

# Islamist Critique in Modern Turkey: Hermeneutics, Tradition, Genealogy

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There is a difference between being a traditionalist, in a negative sense, and having a tradition, in a positive one. Those who do not in this sense have a tradition will find it impossible to enter into the field of reevaluation and reinterpretation.

——— Mehmet Görmez<sup>1</sup>

The need is felt to have a constructive reflection making it possible to open the paths to an Islamic way of thinking better adapted to the historical responsibilities imposed by the confrontation with a West which is always motivated by a desire for power. . . . Today a way of thinking which aspires to the qualification Islamic must be first of all and with all necessary rigor a historian's way of thinking. It has been so since the death of the Prophet.

——— Mohammed Arkoun<sup>2</sup>

## MODERNITY, ISLAM AND MUSLIM CRITICISM IN TURKEY

What is the status of Islamic traditions of discourse and practice in Turkey as it is ever more self-consciously heir to the Islamic heritage of the Ottoman Empire, and yet has seen such dramatic social, economic, and political transformation during the last two centuries? In recent years a considerable and ever-increasing proportion of scholarly and popular effort has been directed on the part of self-identifying Islamist (*İslâmcı*)<sup>3</sup> writers in Turkey toward addressing

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<sup>1</sup> Görmez 1997:2. This is a textbook, and won the Turkish Religious Foundation (Türk Diyanet Vakfı) prize for Islamic research. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Arkoun 1984: 94. Unfortunately, Arkoun is not in a position to apply his 'historicizing' mode to his own treatment of Turkey, which takes Kemalism as merely an instance of 'cultural alienation,' akin to colonialism, leading one to suppose that he is entirely unfamiliar with the late Ottoman experience of incremental structural transformations of regimes of knowledge and power, and their reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Modern Turkish spelling for Turkish, Ottoman, and Arabic terms is used throughout, except

these issues by way of genealogies of contemporary social forms and practices—critical histories of the present. Simultaneously, methodological debates about the nature of sources and interpretation have begun to appear with increasing regularity in monographs, journals, and even dailies. These two concerns with the status of the present and correct method are not solely the concern of Islamist writers in Turkey; indeed, they are arguably the prevailing mode of history and social science writing in Turkey today. As we shall see, informing both of these currents is an interrogation of the grounds from which authoritative, normative discourses on Islamic practice can be elaborated in the wake of empire and sovereign reform on the near-margin of industrial capitalism. At stake are not only discourses, or ‘representations’ of Islamic tradition. Like other traditions, central to Islam is the discursive elaboration of normative judgments about correct practice; indeed, these discursive elaborations *are* important Islamic practices.<sup>4</sup> The critical work currently flourishing in Turkey is thus conceived by its practitioners as an important form of contribution to the elaboration of Islamic traditions and entails important diagnoses of the status of enabling conditions for Islamic practice in the contemporary world. This article argues that attending to these interrogations indicates how the study of changes in Islamic discourse and practice in Turkey has profound implications for the issues of power and agency in modernity and Islam more broadly. Particularly in the context of Turkey’s intensified juridical, economic, and political restructuring in dialogue with the European Community, an understanding of these currents in the Islamic discursive culture of Turkey offers insight into the oft-commented but poorly understood structure of the relationship between Turkey, Europe, and modernity.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1990s it was clear from my discussions with students and faculty at the theology (*ilahiyat*) faculties in Istanbul and regional Anatolian universities that among advanced students of Islamic studies in Turkey a searching interrogation of the relationship between the Republican and Ottoman periods and the status of Islam in each is underway. The authors whose works will be

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where relatively familiar in English (e.g. *hadith* rather than *hadis*). On openly observant Muslim intellectuals in Turkey since the 1970s see the seminal articles by Michael Meeker (1991; 1994).

<sup>4</sup> On Islam as a discursive tradition see Asad 1986; see also MacIntyre (1984) on whom Asad draws in formulating this conceptualization of tradition as an evolving set of discourses and practices structured around the definition and cultivation of certain virtues.

<sup>5</sup> The motivations behind observant Muslims’ desire to enter the European Union are generally centered on a sense that it will benefit the economy, and entail a strengthening of civil rights and a liberalization of policies with regards to civic association, family, and religious practice, which are felt to be more restrictive in Turkey than in the European Union. It had been predicted for some time that hesitation regarding wide-ranging constitutional reform away from the existing statist one that emerged from the 1980 coup (essentially structured around the defense of the state) toward a constitution structured around civil rights and the protection of citizens, would come from the military. This is paradoxical, given the military’s historical role as a force of integration into a liberal, humanist West. Such hesitations indeed duly materialized as negotiations advanced in 2002, when it became clear that it was the military that is most cautious on the topic of European Union integration, and not the vast majority of the country’s observant and outwardly pious citizens.

discussed here, İsmail Kara and Dücane Cündioğlu, are both prominent within the community of Islamist scholars and ‘researcher-writers’ in Turkey, and are widely known through their journalistic activities, writing columns in dailies and weeklies, editorial work at publishing houses, and scholarly monographs. Characteristic of them and many Turkish Islamists is that they do not write explicitly from the position of authoritative interpreters of scripture; this work is left to professors in theology departments and to *imams* (prayer leaders) and *hatibs* (preachers). Rather, these writers inquire—often implicitly—on one hand as to what have been the historical processes through which certain people have been in a position to articulate authoritative knowledge of Islamic traditions?<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the reader of journals and monographs dealing with Islamic subjects will note a pervasive interest in questions of correct method in the interpretation of the textual sources of Islamic traditions, the Quran and *hadith* (authoritative accounts of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed), with a marked sensitivity to the political and ethical relevance of epistemological issues. An adequate conceptualization of these currents goes a long way toward explaining the explosion of scholarly and popular interest in Ottoman history and Islamic topics in Turkey, for I would submit that the prevailing mode of social critique in the country is critical interrogation of the grounds from which one addresses oneself to the past, what such an inquiry makes of our inhabitations of the present, and the available methods for doing so.<sup>7</sup>

With a population of approximately sixty-seven million, Turkey is one of the world’s most populous Muslim-majority countries<sup>8</sup> and is heir to the institutional structures and administrative experience and apparatus of the longest-lived and most powerful Muslim polity the world has seen.<sup>9</sup> Yet its Islamic institutions—and its traditions of Islamic discourse in particular—have been overlooked in much of the recent theoretical discussion of the nature of the relationship between Islam and modernity, and they remain relatively unfamiliar to those otherwise knowledgeable about the Muslim world.<sup>10</sup> Alongside a lack of the language skills necessary to attend to this Turkish production, I would

<sup>6</sup> On authority as a modality of power (distinct from coercion and persuasion) see Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” in Arendt 1968.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting in this connection that many of Turkey’s most accomplished historians began their careers in social sciences: Şerif Mardin (trained in political science), Çağlar Keyder (sociology), Şevket Pamuk (economics), and Tarık Zafer Tunaya (law) come readily to mind. In other words, I am arguing that one of the most important modes of social critique in Turkey is interrogation of the status of the present.

<sup>8</sup> A recent, carefully conducted nation-wide survey found that 97 percent of the population considers itself to be Muslim (Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See Zürcher 1994 for an account of the late Ottoman Empire and early Republic, with special attention to the transitional period. On the Ottomans vis-à-vis other Muslim empires see Hodgson (1974:99–133).

