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The Present Juncture in the Spiritual Journey of Muslims in Turkey

In this chapter our readers can expect to learn something of the historical, political, psychological, and social environment in which Muslims of Turkey conduct their religious practices. This environment is charged with tension, transition, struggle, and risk, as faithful Muslims seek to discern and obey the will of Allah. Those who wish to reach the heart of the religious practices of Muslims in Turkey should be equipped with a picture of the contemporary religious climate in Turkey, for these practices take place within culture and history.

We see two major trajectories, or streams, or bases for grounding existence that form the religious climate in Turkey. One is the stream of the secular understanding, and the other is the stream of the non-secular understanding. We can also call them the contemporary stream and the historical stream; or the modern stream and the traditional stream. We have chosen these terms with care. Many labels used by observers of the Turkish scene are either hurtful or inaccurate. We are uncomfortable, for instance, with the Islamic/non-Islamic, industrial/agricultural, developed/underdeveloped, progressive/reactionary, up to date/outdated, religious/secular, nonbeliever/believer labels, or other terms which carry pejorative meanings.

Both major streams, or mind sets, or tempers, the secular and the non-secular, can be characterized in terms of how the people of Turkey have responded, and continue to respond, to the power and challenge of global European and American technical cultures. This response to ‘the West’ as a phenomenon has meant that nothing in modern Turkey can be understood or discussed without some reference to the problems involved in the creation of the modern Turkish state: namely, the building up of a secular government and society out of a traditional empire, the construction of modern organizations in continuity with
the past and as a break with the past, and the introduction of new views on religion and its relation with the state. All such questions continue to be living problems in Turkey in need of reconciliation and further treatment.

Let us go back to the time of the height of the Ottoman Empire, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Byzantine capital, Constantinople (now Istanbul), was conquered by the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II in 1453. It subsequently became the seat of the Ottoman Empire. In the continued expansion of that empire, especially under Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (reigned 1520–66), the Ottomans felt supreme. The world was at their feet. Their power was nearly unchallenged. They saw themselves as the self-sufficient overlords of history’s greatest achievements in imperial administration, justice and social order, arts, politics, warfare, and religion. Their self image was one of a great expanding empire, continually reaching out to bring more of the world into its benevolent, sagacious, centralizing orbit of Islamic order and justice. The Ottomans’ goal was to make the word of Allah supreme and to bring order to the world under a caliph who was ‘the shadow of Allah on earth’. Just as the Prophet Muhammad was sent to witness to Allah and to call all people to Allah and the truth, so Muslims were also entrusted with this mission to witness and to call.

This Ottoman self-understanding as the mightiest, most civilized empire on earth, acting to bring Allah’s name and Islamic order to all peoples, eventually suffered assault from two directions. One came from within. As their riches and power increased, the Ottomans turned from being an outward looking, conquering, mobile people with a motivation beyond themselves to being a more sophisticated, settled, luxurious, inward looking people, therefore a people more subject to corruption and ineptitude. The other assault on Ottoman identity came from Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the so-called western countries were pioneering what they have termed the modern world. Europeans were harnessing a growing technology to militarism, an evolving rationalism to economics and administration, and an accelerating expansionism to politics. These dynamics soon put serious questions to the Ottomans.

It was primarily the political administration of the Ottomans, namely the sultan, his courtiers, and his army officers, who became worried by the flourishing western achievements in science, technology, scholarship, power, and politics. Such developments concerned the top Ottoman administrators because military preparedness and effectiveness, aggrandizement of wealth and power, and competent