Umut Azak. *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, xv + 234 pages.

Umut Azak's book convincingly puts the study of public discussions in the Turkish print media as a significant sphere of analysis to address the relation between politics and religion. It offers a detailed descriptive account of selective state policies, public incidents and issues between 1930s and 1960s, as well as public discussions about them in the press. An exposition of newspapers and journals is accompanied by memoirs, parliamentary records, school textbooks on national history, and other primary and secondary sources. With this rich source material, Azak delineates how defenders of Kemalism reproduce—with different articulations at different moments—a "discourse" of fear over a period of three to four decades; how in all these historically distinct moments they cast the incidents and issues in question into the mold of a distinction between good and bad Islam; and how they add the newly made mold to a lineage of selectively read past incidents in order to root the fear historically.

Merely through its detailed narration of public debates around these particular incidents or issues in the print media, this book poses an implicit criticism not only of the by now standard focus on institutions and political parties in studies on politics and religion, but also of the overly concept-driven research on the subject, particularly in American political science scholarship. It is a great example of the power of a detailed account, for after having read the book it is no longer possible to subscribe simply to the often made assertion that "Turkey is a Muslim-majority country," or to the mutually exclusive dichotomy of Kemalism *versus* Islamism so often used as an empirically accurate description of Turkish politics. Simply put, the book conveys the point that the issue is more complicated, and that this distinction hides more than it reveals about the Turkish context. Subscribing to this distinction as an empirical fact, on the one hand, hides another distinction, that of Kemalist good Islam *versus* anti-Kemalist bad Islam, a distinction which Azak's book, with a hermeneutical commitment, utters through the mouths of Kemalist politicians and intellectuals. On the other hand, subscribing to any distinction as a short-hand substitute for thick description completely fails to situate the distinction itself politically, and Azak's book takes a step towards such a situating, at least at the level of public discussion.

However, the empirical core of the book could benefit from a more concise analytical and theoretical framework in order to mark the exact limits of a thick description of public discussion in print media. This is

especially evident in the very short conclusion where Azak ends up only restating the backbone logic found in her detailed accounts. It is possible to give examples from chapters concerning the need for more theoretical, analytical and methodological discussion.

Chapter One focuses on the local, religiously motivated rebellion in 1930, the "Menemen Incident," which resulted in the rebels beheading a military officer. Azak describes how, despite the lack of evidence linking the incident to religious orders planning a mobilization against the regime, the beheaded military officer was turned into a symbol for the fight against reactionary Islam at large (as distinct from good Islam). The Kemalist regime was able to turn the incident into a "commemorated event," as opposed to a "historical event" (p. 22), while at the same time political opposition to the regime was demobilized in general and religious discourse was appropriated by the Kemalists for their own ends. This chapter poses a crucial debate about early Republican historiography with the particular comparison of Islamist and official Kemalist accounts of the "incident"; yet, in building an alternative account, Azak's use of the records of the rebel's court trials added as an appendix to the *Records of the Turkish Grand National Assembly* at the least needs a methodological argument as to how such official sources can be utilized to challenge official historiography.

Chapter Two offers an account of the institutionalization of the Turkish call to prayer in 1932 as part of the Kemalist policy of the Turkification of Islam. Chapter Three focuses on the "heated debate" surrounding the Turkish call to prayer just before the first multi-party elections in 1950, between "Kemalist secularists and conservative nationalists" and their competing claims on "secularism." The use of newspapers, journals, magazines and several documents from state archives is particularly rich in this chapter in laying out the competing claims to "secularism." The author's point that this period is not "a period of decay of Kemalist secularism" or "the victory of *irtica* [reactionary Islam] over the Kemalist regime," but a moment where "secularism was redefined" (p. 84) is not original,[1] but well documented. Yet, Azak does not offer any critical analysis and reflection on the main political distinction of the chapter: "Kemalist secularists and conservative nationalists." And such critical analysis—true to the general thrust of Azak's book—is crucial for pinning down the "political question" at hand in historical context. For instance, most of the "conservative nationalists" to whom Azak refers are ex-"Kemalist secularists." And "the authority on the issue of

