Islamic Theology in the Turkish Republic

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The book under review offers an analysis of Islamic theology delineated broadly under the auspices of the Ottomans and the nation-state of Turkey, in past and present. As outlined in its introduction, the book comprises five chapters: 1. Origins, 2. Nation, 3. God, 4. Humanity, 5. Futures.

In Chapter One, Dorroll substantiates the traditional Ottoman origins of Islamic theology in the Republican Turkey with reference to three major themes: Classical Islamic theology (*kalām*) during the Ottomans; Islamic Modernism at the turn of the twentieth century; and the use of sociological theories during the transition from the Ottoman to the Republican regime. Dorroll highlights the significance of the *madrasa*s for the Ottoman system in continuity from the previous Saljūqid regime in institutionally linking religion to the state, beyond providing educational services (19). *Madrasa*s were bureaucratized and thus sponsored by the state, while training judges, staff for practical religious services and other state functionaries (18-21). Dorroll underlines the policy of the Ottoman system to centralize the religious authority under the state, as exemplified in the office of Shaykh al-Islam and integrating the *'ulamā* into the state machinery, especially for how such integration would

render the state an unprecedented sacrality (20-22). He provides extensive information about the rise of *madrasa*s, the significance of their curricula and dominant theological textbooks, while establishing how the Ottoman Sunni theology developed at *madrasas* under the auspices of the state during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Dorroll then analyzes modernist theological interpretations during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods of Turkey in the broad context of Islamic modernism. He provides a detailed survey of intellectual debates in Islamic modernism during the decline of the Ottoman Empire through the years of the First World War to the early decades of the Republican Turkey. Thus he establishes a continuity from the Ottoman *madrasa*s to modern university departments, with particular focus upon the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University and its historical trajectory from Ottoman Sunni theology to what he calls modern Turkish theology.

In Chapter Two, Dorroll focuses mainly on the correlation between Turkish nationalism and Turkish theology, following on the previous chapter's account of late Ottoman Islamic modernism. In both cases, the French Revolution enhances the motivation for theological re-interpretations in modern national contexts (57). Among other scholars, the Ottoman Shaykh al-Islam Musa Kazım (1858/59-1920), İsmail Hakkı İzmirli (1869-1946), and Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır (1878-1942) are given generous coverage as advocates for liberty, equality, and justice as common values for both the nation and the religion.

Dorroll duly underlines the significance of Said Nursi (1877-1960) in his endeavors to combat materialism in favor of reinforcing Islamic belief (*īmān*), albeit without overtly challenging the secularist paradigm of the state. Dorroll compares Nursi with Izmirli, as both scholars were against materialistic philosophies. He notes that Nursi, unlike Izmirli, was not a member of the Ottoman Istanbul elite; he spent the bulk of his life disseminating his theological messages in informal study circles and promoting educational reforms in various provinces of the Ottoman Empire (71). However, Dorroll does not deal with Nursi's Shāfiʿite origin, which could have led the way to a comparative analysis of Shāfiʿite-Ashʿarite Sunnī theological discourses in the context of the madrasas of the predominantly Shafiʿite Eastern Anatolian provinces of the Ottoman

Empire, where he was raised, educated, and called for the implementation of his rejected educational reform project (*madrasat al-zahrā*).

Meanwhile, Dorroll quite rightly highlights that the ideology of Turkish nationalism stimulated intellectual interest to enhance the interpretation of Islamic theology based upon the "moderate rationalist" Maturīdī theological school. Indeed, its famous eponym, the classical Transoxanian theologian, Abu Mansur al-Maturīdī (d. 944), has an immensely significant place in Islamic theology in both the Ottoman and the Republican eras of Turkey. His *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* and *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān* were both recently published in Turkish translation by modern Turkish academics. Dorroll states the Turkish nationalists' interest in Maturidism as follows: "Because al-Maturīdī came to be understood as a part of Turkish national heritage, this enabled the retrieval and revival of his theology in the Turkish Republican context" (64). In fact, the creation of the Diyanet offices was essentially in a *de facto* continuity with the Ottoman office of Shaykh al-Islām, which had followed a Maturidi-Hanafi theological line for centuries. In time, the popularity of Maturidi theology has advanced beyond the interest of academics to the extent that columnists like the late Gündüz Aktan and Taha Akyol (known for their former affiliations to the far-right Nationalist Action Party) could proclaim the exemplary harmony between the nature of the Turks and Maturidi theology (see Aktan, *Radikal*, 12 October 2004 & Akyol, *Milliyet*, 10 July 2007).

In Chapter Three, Dorroll highlights the leading role of Izmirli and Bekir Topaloğlu (1932-2016) in the academic study of Islamic theology (*kalām*) in Turkey. This chapter focuses on the relationship between unchangeable eternal truth and changeable worldly contexts.

In Chapter Four, Dorroll rightly focuses on Hüseyin Atay's argument for the correlation of reason and revelation (126). Atay, an emeritus professor and a leading academic in theological studies from Ankara University's Faculty of Divinity, puts a great emphasis upon human reason in harmony with divine revelation. As a leading rationalist theologian, Atay focuses upon the Qur'an while being critical of traditional historical systematic theological interpretations, which he deems not justifiable through human reasoning (125). Atay, as rightly interpreted

by Dorroll, "argues for the use of independent reason connected with revealed religious principles as the key to elaborating a modern Islamic theological framework in Turkey" (125). Indeed, Atay persistently advocates for the use of reason in interpretation of Qur'anic theological principles and practical legal rulings.

In Chapter Five, Dorroll covers the impact of state power on the development and future opportunities of theology in Turkey. He compares the potential of Kemalism to that of the Justice and Development Party's rule over the past two decades (165). Dorroll pinpoints the crucial influence of the state in shaping theological discourses through the presently over a hundred Faculties of Divinity/Islamic Studies at Turkish universities and practical religious services through Diyanet, which administers roughly over ninety thousand officially registered mosques. He notes, for instance, that "in the Turkish Republic religion has always been subject to close state supervision under the principle of laiklik, or Turkish laicism," which he glosses further as the "particularly strong version of secularism … whereby the state retains the right to approve and supervise all formal religious institutions and organizations in the country" (166). In turn, this means that "Religious discourses such as theology are therefore seen by the Turkish state as legitimate objects of control," not just in the present but indeed "throughout the history of the Turkish Republic" (166).

In general, the book covers academic theological discourses from the Ottoman academic elite, predominantly from Ismail Hakki Izmirli, and then turns to the views of two leading academics of the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century (the Istanbul-based Bekir Topaloğlu and the Ankara-based Hüseyin Atay). The scope of the book is in a way demarcated by the official public line of Islamic theology (Hanafi-Maturidi discourses in the Ottoman and the Republican systems of Turkey). Over its course it turns covers certain issues causing tensions with regard to religion in national public contexts, such as the former prohibition of female students wearing headscarves on university campuses, particularly in the 1990s (177), gender inequalities, misogynistic discourses originating from theological interpretations of classical religious texts (147 ff.), and LGBTI+ related theological discussions (181

ff.). Notably, the book does not mention Alawites or Alawism, which remains a major issue of serious theopolitical tension in both theoretical and practical religious, social and political public contexts of Turkey. In sum, this book aptly brings forth the strategic interrelationship of religion and state, and the influential role of the state in determining the theological discourses and perceptions from within the Hanafi-Maturidi line of Islamic theology in the Turkish official public space, during the eras of both Ottoman and Republican Turkey.

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