<sup>10</sup> For example, a recent volume of writings by Muslim scholars, edited by prominent Western academics and published by a prestigious press, does not include a single writer from Turkey (Esposito and Voll 2001).

argue that this lack of interest is based on conceptualizations of the scope and nature of Islamic traditions in recent centuries and their relationship to modernity that are in need of profound reformulation in light of the Ottoman and Turkish experience.<sup>11</sup>

#### POWER AND ISLAMIC TRADITION ON THE MARGIN OF EUROPE

Recent discussions of power and agency beyond the heartland of industrial capitalism have tended to be posed, often implicitly, in terms of the cultural politics of post-coloniality.<sup>12</sup> Such a formulation, however, elides the fact that in the Ottoman and Turkish context knowledge does not cleave into a ‘traditional’ regime, constituted as such by distinction from a newly imposed colonial regime of knowledge and power structured around a redoubled rationalization of administration and normalization of the objects of governance—that assemblage Foucault (1991) referred to as governmentality. For governmentality in the Ottoman empire (particularly the core lands of the Balkans and western Anatolia) was not a colonial project, but rather a sovereign Ottoman one beginning in the eighteenth century, recalling that these areas were never colonized and the Ottoman bureaucracy never ceased to function as a sovereign state.<sup>13</sup> The history of the late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey today is effectively an extended and ongoing experiment in the chain of events entailed by this engagement of a sovereign Muslim polity with the specifically modern forms of power and their attendant modes of subjection.<sup>14</sup> The sphere of the religious did come to be increasingly constituted as such in relation to the emergence of this governmentality, as new forms of discipline and governance were instituted.<sup>15</sup> The question, then, is how to adequately conceptualize criteria of continuity with the past which have been proposed as crucial for constituting resources for agency within Islam as a discursive tradition, given this genealogy?<sup>16</sup> This, as we will see, is precisely the problem—the politics of continuity in Islamic traditions of discourse and practice—an increasingly wide circle of Islamists in Turkey are posing.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Silverstein 2003 for an extended discussion.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the essays in Mitchell 2000.

<sup>13</sup> On the genealogy of institutional reform and its relation to Ottoman and Turkish Islamic traditions see Silverstein 2003. On the culture of the late Ottoman bureaucracy see Findley 1989.

<sup>14</sup> See Foucault 1978 and Butler 1997 for discussion of these forms and modes.

<sup>15</sup> See Chambers 1972 and Fortna 2002 on the redistribution of prestige among Ottoman institutions and the structural transformation of their scope and function.

<sup>16</sup> On continuity in tradition as a resource for agency see Asad 1987. The stakes are indeed very high, for, as Hirschkind (2001) has recently shown in his work with Egyptian activists, attempts to legitimate certain practices (and censure others) may be linked to an argument about the specifically Islamic quality of sentiments associated with them. It is precisely the nature of the grounds and conditions of possibility of such sentiments (e.g., their continuity over recent centuries) that the work discussed here is putting in question (which is not to say necessarily disavowing).

<sup>17</sup> On the centrality of past precedent in the normative discourses of correct practice as defining characteristics of Islamic (and other) traditions, see Asad 1986. See Meeker’s recent study for a

What in this context are the criteria of continuity according to which one might arrive at definitions of Islamic traditions? A widening circle of thinkers and writers in Turkey who consider themselves to be working from within the traditions have arrived at a diagnosis that the answers to these questions are not simple or obvious. It is precisely the relationship between the inside and outside of the Islamic tradition that is being problematized by a significant number of writers in Turkey who refer to themselves as Islamist, or religiously conservative (*dindar; muhafazakâr*), as they engage in the endeavor to interpret the status of the present and clarify methods of textual exegesis through which one relates to the canonical sources. Moreover, many Turks feel that history has positioned them to confront these issues in a particularly poignant way, issues which are not only crucial for Turkish Muslims, but for all Muslims, given the world we live in with imbalances of global relations of power and large Muslim communities living as minorities among non-Muslims. In formulating their efforts in this way, scholars in Turkey are elaborating contributions to Islamic traditions the status of which neither Western social science nor large parts of populations in other parts of the Muslim world seem able to recognize.

Many of those in Turkey who consider their work to be contributions to Islamic traditions see themselves as part of and as debating from within what is called in Turkey Islamism (*İslâmcılık*). İsmail Kara provides a definition of Islamism:<sup>18</sup>

Islamism can be described as a movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that would make Islam as a whole (belief, worship, ethics, philosophy, politics, law, education) dominant 'again,' and through rational methods would rescue Muslims and the Islamic world from Western colonialism and imperialism, tyrannical leaders, slavery, imitation, and superstition. It includes a whole range of particularly eclectic, activist and modernist approaches to political, intellectual and scholarly work, research, proposals and solutions in an effort to civilize, unify, and develop. In the Islamic world terms and expressions such as *tecdid, ıslah, ittihad-i İslam* (usually translating 'Pan-Islamism'), and *ihya*, have been employed to refer to Islamism, while in the West such terms as 'Pan-Islamism' and, especially in more recent works, 'modern Islam,' 'contemporary Islamic thought,' and 'reformist thought in Islam,' have been used. . . . In this sense then the Islamist movement that emerged in the nineteenth century, for all that it professed an emphasis on returning to the sources, generally remained far from a thorough reform and renewal, and in fact did not even try to carry it out. Since [Islamists] were after emancipation, development, power and control, rather than looking to the past it was much

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masterful and subtle account of the Ottoman legacy in Republican Turkish social and political forms (2002).

<sup>18</sup> As this definition represents an elaboration of the ground from which many Islamists in Turkey consider themselves to be working, I have quoted it at length. I will quote rather extended passages from the works of the writers discussed, to convey a sense of the discursive style of the writing and the concepts they use. Also, to the best of my knowledge, none of either Kara's or Cüendioğlu's work has appeared in English, so it seemed that translating selections for a wider audience was desirable in itself. On the emergence of ideology in the Ottoman Middle East see Findley 1982.

more attractive to think of the future and find urgent solutions to the pressing problems of the day (Kara 1997:16–18).

Ottoman Muslim discussions and debates about correct practice were closely linked to articulations of specific proposals about how to reverse the Empire's increasingly alarming military, diplomatic, and economic setbacks, and specifically to the changing context of social, political, and economic institutions and practices in which these discourses were elaborated. While Kara is brushing broad strokes here—assimilating, for instance, *ıslah*, 'Islamic modernism' and pan-Islamism—he is aware of the different registers on which these various currents operated, and wants to draw attention to the context of power in which they unfolded.<sup>19</sup> For Ottomans, these were not merely epistemological or identity issues (though they eventually became these as well); Muslim territories were being lost to non-Muslims, and waves of hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees from the Balkans and Caucasus were pouring into the remaining Ottoman territories in the face of violent attacks on their life and property; the very survival of Muslim communities, including those in Istanbul, was at stake.

Herein lies an important difference in emphasis and accent between Ottoman Islamists close to the capital and those writing 'in the provinces' like Egypt and in India. Questions of the appropriate attitude to hold toward Islamic traditions—renewal? reform? reevaluation and reinterpretation of the sources?—tended to be intimately tied, in the same text, to pragmatic issues of governance of a multi-confessional empire faced with increasingly dire political, military and economic pressure from Christians to the north and west, amounting to discord and disintegration (*tefrika*). These challenges were recognized by all classes of Muslim Ottomans as the most important ones the state faced, which explains some of the differences in theme, tone, and emphasis between figures like Jemal ad-din Afghani and Mohammad ʿAbduh on one hand, and the Ottomans Mehmet Akif and Said Halim Pasha on the other. Current work by Turkish Islamists similarly tends to foreground the socio-political effects and conditions of possibility of scholarly and intellectual efforts, highlighting the direct connection between such efforts and the social contexts in which they unfold. As such, this kind of scholarly endeavor is conceived by its practitioners as an important form of contribution to Islamic traditions, inspired by the work of earlier thinkers and writers living in turbulent times like our own.

#### THE MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL AND ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN TURKEY

This article looks at the work of two scholars, which is illustrative of important features of the structure and mode of Islamist scholarly culture in Turkey to-

<sup>19</sup> On Islamism and Muslim modernism see Hourani 1983; on the influential Afghani see Keddie 1983.

day: İsmail Kara and Dücan Cündioğlu. Both Kara and Cündioğlu are less known inside and outside Turkey than figures like Ali Bulaç, İsmet Özel, and Rasim Özdenören.<sup>20</sup> As has been noted for other self-identifying Muslim intellectuals (*aydın*) in Turkey, neither would be considered to be *ulema* in a classic sense; neither has received any training in a *medrese*. Nor are they *imams*; that is, they are not, by vocation, among those who lead prayers in mosques (state bureaucrats in Turkey), although Kara had much the same education prior to his graduate studies that a better educated *imam* would have.