1 Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 72-73.

secularism" (p. 76) they "accepted"— namely, Ali Fuad Başgil—is not only an ex-member of the Republican People's Party (RPP), but actually as a member of the RPP penned articles with fascistic tendencies in the 1930s, plagiarizing statements from Benito Mussolini.[2] This is well documented in Parla and Davison, a book to which Azak refers quite often on other occasions. Missing these links becomes even more problematic when Azak only mentions the "fascistic tendencies" (p. 97) of "conservative nationalists." Azak concludes the chapter by elaborating on the "discursive" positioning of the Democrat Party *vis-à-vis* Kemalist secularism and conservative nationalism during the re-institutionalization of the Arabic call to prayer (p. 73). She does not interrogate the contextual political determinants of this "discursive" positioning.

Chapter Four is on the failed assassination attempt against a "secular" public intellectual in 1952. Again, the intellectual in question, Ahmet Emin Yalman, as Azak reminds us, had oscillated politically between supporting the Democrat Party and the Republican People's Party. The chapter documents the very important and often forgotten intertwinement of references to anti-communism and reactionary Islam as a new face of the "discourse of Kemalist secularism"; therefore, she reminds the reader of the impact of the international Cold War context on domestic politics. This focus on the different and new articulation of fear is followed by continuities that Kemalist intellectuals strike with the "Menemen Incident," which Azak argues involves "a politics of memory equating actors of the past and of the present" (p. 86). Yet, the attempt at the end of the chapter to evaluate comparatively an *act* of violence with a religious motive and "the conservative nationalism" of the period, which is mostly presented in the book at the level of oral and written *statements* of its spokespersons, and Azak's remark on "the thin line between violent Islamic reactionism and conservative nationalism" (p. 97) are among many parts of the book that suggest that an explicit discussion of the relation between ideas and action is needed in order to mark the limits of what Azak often calls "discourse" analysis (p. xiii). In the conclusion, for instance Azak's leap from the level of ideas to actions shows itself at a larger scale when she claims that the good and bad Muslim "discourse of Kemalist secularism shaped not only public debates but also the actions of civil society groups, political parties and the state" (p. 176).

Chapter Five is on the articulation of the Kemalist fear concerning a disguised reactionary Islam, materialized in the fear of the Nurcu move-

2 Taha Parla and Andrew Davison, *Corporatist Ideology in Kemalist Turkey: Progress or Order* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 256-257.

ment "creeping" to take over the state, in contrast to the fear regarding a highly visible outburst of violent reactionary Islam of the previous chapter. Here the competing claims on "secularism" by the RPP and DP introduced in the previous chapter are followed through "the different attitudes taken by the RPP and the DP towards Said Nursi." Azak claims that these different attitudes "reflected the deep-seated differences in their understanding of secularism" (p. 131). "Both groups manipulated the past," so Azak argues, either to present him as the last link of a historical chain of events constitutive of reactionary Islam, and hence "delegitimize" him, in the case of RPP, or "to vindicate him as a poor old man and a real Turk" (131) in the case of the DP. "It was this politics of memory," Azak concludes, "which shaped their different discourses of secularism" (p. 131). The relation between "different attitudes," "deep-seated differences in their understanding of secularism," "different discourses of secularism," and "politics of memory" and, in the final analysis, the book's elusiveness on which one constitutes the other become quite visible in this chapter. Besides this elusiveness, simpler hypotheses—such as the "struggle for votes," which can mark the conflict of interest between the RPP and DP—are alluded to only in passing (p. 121). In other words, possible contextually determined interest-based explanations of variations in different claims on secularism are passed over, and the author in search of a "politics of memory" seats some ideas deeper than others.

