernity and the rule of state in Turkey?

In overcoming seemingly antithetical formulations, I imagine there may be more to accomplish than simply reproduce ideologies that assert the moral superiority of secular modernity and view Islam as a potential impediment to that morality. A re-examination of Turkish state formation provides a basis for rethinking the intricacy of the discursive links...