As there are no Islamic courts and no sphere in which Islamic law in contrast to secular civil law has jurisdiction in Turkey, the official, state outlets for 'religious work' are *imam* positions; a limited number of administrative positions within the Directorate of Religious Affairs, including the position of *müftü* for each *il* (province) and *ilçe* (county) (which positions are not generally occupied by figures prominent in research); teachers of religion and morals (*din ve ahlak*) in elementary and high schools; and academic positions in universities, in either theology or other social science, history, or literature departments. In Turkey, publishing monographs and journals is, and has been for decades, one of the most important outlets for Islamic scholarship, alongside contributions to dailies.

Scholarly activity and publication on Islamic subjects has generally increased over the course of the Republican period, but very unevenly and depending very much on the socio-political climate in the country. It cannot be said that Islam ever ceased altogether to be the object of serious scholarly activity in Turkey after the establishment of the Republic in 1923, but from 1924 to 1950 very few publications were produced that dealt explicitly with Islam. The few books dealing with Islam that were published during this period were all official publications of the Ministry for Religious Affairs (Diyaret İşleri Reisliği), Directorate of Foundations (Evkaf Umum Müdürlüğü), Ministry of Education (Maarif Vekaleti), or the Faculty of Law (Hukuk Fakültesi) (Kara 1985). Since the onset of multi-party politics in 1946 and the successive governments of the Democrat Party in the 1950s, publishing and scholarly work on Islamic topics have increased considerably. The military coup of 1980 ushered in an officially sponsored policy of 'synthesis' of Turkish and Islamic culture as national identity, under the tutelage of general-cum-president Kenan Evren—the height of irony in the eyes of many secular, liberal Turks, given the military's staunch secularism. The aim was to discourage leftist currents in social and political life, and to co-opt Islamic discourse and re-exert an already near total control of religious institutions. These state efforts were by all accounts largely successful. The official nod sparked a renewed interest in things Ottoman and Islamic in the country, interests which had, it must be said, been

<sup>20</sup> For interpretive essays on the works of these and other writers and their significance in Republican Turkey see the articles by Meeker (1991; 1994) and the works cited therein.



on the rise since the late 1960s. But until 1980 a very large proportion of the books and compilations on Islamic topics published in Turkey were translations, especially of work by Syrian and Egyptian members of the Muslim Brothers, Indian and Pakistani writers associated with Jemaati-i Islami and Navdatu'l-Ulema, and Muslim intellectuals trained in Europe (Kara 1985:156–57). Currently, scholarship on Islamic history, doctrine, and practice is flourishing in Turkey, including editions of original archival manuscripts, historical monographs, textbooks on topics like methodology in Islamic law (*usul ul-fiqh*), theology (*kelam*), *hadith*, and Quranic exegesis and commentary (*tefsir*).

Kara evaluates the meager output of publications in early Republican Turkey on Islamic topics:

This situation would seem to be natural in a country that experienced a fairly long suspension of its religious life, culture and institutions. However, it does not appear natural that the important accumulation existing from pre-Republican Turkey [sic] would be ignored. It certainly is striking that there would be no interest in the thought and works of scholars such as İzmirli İsmail Hakkı, Şehbenderzâde Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi, Ferit Kam, Mehmet Ali Aynî, İsmail Fenni Ertuğrul, Seyyid Bey, Mehmet Zihni Efendi, and Mahmud Esad Seydişehri on such topics as Islamic philosophy, *kelam*, Sufism, philosophy, *fiqh*, *usul-ul fiqh*, Islamic history, contemporary Islamic issues, the state and civilization, etcetera, works which are still of great value today and which are of a higher quality than those that were translated; *nor was there an attempt to continue where these writers had left off* (Kara 1985:157, my emphasis).

This evaluation is significant. Many Islamist writers in Turkey today intend their work to be a continuation of the project of modernist Islamic critique that these scholars active at the demise of the Ottoman empire were engaged in, and they do so precisely by consciously situating themselves among these late Ottoman figures, by reviving interest in them, and by studying their work and publishing editions of it. These writers are fully conscious that these late Ottoman writers were deeply influenced by their own social and political environment, and that the influence of contemporary events—not least the Empire's weakened position vis-à-vis western Europe and the influence of western European intellectual currents—can be seen in the work of every one of them. No do they avoid this recognition, bemoan it, or try to belittle it.

#### İSMAIL KARA: HISTORY AS CRITIQUE

İsmail Kara graduated from an *imam-hatip* high school in 1973, then from the short-lived but by all accounts quite productive Advanced Islamic Institute (Yüksek İslâm Enstitüsü)<sup>21</sup> in 1977, and finally from the history department of the faculty of literature at Istanbul University in 1986. In 1993 Kara completed his doctorate in political science, and he is currently on the Theology Faculty of Marmara University in Istanbul, the country's most prestigious institu-

<sup>21</sup> These institutes were integrated into universities in their respective cities as Faculties of Theology.



tion of Islamic learning.<sup>22</sup> He has also been an affiliated fellow of the Islamic Research Center (İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi) in Istanbul. The center is not directly connected to the Directorate of Religious Affairs or any other branch of the state, but is rather based on a private foundation, Diyanet Vakfı, the ‘Foundation for Religion.’ It has been the institutional base for many of the country’s most serious scholars of Islam since the mid-1990s.

Best known for his three edited volumes of *Islamist Thought in Turkey*, Kara is currently one of the country’s most sophisticated and well-respected scholars and historians of late Ottoman and Republican religious institutions and practices, and is invited to contribute chapters and articles on late Ottoman and Republican Islamic institutions to encyclopedia and volumes edited by solidly secularist, and internationally reputed, academics. For a country like Turkey, in which the social history of the end of the empire and establishment of the Republic has been carefully forgotten, the publication of the three volumes of transliterations and translations into modern Turkish (from Ottoman and Arabic) of a variety of genres of writings, including newspaper and scholarly journal articles, pamphlets, lectures, and book sections, was unmistakably an intervention in the politics of Turkish historiography. The work has become the obligatory starting point for those studying Islam in the late empire and Republic.

#### TRADITION AND AGENCY IN THE LEGACY OF OTTOMAN GOVERNMENTALITY

In the present world, then, and specifically in the context of the last century in Turkey, what would ‘renewal of Islam from within’ mean? This would appear to be the central issue for a great many Islamists in Turkey, for they feel that historical circumstances have put them in a position to appreciate particularly acutely the problematic nature of this question. What constitutes continuity in Islamic traditions, what is the inside of the tradition, and what the outside?

On the one hand, the possibility of renewal from within has been an indication of self-sufficiency, on the other it was a result of it. However, Islamists—perhaps with good reason—lost this faith in their self-sufficiency. . . . Practically the entire Muslim world was seriously shaken by military failure in the face of the West, and, linked to this, social unrest became widespread. With the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 the Ottoman state was faced with a heavy defeat; in 1757 Bengal came under English rule; in 1798 Napoleon occupied Egypt; in 1852 the entire Indo-Pakistani subcontinent came under English protection and for the first time in India Western laws began to be applied to Muslims. From 1830 to 1857 France finalized its occupation of Algeria, and in 1881 entered Tunisia. And the Ottoman state, of its own accord and under the influence of French law, in 1850 reorganized its commercial law and its criminal law in 1858; in 1882 England entered Egypt . . .” (Kara 1997:19–20).

<sup>22</sup> According to friends both studying there and elsewhere, the scores necessary on the centralized university entrance examination to enter Marmara Theology would also permit entry to many departments at Boğaziçi and Middle East Technical, generally seen as the country’s top institutions.

In the Ottoman context, Kara wants to clarify, the issues surrounding the empire's relations with polities to the north and west did not initially or even primarily present themselves as ones of identity or of what does or does not constitute the Islamic tradition; official Ottoman discourse and practice were, in their own eyes, by definition Islamic. The issues were ones of brute military and commercial domination. Moves made to strengthen the empire's hand were undertaken of its own accord. What Kara is referring to here are implications of the point raised above that in the Ottoman context governmentality—understood as the rationalization of administration and normalization of objects of governance—was not a colonial project, it was a sovereign Ottoman one. The issues of modernity and continuity in tradition thus cannot be exhausted through a discussion of post-coloniality, at least not with respect to the situation in Turkey. This would explain why there has been no general interest among Islamist writers in Turkey with the literature on the post-colonial condition.