An emphasis on the "politics of memory" (p. 18) is the major candidate for the methodological, and the general theoretical, originality that the book claims for itself. Yet, it is not clear why the reader should find a selective construction of the past theoretically significant, unless the selectiveness is situated in a context, or its intertwinement with other discourses (such as anti-communism) underlined by the author theorized more systematically in order to flesh out empirically a concept of the "political." For as it is, the "selectiveness" of memory is the only qualification offered for the memory's political nature.

The author explicitly follows two different routes to situate her account. The first is to situate it in the continuing relevance of the phenomenon itself. In the introduction and the conclusion, Azak stretches the conclusions of her event analysis on "good *versus* bad Islam," "politics of memory," and "fear" to strike parallels with events and movements from the recent decade. However, these cannot go beyond marking the contemporary significance of the work, for the continuity or discontinuity with the events she chooses to analyze between 1930s and 1960s are not rendered an explicit object of study. Moreover, Azak's claim that recent social movements in defense of Kemalism often staged at the tomb

https://doi.org/10.1017/S089663460000162X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Atatürk are expressions of the "fear of 'reactionary Islam'" internalized by large segments of society would require more than "discourse" analysis to demonstrate—particularly, the complicated question of "internalization."

The place of the references to recent events and movements aside, even for the time-periods for which extensive documentation is offered, the book is at the very least begging for a theory of media and politics. It needs such a theoretical and concomitant analytical framework to be able to mark the limits and hence the precise theoretical significance of an analysis of discussions in the "print media." Such a theory is needed in order to go beyond the thick and unconvincing assumption stated early in the book; that is, the "printed press, as a key mediator between the elite and the masses, provided the political leaders and intellectuals with the platform where they could convey, negotiate and fix the meaning of secularism" (p. 19). This is a quite problematic assumption, because according to the 1935 census 81.3 percent of the population was illiterate (92 percent of women) and in the 1965 census so was still more than half of the population (53.7 percent, and 72.4 percent of women).[3] This is not to forget that Azak makes no inquiry into the circulation of the print media in question.

The second explicit route is to situate the account in contemporary debates on politics and religion. One such debate that the author chooses is the question of whether secularism can travel to contexts beyond its origin; more particularly with regard to the literature on the Middle East, whether secularism is alien to the Middle East. Azak underlines that this question is ahistorical, given the Late Ottoman history of secularizing reforms and the public debates over these reforms seeking venues of compatibility between modernity and Islam, as well as the Turkish Republic's principle and practice of *laiklik* (laicism). And when Azak begins to address, albeit briefly, the more particular literature on Turkey, the reader learns that the point on the defenders of Kemalism mobilizing a distinction between good and bad, pure and impure Islam has already been underlined by previous research, although through different empirical examples than what Azak offers. When she addresses the debate on hermeneutics, the author follows some and dismisses other methodological caveats of this school, without giving sufficient reason. On the one hand, Azak follows a hermeneutical approach by offering a relatively thick description and spends considerable time with the self-presentation of the actors; on the other hand, she simply "prefer[s] to

3 *Statistical Indicators 1923-2008*, (Ankara: Turkish Statistical Institute, Printing Division, 2009), 19.

use the more general term of 'secularism'" rather than "*laiklik*" or "laicism," instead of explicating and answering to the precise debate in question. She breaks with a hermeneutical approach when she starts making overarching statements, such as Kemalism "entailed democratization" (p. 113)—a statement which fits better with the modernist historiography of Niyazi Berkes, rather than a hermeneutical approach—with one simple methodological caveat that such a position carries the burden of proof for why democracy was then not one of the six arrows. But even more problematic is the fact that she quotes from Merriam-Webster the definition of secularism, an authoritative move on definitions which completely contradicts her claim to follow "Davison's [hermeneutical] perspective" (p. 8). A more in-depth focus on one of the two debates that Azak chooses to briefly map out in the introduction, or else on the crossing of the theoretical literature on secularism and nationalism are some possible routes for theoretically situating better the rich empirical evidence. After all, the detailed description in the book convincingly puts the process of nationalization as an indispensible variable in studying struggles over, around and through religion.

Murat Akan
Boğaziçi University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S089663460000162X Published online by Cambridge University Press