#### IDENTITY AND GROUND: THE STATUS OF THE TURKISH PRESENT

Much Islamist writing in Turkey today departs from a diagnosis of a problematic present, and the most common interpretation that one encounters in these works is that the problem is one of identity; Turks do not know who they are. Or, what amounts to the same thing, they think they are other than their 'real' selves. That real self is, in its broadest outlines, Muslim and Turkish. The question then becomes, What does it mean to be a Muslim Turk? If one looks to the self-appointed Turkish intellectuals for answers, Kara claims, one is confronted with more structural ambiguity: "The ground [*zemin*] from which the intellectual emerged is in the West. This is the issue. The intellectual is a rupture, it is a question of this rupture remaking itself. According to what should this be done? According to one's own ground [*kendi toprağına göre*]. And we [Islamists] mean to contribute to this construction [*işte biz bu inşaya varız*]" (2001).

Ground and center are key notions for many Islamists writing in Turkey, expressing a desire to establish a legitimate foundation for Turkish Muslim identity.<sup>23</sup> For many Islamists, there is indeed an authentic Turkish identity; in their view it is simply the one that emerges when one attends to the historical threads that have gone into making Turks what they are. Attempts to obscure this are politically motivated mythology, and are to be denounced both because they are false according to criteria of evidence—hence any historian with a conscience should denounce them—and moreover, Islamists point out, the ideology in the name of which such attempts have been made is secular nationalism, which is both a foreign importation and a straying from the path of God (introducing

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Kara has recently taken to using the term '*toprak*,' literally soil or earth (rather than the more abstract '*yer*', place) to refer to the ground from which one speaks, thereby incorporating organic associations into the terminology of identity.

strife and discord among Muslims who should be unified as a political and ethical community). The effect of such moves is a denial of the essential self:

Along with its history of modernization, Turkey thought it would exist by ceasing to mentally be itself. And this process continues today, so much so that it has even infected the Islamist movement, both in the past and today. In fact, compared to the older one the current infection is more serious. But the historical experience of humanity reveals that no nation, no polity on earth can exist if it ceases to be itself [*kendisi olmaktan çıkarak varolamaz*]. It can change, it can carry out revolutions, but in the end it is still itself. If one is to speak of intellectual betrayal in Turkey, it should be sought in intellectuals, who ought to be striving to recognize their own ground [*bastığı topraklar*], the nature of that ground in all its strengths and weaknesses, but instead prefer to soar in other skies (Kara 2001).

The work of many Islamist intellectuals in Turkey today represents in effect an attempt to elaborate an analytic framework adequate to the task of identifying the issues involved for those who are trying to live their lives *as Muslims* in Turkey. Clearly, one of the major concerns of Islamists in Turkey is authenticity, the authenticity of cultural identity. What is perhaps characteristically Turkish is the way these questions have come to be asked: What is the status of the work we are doing, as Muslims, in Turkey today? What has been the effect of the history of the past century on the ground from which one might speak and act, as Muslims? Do we know where we stand? The key to an awareness of where one is standing is knowing the history that has constituted one institutionally and discursively. Knowledge of this history, according to many Islamists, is both a necessary condition for authentic continuity in Islamic identity and practice, and in a very poorly developed state in Turkey, among all Turkish intellectuals:

We need to be clear about the present-day situation of Turkish intellectuals in order to be able to speak of Islamist intellectuals as an important part of them. In the first place, those we call intellectuals should have a very strong connection to historical experience. He or she will be in and of change and renewal—that is, history. Secondly, his or her connection to present-day problems will be strong. If you only have one of these, it means one wing of the intellectual is missing. . . . And third, in connection to the present, there should be a future-oriented effort to interpret and pry the gates open. . . . Today, those walking around with the title Islamist intellectual are people who, forget long-term historical experience, do not even give importance to their own fifteen to twenty years of experience and wish to forget it or make it forgotten. I think we can safely say that we have serious doubts about their information on the present, about their ability to understand and their level of interpretation (Kara 2001).

Kara is referring here to the institutionalized ‘forgetting’ that many commentators have identified as the condition for being in the Kemalist present, a forgetting mainly of the heterogeneous structure (e.g. linguistic, ethnic, religious) of Ottoman-Turkish society and history that belies the ideologies of the nation-state. More troubling to Islamists, however, is the effect of this ‘forgetting’ on the ethical grounds of discourse and practices through which Turks constitute themselves:

Naturally, Turkey occupies a place in the world we live in. As a result of this, if Islamists are a distinct group of course they will speak about democracy, human rights, and freedom, but what we need to look at is this: When these words are pronounced in Turkey, do we or do we not have any chance of understanding them just by taking them at face value [*bakarak*]? This is the issue. Just because someone stands up and starts speaking like someone in Paris, London, or New York, this is in my opinion not at all an important event. This is simply a way of thinking and speaking that carries no ethical/moral [*ahlakî*] or intellectual [*fikrî*] responsibility. However, when a person speaks in relation to the center [*merkez*] about democracy and human rights we will know that this person is speaking 'from somewhere' [*bir yerden konuşuyor*]. Other manners of speaking may be politically useful, may even be appropriate as a political trick, but we certainly do not need to ascribe any special importance to them (Kara 2001: 7).

In this passage, Kara lays out a number of important points. First, no one should be surprised if Muslims are talking about democracy and freedom; everyone in the world is. However, one cannot understand the significance of a certain discourse just by taking it at face value and interpreting its content. What is important to know is the structural significance of a given discourse being spoken in Turkey; what projects of ethical practice are these discourses embedded in? The key terms here are moral and intellectual responsibility.<sup>24</sup> In more recent writings Kara has suggested, as he does here, that what is central to the authentic identity of Turks is this commitment to a particular, Islamic ethical project of self-making.

The mode of critique of identity, then, for Islamists in Turkey like Kara, is a genealogical interrogation of the present. How does the present stand in relation to the past, and what does this past, of which we are largely ignorant in Turkey, make of us today? The line running through these concerns is the notion that one is constituted by the histories that are embedded in institutions and practices. In contrast, then, to those, like Cündioğlu (who I will discuss in a moment), who are more specifically focused on the interpretation of texts and production of works of *tefsir* (Quranic exegesis and commentary) the question is not so much, What are the appropriate ways to interpret the central texts of the Islamic tradition? but rather, What kinds of institutions and scholarly traditions can generate authentic interpretations?

There is no class called the *ulema* in Turkey. . . . Now, this state of affairs can perhaps be understood with reference to the conditions of the establishment of the Republican administration, but when it came to closing down weak points and reconstituting itself, and acquiring what they lost, it did not happen that way. Of course, we should not be looking for a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century *ulema* class, but knowledge and ideas cannot be unrelated to anything. In fact, however far back that connection can go, it will be that much stronger and productive. If we can ask 'Who are we?' our path will be clear [*yolumuz açılacak*]. From the moment this question is posed it means the light has been seen (Kara 2001).

<sup>24</sup> See the title of Kara's interview in Kara 2001.

## BIOGRAPHY, MEMOIR AND COUNTER-INTUITIVE CONTINUITY

Another important type of intervention Islamist scholars are increasingly making is the critical introduction, edition, and transcription of memoirs from the late Ottoman and transitional period. This work is complicating the current picture of late Ottoman and early Republican historical rupture and continuity, especially in religious life and the scholarly religious landscape in which issues of modernity and Islam were discussed, then as now. Memoirs of figures from this period are an especially rich source of illustrations of embodied subject positions that have become almost literally unthinkable. The aim is to recuperate this period from simplistic historiographies of either Kemalist or self-styled Islamist leanings, in which Islamic movements allegedly were either reactionary and hostile to the reforms necessary to good government, or transparently 'authentic' and unified in their form and content during most of the history of the empire. Memoirs written by individuals whose actions and writings during the period were in the main trying to advance Islamist politics, give a concrete sense of the difficulties such people were faced with, and of what Islamist critique and reasoning was like in the midst of the collapse of empire. Kara, for instance, does not retreat from addressing and presenting many such individuals in their full complexity and even, at times, their seeming contradictions, such as those, like Osman Nuri Ergin, who were considered to be 'conservative' during the Republican period, but who denounced the dysfunction of Ottoman institutions before and after 1923 and generally praised the accelerated Republican reforms (Kara 1998); or such figures as Sheikh ul-Islam Musa Kâzım, simultaneously chief Mufti of the empire, prolific scholar and writer, member of the Committee of Union and Progress, Naqshbandi Sufi, and Mason.<sup>25</sup>

Kara is clearly impressed by the difficulty and counter-intuitiveness involved in interpreting these relatively recent figures and periods in terms of the categories and frameworks that had become predominant in Republican-era historiography. He sees in these figures examples of a living tradition of modern Islam, and his work on these figures is itself conceived as work as modernist Islamic scholarly culture. In other words, in this genealogical research, Kara is attempting to reestablish a line of thought that he thinks was profoundly productive and was un-naturally aborted. In this sense, carrying out this kind of work is *hizmet*, service for the good of the Muslim community, through the excavation of a ground from which a tradition of Islamic ethical self-making can continue *from where it left off*.

Islamists assume that there is an Islamic tradition (*gelenek*) that cannot be reduced to a 'construction' or 'invention,' though it is continually adapted and updated (Asad 1986). It is also the authentic center (*merkez*) of Turkish identity, in their view. The reinvigoration of a generative notion of tradition, capable of dealing adequately with the concrete problems facing the country today, is cen-

<sup>25</sup> See also the entry on Musa Kâzım in Kara 1997.

tral to much Islamist work in Turkey. The question is what constitutes it and how it can ‘bear’ Turkey in time of need. “[T]he effort that [had been] expected on the topics relating to Turkey’s historical experience, present problems and the future was not expended. And I say this from [within] a movement striving to bear Turkey along” (Kara 2001). For a growing number of these writers a genealogical project—ascertaining to what extent and specifically how the present relates to the past—is from now on inseparable from the positive project of tradition-building. What kinds of transformations in discourse and institutions have led us to be what and who we are today? What is the status of the Islamic traditions of discourse and practice in Turkey? Turkish Islamist thinkers have identified this complex of issues as crucial to the project of elaborating on Islamic tradition as Muslim scholars in Turkey. The problem, as Kara repeatedly puts it, is “to conceptualize our historical and present situations” (2001: 6).

#### RECONSTITUTING THE TRADITION FROM EMPIRE TO REPUBLIC

Crucial to this understanding of the present, for an important number of writers and thinkers in Turkey, is an understanding of what institutional transformations were involved in the transition from the Ottoman empire to the Republic, and in the context of what kinds of imperatives. There are a growing number of studies published by presses associated with the Islamist movement (such as *Kitabevi*, *İz*, *İnsan*, *Dergâh*, and *Şule*) dealing with such topics in Ottoman social history as translation bureaus, educational institutions, and methods of urban administration. The Republic has produced its own historiography on the topic, glossing the period as the inevitable *telos* of a nation constituting its own sovereignty in a swift and revolutionary act of complete and total rejection of what had come before. By the 1950s, however, cracks were beginning to appear in the edifice of the historiography of radical rupture, and by the 1980s the official narrative of institutional and ontological fracture in 1923 was no longer convincing to most serious Turkish students of late Ottoman and Republican history.

Given the concerns for renewal from within an ongoing, living tradition, it is not a coincidence that so many Islamists (as well as other historians) have recently begun to hone in on the period following the Second Constitutional revolution of 1908 and the political and social restructuring that ensued. We have already seen that the Empire lost almost the entirety of its European territories in the Balkans—territories which had been part of the core of the empire for centuries, and the birthplace of a disproportionately large number of cadres of the Second Constitutional and early Republican periods; Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) himself was born and raised in Salonica (present-day Greek Macedonia) and attended the Ottoman military academy at Monastir, in formerly Yugoslav Macedonia.<sup>26</sup> Most important for discussions of the present, however,

<sup>26</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (2003) the significance of this period and of events in the Bal-

was the crisis of legitimacy that the coup of 1908 had manifested. What was to be the legitimate foundation of the sovereignty of the state? The question was not posed for the first time in 1923.<sup>27</sup>

The Second Constitutional period, beginning in 1908, has thus come to be seen among scholars in Turkey as a watershed, in some senses even more so than 1923, since it intensified the processes of institutional change and inaugurated the political culture that would become characteristic of the Republic: “The second constitutional period of the history of Turkish modernization is still waiting to be discovered and interpreted; it is the historical period in which the tendencies and accumulations inaugurated by the Tanzimat were to express themselves, and in connection with this it was a time when expected and unexpected political and social developments, problems, and agitations were lived at the highest levels. It was the period during which the expanding and contracting world of the Republican administration was leavened” (Kara 1994:5–6).

The choice, then, on the part of Islamists to work on the history of the last two hundred years, and not the classical period, is a choice to work on what might seem to many Muslims concerned with internal renewal to be an awkward period. This is the time when Muslims everywhere were under the unmistakable and often life-and-death pressure of non-believers from Europe, and this confrontation, this threat, led Muslims to change their own institutions. What were the implications of these transformations for the grounds of Islamic discourse and practice?

In an extremely subtle and sophisticated statement, Kara lays out the outlines and stakes of the intervention he and the Islamist genealogist-historians like him are attempting, and indicates the ground they are attempting to excavate and ethical practices they are attempting to renew:

Among the questions we have attempted to answer, the one that is foremost is: Taking into consideration their fundamental preferences, how should one evaluate Islamists’ political views? As opposed to Ottoman modernization and new political tendencies, as supporting them, or as parallel to them? On the issues of European civilization, and particularly new political concepts and institutions, what was the level of Islamists’ knowledge and their capacity for interpretation?

For the last two centuries politics [*siyaset*] and government [*idare*] have constituted the primary domains of Muslim intellectuals’ interest; however, out of the political views of Islamists there is no political philosophy that emerges, nor is there a particular un-

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kans for setting the tone and nature of subsequent developments in the country can hardly be overstated, and there has recently been a great rise in interest in it among historians.

<sup>27</sup> With the restoration of the constitution, and in a violent context of Serbian, Greek, and Bulgarian nationalist rebellion, the inherently unstable and contradictory notion of the Ottoman citizen becomes the model for the political self. Although the problem of the relationship between the citizen and the nation would soon become manifest, the citizenship model of political constitution was to be permanent. “The greatest contribution of the [constitutional period] to Turkey’s political development was that it initiated the model of the citizen” (Tunaya 1998:399).



derstanding of the state [*devlet anlayışı*] or a comprehensive administrative organization. Nor is it possible to speak of programs with political, social, and cultural dimensions that characterize and interpret the past or that emphasize expectations derived from pondering the future. . . .

In a context considered to be *darul-Islam* and the *caliphate*, and since the central topic of debate and direction of investigation was producing the questions: ‘What kind of government [*idare*]?’ and ‘who should govern [*yönetmeli*]?’ goals and tendencies toward reform of faltering features and adaptation to contemporary conditions are prominent. Attempts to reexamine the *Asr-ı Saadet*,<sup>28</sup> return to the sources, and emphasize *salafî*<sup>29</sup> systems of belief and understanding did not so much construct a new conception of politics and the state, but rather became an attempt to incorporate [*dahi etme*] modern [*çağdaş*] concepts and institutions into an Islamic framework [*çerçeve*].

Domestic and foreign events of the second constitutional period do not seem to have furnished a chance for Turkish intellectuals—including Islamists—to do much more than follow rapidly unfolding, unexpected, and disappointing events and try to find urgent and practical solutions to the extremely pressing problems they were faced with. . . . Within the general political tendencies of the period, the Islamists’ political views display a favorable (*muvafik*) character rather than an oppositional one (1994:6–7).

The last statement in this passage falls like a bombshell to those, both activist Muslim and secular in their orientation, whose knowledge of and attitudes toward this period were formed with the frameworks of Republican historiography. Islamists in the Second Constitutional period were supportive of the constitutional regime, he points out, and we should have no romantic (or cynical) illusions about the nature of the problems they felt to be most crucial to their very existence.

As an Islamist, Kara does think that Islamic tradition can be drawn upon as a resource for agency in the face of an onslaught by ‘the West.’ Nonetheless, he argues that one ought have no illusions that that tradition has evolved over the last three centuries independently of regimes of governmentality. This is the thrust of much of the research conducted by Islamist scholars in recent years, namely that any attempt to connect the present with the past of a thousand years ago, passing over recent centuries, in the Turkish case at least has the effect of erasing precisely the possibility of continuity that would be a criterion of tradition, for the Ottomans were dealing with similar situations of economic and military weakness vis-à-vis empires of non-believers, as Turkish Islamists are in the present. Kara wants to make sure his readers understand that governmentality was an Ottoman project, by and large looked at approvingly by the *ulema* and Sufi sheikhs at a time when Islamic educational and juridical institutions were still functioning under the auspices of a sovereign Ottoman state. One will never appreciate what continuity means and thus never be in a posi-

<sup>28</sup> The reign of the first four, “rightly guided” Caliphs.

<sup>29</sup> A movement coalescing in the late nineteenth century, disdaining developments subsequent to the “Righteous Ancestors” [*Salaf as-Salihin*], usually considered the first three generations of Muslims, beginning with the companions of the Prophet.

tion to engage the tradition, he is arguing, if one fails to account for that transitional period. Only then will one arrive at an adequate understanding of the status of the present.

#### DÜCANE CÜNDİOĞLU: HERMENEUTICS AND IDENTITY

Düçane Cündioğlu has not been affiliated with a university as a faculty member, and does not hold an advanced university degree. Like many other Islamist researchers he is an occasional lecturer at various research foundations in and around Istanbul, most recently Bilim ve Sanat Vakfı (the Foundation for Science and Art), where he gives an advanced course on history and method of *tefsir*. Cündioğlu is also a very prolific writer, with (at the time of writing) a ten-volume series of slim essays entitled *Kur'an Tedkikleri* (Quranic studies), a book of interviews and selected newspaper writings, and two monographs—one on the politics of Quran translation in Turkey and the other on the politics of Turkification (*Türkçeleştirme*) of religion in the early Republic. The reasons for his institutional marginality would seem to be mainly technical and/or legal ones,<sup>30</sup> for the quality and quantity of his publications is, it must be said, far superior to those of many on the country's university faculties.

For Cündioğlu, again like so many Islamists in Turkey, the basic issues are ones of identity and the status of the institutions functioning in the name of Islam, and the problematic relationship with the West.

This is precisely the issue: we do not recognize our selves, our past, our richness [*zenginlikler*]. This is why we fail to appreciate the political value of our own thought and of the discourses we articulate. It was inevitable that Western thought would end up de-centered [*merkezsiz*]. This is a natural outcome. Decentralization! [*adem-i merkezîyet*] What's lamentable is not that [Westerners] came (we could also say 'fell') into this situation, but rather that those who call themselves 'intellectuals' [in Turkey] have appropriated [*sahiplenmek*] these philosophies from a period of crisis [in the West] as their own without being aware of where they themselves stand [*kendi durdukları yerin farkına varmaksızın*]. It is one thing to know, learn, debate, and compare, but quite another to appropriate as one's own. We do not learn, do not debate; what we do is simply appropriate before learning or debating. In this sense the [musical] score is always the same, only the performance changes (Cündioğlu 1998a:20).

Turks, in his view, have failed to appreciate the nature of the ground from which they speak and act, and they vacuously reproduce certain ways of thinking and speaking merely because they are prestigious in the context of secular nationalism. Cündioğlu has published two book-length studies of early Turkish Republican Turkification and nationalization of the religious sphere through the 1950s. Significantly, he, like most serious scholars in Turkey, sees this as part of a secular construction of Islam as 'religion,' to be separated from something called politics and relegated to private life,<sup>31</sup> and he locates its inception in the

<sup>30</sup> See note 34.

<sup>31</sup> On the shifts in regimes of knowledge and power that this entailed, see Silverstein 2003. See

later Ottoman period. Cündioğlu is somewhat vague regarding the historical imperatives of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, which scholars like Kara wish to bring to light; he tends to see things in terms of ‘east’ and ‘west,’ ‘authenticity’ and alienation.’

#### ISLAMIC TRADITION AND AUTHENTIC IDENTITY

In his long preface to *The Essence of the Word*, Cündioğlu writes:

Muslims today—from the point of view of the truest source of the world-view they represent—are in possession of God’s book, the Quran. In the Quran’s emergence as definitive [*kat’i*] there has been to this day not a single doubt that could be taken seriously, nor has the formation of any manner of such doubt been allowed. And yet today the question of whether the guidance [*delalet*] of the Quran-i Kerim is or is not definitive continues, due to certain reasons, to be the subject of dispute, and, like the *Batini*<sup>32</sup> before them, there is an attempt to exploit [*istismar edilmek*] this dispute in the name of ‘plural(ist) readings’ [*çoğul(cu) okuma*] or a subjective(ist) approach [*öznel(ci) yaklaşım*].

It is an undeniable fact that those who stand up and try to interpret [*yorumlamak*] the text [*metin*] without taking into consideration what is intended in the text [*metinde murad edilen*], giving the excuse that with each passing century the Quran needs to have new *tefsir*, and that in every letter of the Quran there are thousands of meanings [*anlam*] and that their own interpretations are but one of these meanings, it is undeniable that such people are profiting from the charms [*cazibe*] of the dominant discourse [*hakim söylem*]. Thus it is for this reason that today, as social and political pluralism [*çoğulculuk*] have become taboo [read: undisputable], no one speaks out against the fact that pluralist readings have subjected the text to deconstruction [*yapıbozuma uğratmak*], and that the claim put forth in a form inspired by Western Sophistry that ‘meaning can be assigned by the reader,’ in the name of ‘freedom allowed to the reader,’ has been so warmly received (1998c:19).

This passage is very illustrative of a certain project. First, the language itself displays the convoluted style and liberal use of neologisms one finds in either attempts to translate from Western languages or in quotations from others’ translations; in effect, Cündioğlu is clearly positioning himself as a reader of contemporary literary criticism and post-structuralist philosophy, alongside Islamic history and *tefsir*.<sup>33</sup> The juxtaposition of references to the two literatures is uncommon, as is the juxtaposition of Turkish neologisms with Arabic terms arcane to the modern Turkish reader, but familiar to one with a more religious education. The very language of Cündioğlu’s texts, then, points to the site he is trying to occupy. To use Arabic (‘Ottoman’) terms in the place of Turkish neologisms is generally to identify oneself as a ‘conservative,’ and usually a religiously oriented one. Cündioğlu’s use of precisely such neologisms from Turk-

Asad 1993 for a critique of the bourgeois liberal genealogy of normative discourse about religion as differentiated from politics, which thereby, and by definition, becomes a secular(ized) field.

<sup>32</sup> Partisans of esoteric meanings in the source texts of Islamic traditions.

<sup>33</sup> Though he is apparently quite proficient in classical Arabic, I am told by colleagues that Cündioğlu does not in fact have reading knowledge of a ‘Western’ language, and makes use of Turkish translations.

ish translations of post-structuralist philosophy is a careful embedding of this neologism-laden language of ‘foreign’ concepts *within* the Arabic-heavy language of ‘cultural authenticity.’ This can be seen in the last sentence quoted above. The terms ‘meaning being assigned by the reader’ and ‘autonomy of the reader’ are surrounded by quotation marks in Cüндiođlu’s text, which has roughly the same effect it has in English, namely to refer to well-known notions while simultaneously suggesting their dubiousness. The sentence in which these quotes are embedded begins: ‘*Nitekim bu nedenledir ki . . .*’ and ends ‘*. . . hüsn-i kabul görmektedir.*’ To a contemporary Turkish reader such a sentence reads as either very dated or very much in an explicitly conservative idiom trying to call attention to itself. It is not, then, a question for Cüндiođlu of a mere juxtaposition of regimes of knowledge, represented by these two styles in language, with which modern-day Turks might contest meanings in Islam. Rather, these regimes stand in a clear hierarchy in his writings. The frame—the ground—is the conservative, ‘revival of the authentic’ idiom, in the context of which one may make sense of the ‘dubious sophistry’ of post-structuralist Western thought.

This passage is also illustrative of a particular understanding of authentic tradition. First, he states, in an appeal to common sense, that there have been no doubts about the definitiveness of the Quran *that can be taken seriously*, and in the same sentence adds that nor have such developments been *permitted*. Bracketing the historical accuracy of this statement, one may ask: have there simply historically been no doubts, or have those who might harbor or communicate such doubts been silenced? The lack of a distinction between these two may perhaps be taken as an indicator of Cüндiođlu’s conception of the social functioning of what he would call tradition.

#### FROM *TEFSİR* TO TRANSLATION

One of Cüндiođlu’s most interesting and unique arguments is that translation has probably overtaken *tefsir* as the most important site of Quranic exegesis in many non-Arabic speaking countries like Turkey. This explains why he has devoted much effort in his series of slim volumes of ‘Quranic studies’ to the issues surrounding translation of language in general, and why his two monographs are on the relationship between Quran translation and the political and cultural context of nationalization within which Quran translation has been debated and practiced in Turkey. In the preface to a book of interviews, Cüндiođlu sets out the present situation in which questions of translation and exegesis inevitably arise. As non-native speakers of Arabic, he argues, the fact is that in places like Turkey, even advanced discussions and debates about finer points of exegesis, while turning around concepts derived from and expressed in Arabic, are nonetheless conducted in Turkish. To the extent that anyone wishes to transmit the conclusions of such debates to an audience beyond the rarefied one in which they unfolded, that discourse will likewise be in Turkish, and will

probably make use of more Turkish terms and expressions to translate technical terms from Arabic. So the problem of understanding across languages leads Cüendioğlu to a concern with the problem of understanding in language per se.

From the perspective of understanding the fundamental tendencies of modern *tefsir* movements, there can be no doubt that the critique [*eliştirilmesi*] of modern interpretations [*çağdaş yorumları*] of the Quran, the identification of their weaknesses and the identification and analysis of parallels [*koşutluk*] between the political history of the Islamic world and Quran interpretation are extremely important. However, in this country [Turkey] as soon as one begins to speak of modern interpretations of the Quran, either works of *tefsir* or other various works come to mind, while Quran translations and their role in the constitution [*oluşma*] of the understanding of the addressee [*muhatabın anlayışı*] are never taken into consideration. Indeed, works published in recent years having to do with the history of *tefsir* are an obvious illustration of this, as no discussion is yet given over to 'Quran translations' in these works; the field is being entirely neglected. And yet, these days the modern reader's efforts [*çabalar*] to understand and interpret are undertaken departing from translations more than from works of *tefsir*, and, particularly in non-Arabic speaking countries, Quranic exegesis [*yorumlar*] is expressed through [*vasıtasıyla dile getirilmek*] translation (1998a:7).

#### HERMENEUTICS

One of the main concerns of Islamists is to wean Turkish intellectuals in general, and activist Muslim researchers working on topics internal to Islam in particular, from what they see as the latter's perennial and pathological dependence on the latest intellectual fashions of the 'West.' The latest fashion, Cüendioğlu diagnoses, is postmodernism, and its methodological and (post-) philosophical concerns with discourse and language. This all amounts, in his estimation, to no more than the sophistry that Plato condemned. It is also, and more significantly, symptomatic of a civilization that has lost its nerve, that has stumbled, and, Cüendioğlu wagers, that will never regain its balance. The 'West' is decadent, incapable of the kind of moral thought that would stem the rot overtaking it. The preface to his *Essence of the Word* begins (with reference to 'the West'): "A civilization's loss of self-security undoubtedly reveals that the worldview that civilization represented has become indefensible and that it has itself begun to find it pathetic" (1998c:7).<sup>34</sup> What is more, Muslims do not need Rorty and Derrida, Cüendioğlu argues, since there is a long and sophisticated tradition within Islam of work on meaning and language. If these were at one point in the history of Islam cultivated in the field *kelam*, Cüendioğlu argues, they are now, and in fact have been since the nineteenth century, explicitly treated in a more satisfactory manner in the field of *tefsir*, and even in recent decades in annotated translation.

<sup>34</sup> Friends in Turkey have suggested to me that this tone of Cüendioğlu's hearkens back to his former identity—not unique among latter-day Islamists—in the 1970s as an activist in right-wing ultra-nationalist youth movements. Apparently tried and convicted in connection to illegal activities carried out by such groups during that tumultuous period, Cüendioğlu is allegedly ineligible to occupy a public office, such as lecturer in a public university. If true, this may partly explain his relative institutional and social marginality, as well as his acerbic tone, even toward other academics.

Cüendioğlu's ten-volume series *Quranic Studies* was initiated by *The Meaning of Understanding the Quran*, which looks at the way the Quran signifies, by way of a discussion of the notions of understanding (*anlama*) and interpretation (*yorumlama*). As such, this kind of work covers the terrain traditionally addressed in works of *tefsir*. The subtitle of the volume is "A Hermeneutic (*hermeneütik*) Essay." Its contents are as follows:

Preface

- I. Understanding and the Essence (*mahiyet*) of Interpretation
- II. The Conceptual Means (*kavramsal araçları*) for the Act (*faaliyet*) of Understanding
  - a. Teller—Telling—Told (*anlatan-anlatım-anlatılan*)
  - b. Understander—Understanding—Understood (*anlayan-anlama-anlaşılan*)
  - c. Correct Meaning—Wrong Meaning (*doğru anlam-yanlış anlam*)
  - d. The Word's Natural Tie (*söz'ün tabii bağı*)
- III. The Orientation (*istikamet*) of the Act of Understanding
- IV. The Subjectification (*öznelleştirilme*) of Understanding [three examples]
- V. The Meaninglessness (*anlamsızlığı*) of 'Meanings'
- VI. From Meanings to Meaning
- VII. Multiple Meaning (*çokanlamlılık*) or Common Speech (*lafz-ı müsterek*)
- VIII. Word-Sentence Relationship
- IX. Correctness (*doğruluğu*) of Understanding
  - a. What Does It Say?
  - b. Why Does It Say It?
  - c. To Whom Does It Say It?
  - d. Where and When Does It Say It?
    - \* Understanding and Time
    - \* The Question of the Addressee (*muhatab*)—Time—Place in Understanding the Ma'un Sura
  - e. How Does It Say It?
- X. Written (*vazı*) Language and Spoken (*konuşma*) Language

Postface

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In the Preface, Cüendioğlu outlines his larger project, which is no less than a general method for interpreting the Quran. He recalls that the Islamic tradition does indeed have a discipline dealing with this, *tefsir*, but claims that when faced with the problems and issues of the modern world and a desire to understand these in light of what the Quran 'says,' the contemporary Muslim will most likely search the classic works of *tefsir* in vain for guidelines about how to understand the meaning of a given passage of the Book.

In this the first of a projected ten volumes of *Quranic Studies* [*Kur'an Tetkikleri*] we attempt to establish [*temellendirmek*] explicit principles [*ilkeleri*] for understanding the Quran and, by way of a few examples, to show how these principles affect the interpretation of the Quran.

This effort consists of an attempt to answer questions such as: what happens in the course of understanding a text; what kind of relationship there is between a reader and a text; when a reader seeks to understand a text what the text may expect from him or

her; what role knowledge of where the reader is, where the text is, or of the situation and conditions encapsulating them both may play in reaching the correct meaning [*doğru anlam*]. We do not claim to definitively resolve the issues that readers face or might face when addressing themselves to the Quran; this in fact would be impossible.

It must be said that the *tefsir* and *usul-u tefsir* literature, which has accumulated over centuries, has been unable to sufficiently respond to these issues raised above, and that only after taking stock as a result of patient and extensive research can this literature be functional [*işlev görebilmek*]. This is because it is an incontestable fact that people today have serious difficulties [*müşkil*] when it comes to understanding the Quran. As for the works of *usul-u tefsir*, which are where we ought to be able to find the answers to these difficulties, they unfortunately do not present us with satisfying [*mukni*] answers, and thus the distance separating the Quran from people today—which is already great—grows wider.

This then is why we say that [our] treatises to be published under the title *Quranic Studies* do not aim to exhaust these issues. The issues are endless, but at the very least one must start somewhere. Therefore, to the extent that those striving to understand the Quran desire not to fall into despair but rather to learn what meaning an *ayet* has come to have, they also need to be interested in why and how the *ayet* has come to have that meaning. This is because such a stance [*tutum*] is the way to counter those who, in the name of the Quran, say whatever comes to mind and spew forth whatever they want in whatever way they want, and it is the soundest way [*sağlıklı yol*] to say what it is the Quran wants [*Kur'an'ın istedikleri*].

Our supplication and prayers to our Lord are that this work, *The Meaning of Understanding the Quran*, may be of assistance to those treading this path. Allah guides those who strive. In that case, the effort is ours, the success His! (1998b:n.p.)

In these discussions of interpretation and meaning, Cündioğlu can be read as attempting to constitute himself as an authoritative interpreter of the central texts of the Islamic tradition, Quran and *hadith*. The specific way he does this is not by implying a defense of his 'status' (e.g. as someone heavily invested in a certain institutional network of knowledge production, for instance like a person with a *medrese* education); but rather through a claim to possess 'correct method.' Cündioğlu is doing a rereading of the history of *tefsir* in the light of Western hermeneutics, the aim being to show why the tradition of the former obviates any need for the latter.

If the aim of Cündioğlu's critical work is ultimately moral correction, it is nonetheless not written from the ground of one concerned to justify the form of his own practice from within the Islamic tradition. His is, rather, an acid critique of what he takes to be Western approaches to texts and interpretation, in favor of an authentically Islamic one. He wants to make clear that the production of meaning in Islam is disciplined and under control. He characterizes the 'West' in the opposite terms, as having succumbed to the evils of relativism, uncertainty and 'sophistry'.

#### TURKIFICATION AND ISLAM IN THE NATION-STATE

Cündioğlu is also well known in Turkey for his vociferous criticism of canonical worship (*ibadet*) in the Turkish language (as opposed to Arabic), which has



been a point of dispute in the Republican period ever since the 1930s. Most of the personnel of the Directorate for Religious Affairs are reluctant to publicly give opinions on the topic, and this is usually interpreted as their personally believing worship in Turkish to be of dubious value, but nonetheless feeling pressure not to openly denounce it. The head of the Directorate at the time of writing, Nuri Yılmaz, as well as other prominent Kemalist/modernist scholars (e.g., Yaşar Nuri Öztürk) publicly hold that it is in every case preferable to perform one's prayers in Arabic; however, it is also much preferable to say them in Turkish than to not perform the duty at all.<sup>35</sup> Cündioğlu has published two books on the topic, in each scarcely concealing his contempt for the program of Kemalist reforms during the early Republic, where he critiques the 'Turkification' of *ibadet* as part and parcel of a larger project of nationalism, for which there is no place in Islam.

Since the ideology of the Turkish Republic is explicitly secularist, positivist nationalism, any criticism of these values is in essence a critique of the foundations of the Republic. Nonetheless, all of these values (nationalism, positivism, humanism) have been subject in Turkey to the kind of thoroughgoing critique they have seen elsewhere. Recent historiographical reevaluation of the second constitutional and early Republican periods can fruitfully be read in this light, as oblique attempts to demystify the narrative of the founding of the Republic, to turn it into a terrain of social historical research like any other, and thus reinsert the history of power relations into this period—as well as, implicitly, the proposition that things might have turned out otherwise.

Cündioğlu's and others' work on the young Republic's program of Turkification of Islamic institutions and practice should be read in this vein, as an attempt to historicize what they see as the attempt by a nation-state on the Western model to appropriate Islam for its own purposes—which purposes, they argue, stand in an unclear relationship to Islamic virtues—and in the process alienating its own population from its authentic heritage and culture by force. Islam is the authentic, local culture of the Turkish nation, according to Cündioğlu, and there are explicit rules to be followed in addressing oneself to the sources in order to derive normative judgments about correct practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have sought to identify and analyze two main modes as well as the structural significance of scholarship being carried out by two of Turkey's more sophisticated and prominent Islamist intellectuals. İsmail Kara and Dücane Cündioğlu are particularly advanced practitioners of two modes work in Turkey that ex-

<sup>35</sup> A veritable 'Turkish prayer' [*Türkçe ibadet*] industry has arisen, given over to polemic on the issue. See Cündioğlu's (1999) treatment and particularly the early Republican-era texts assembled therein.

PLICITLY situate themselves within the Islamic tradition, and which attempt to both articulate the issues and terms of a Muslim critique of predominant regimes of knowledge and power in their society, and the ground from which such critique can be made in post-Ottoman, Republican Turkey. In the process, they proffer a critical intervention into the ongoing elaboration of authoritative, normative discourse that stands in an authorizing relationship to Islamic practice, thereby attempting to contribute to the elaboration of Islamic tradition from within.

Cüндiođlu and the exegetes seek to resurrect a native Islamic hermeneutic tradition they see as still productive of meaning. They are also working within the idiom of hermeneutics in the sense that they are trying to uncover an existent, core meaning of canonical texts while reinvigorating Islamic disciplines of meaning (explicitly denouncing the deployment of ‘meanings’ in the plural, a main argument of Cüндiođlu 1998b). This revitalization of a ‘native practice’ allows Cüндiođlu to criticize what he sees as his countrymen’s obsession with the latest intellectual fashions in their attempts to theorize themselves. We might ask whether Cüндiođlu’s concern with the former stems from a prior concern with the latter? It is difficult to tell. At the very least, these concerns reflect a significant feature of the biographies of a number of Muslim intellectuals in Turkey, namely that they were not raised in families of Islamic scholars, and had quite different political positions through the 1970s than they do now (leftist in a few cases, but more commonly from the ‘right,’ or even ultra-nationalist).<sup>36</sup> Cüндiođlu, then, is emblematic of those Islamists in Turkey who are asking, ‘What is the proper way to determine meaning in Islam?’ They are after a theory of Islamic exegesis.

There is no ‘theory’ in Kara and the genealogists, which is not to say that their interventions are any less articulate or trenchant in their implications or effects. Through their editing of memoirs and work on the second constitutional and early Republican periods, the genealogists are excavating sites that many Turks (and indeed others) were unaware existed, positions whose subtlety articulated a relationship of modernity and Islam that were far more complex than Kemalist and latter-day self-styled Islamist historians have conceived. Practitioners of this mode of Islamist work do not engage with internal debates in *tefsir* or the language of hermeneutics, because they are not primarily concerned with telling fellow Muslims how to interpret the core texts of the Islamic tradition; at least we can say that their main scholarly activity is not oriented to this end. If Kara’s interviews and newspaper pieces are relatively sharper in their socio-political commentary than his scholarly studies discussed here, this tends to appear as Kara’s cynicism toward what he sees as Kemalist hypocrisy (the issue of democracy coming in most prominently for this kind of treatment). He is trying to complicate a picture of Muslim subject positions that has been

<sup>36</sup> See Meeker 1991; 1994.

oversimplified for decades, to re-expose a ground that can become a baseline for continuity in the ethical self-formation of traditional Islamic disciplines. Genealogists like Kara ask: ‘How, historically, have certain kinds of persons been in particular positions to articulate authoritative knowledge of Islam? What kinds of people have been having what kinds of discussions? What has authoritative Islamic knowledge looked like in the history immediately preceding and leading to ours?’ Significantly, he has concluded that the historical evidence does not reflect a consensus on even what the main questions were, thereby indicating to less subtle colleagues that any facile dichotomies are false and not helpful: “In response to the question ‘where to begin?’ we are in possession of no clear or systematic evidence that [late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ottoman] Islamists knew the answer or had reached a consensus” (Kara 1997:25).

At least since the intensification of Ottoman administrative reform in the late eighteenth century, Islamic disciplines of ethical self-formation have been profoundly rearticulated by characteristically modern forms and practices. The Ottoman experience of the last three centuries suggests that the issues of Islam and modernity, power and agency, involve a far more complex history than can be adequately interpreted by existing frameworks of Westernization or authentic continuity typically derived from post-colonial contexts. The historicity of Islamic institutions in Turkey and their status in the present challenge the theoretical and analytical frameworks with which both Islam and modernity have hitherto been approached, calling for new conceptual formulations like the ones currently being elaborated by Muslim scholars in Turkey.

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