

An Unfulfilled Promise of Enlightenment: Kemalism and its Liberal Critics

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ABSTRACT A defining feature of Turkish politics during the 2000s has been the alliance between liberals and Islamic conservatives. While legitimizing Islamic conservatism, the liberals have concomitantly de-legitimized Kemalism. Ultimately, the liberal disavowal is a call for a reexamination of the Turkish secularist experience, and in particular of how it relates to Western, emancipating traditions. The potential of freedom has remained unfulfilled because Turkish secularism has never really broken with the orthodox mentality of the past. Mirroring the failure of the secular-minded Ottoman reformers of the nineteenth century, who had initially held out an unfulfilled promise of universalism, enshrined in the concept of liberal citizenship, the Kemalists have gotten stuck in parochial nationalism. The promise of universalism was distorted by the allure of the parochial, as the rational succumbed to the mystique of the primordial. The story of Turkish secularism is ultimately one about the promise of an enlightened modernity being overrun by the primordial forces of history and tradition.

“If Atatürk had not done what he did, against the will of the people, we would neither have had a Kurdish problem nor a problem about religion in this country.”¹ “Kemalism corresponds to what is reactionary rather than to what is progressive.”² These judgments over Kemalism, made by two of Turkey’s prominent liberal intellectuals, convey what has come to be established as the common view among Turkey’s albeit small but disproportionately influential liberal intelligentsia.

A defining feature of Turkish politics during the last decade has been the alliance between liberals and Islamic conservatives. Liberal intellectuals have played an important, indeed a vital, role as promoters of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). The benediction bestowed by the liberals was crucial in constructing the image of the “post-Islamist” AKP as a party of liberal and democratic reform. The alliance that was formed between the Islamic conservative movement and liberal intellectuals at the beginning of the decade proved instrumental

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in legitimizing the latter movement in the eyes not only of a significant part of the secular middle class in Turkey but equally, and no less importantly, in the eyes of liberal opinion-makers in the West, particularly in Europe. As one European editor said, “I see no reason not to believe that the AKP is a liberalizing force, as liberal Turkish intellectuals have assured me on this account.”³

While legitimizing Islamic conservatism, the liberals have concomitantly delegitimized Kemalism. The liberals and other democrats (the term employed in Turkish political parlance is “libertarian-democrats”) have been decisive in shaping recent public discourse about the Republican experience. Liberal think tanks and privately funded universities have contributed to creating and sustaining a new, anti-Kemalist paradigm. The reasons for the Islamic conservative, not to speak of radical Islamist, opposition to the endeavor of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk are self-evident. Faced with the forces of religious “reaction,” Kemalism commanded the moral high ground, confident in the belief that it stood for progress and “Enlightenment.” The liberal defiance is of an altogether different nature, as it challenges the self-image of Kemalism. Unlike Islamic forces, liberalism represents a challenge from within, calling the very claim of Kemalism to embody modernity into question. Understanding how that came about is critically important.

The Liberal Charge against Kemalism

The liberal charge against Kemalism reflects a rift within the modernist, secular camp, with a young generation rebelling against older authority, sometimes even within the same family. The case of Esra Özyürek⁴ is not untypical: like several of the liberal-minded critics of Atatürk and Kemalism, Özyürek has a secularist-nationalist family background, her father being the deputy chairman of the republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP). In her study of the Kemalist nostalgia for the early decades of the Republic and of the Atatürk cult, Özyürek tellingly depicts Atatürk as “a totalitarian leader, a contemporary to others,”⁵ implying that the founder of the Republic was a Turkish variant of a Hitler or Mussolini. It is tempting to interpret such iconoclasm as the expression of an adolescent desire to tear down an icon of a former, ideologically un-venerated generation. Yet, Özyürek’s choice of subject—the Atatürk cult—is suggestive: she represents a generation that came of age during a the military rule of the 1980s, when, as she observes, the junta used Atatürk as a symbol in order to reinstate the authority of the state and forced Atatürk on everyone. Although the founder of the Republic had always been the object of a personality cult—except from 1938 to 1950, when Atatürk was dethroned as a state symbol by his successor İsmet İnönü, who replaced him on bills and stamps—the cult had never before attained the levels it did during the Kenan Evren regime in the 1980s. “Atatürkism” was officially elevated to a founding principle of the Constitution (of 1982) that was ordered by the military.

Writing in 1991, long before the advent of the moderate Islamists, political scientist Taner Timur anticipated what was to follow a decade later:

The constant exploitation by the 1971 and 1980 military interventions of the Kemalist cult and their incessant references to Atatürkism have distorted the public opinion's perception of what Kemalism is about. By utilizing Kemalism as a label for policies that are in marked contradiction with its core principles, the 1980 coup Kemalists finally succeeded in repelling democrats from Atatürk.⁶

Liberals and other democrats were, as Timur could foretell already a decade prior, ready to embrace any force that would present itself as the democratic alternative to a Kemalism that had come to be employed as an instrument for legitimizing oppression, not least of the secular left. Moderate Islam was to cast itself in the role of that democratic alternative by 2002.

In a similar fashion, Atilla Yayla writes: "My objection to Kemalism is that it is fashioned as an ideology and then forced on everyone by the state, with those dissenting from it being terrorized."⁷ He further states that

[t]he reason why Kemalism is subjected to heavy criticism is that it is exaggerated, sanctified and used to legitimize the current oppression. If that continues, the critics will become even more unrelenting and the tendency to disavow it altogether will grow stronger.⁸

Indeed, Yayla was severely punished for his statement about Kemalism cited above. He was dismissed from his chair at the Gazi University in Ankara, "lynched," as he describes it, by his colleagues and in the nationalist media, and was subsequently, in January 2008, given a suspended prison sentence of sixteen months for having "defamed" the memory of the founder of the Republic.

The fact that the ideology of the purportedly Westernizing republic fails to command the loyalty of an intellectual elite that aspires to be, precisely, a modernizing and Westernizing vanguard—and the fact that that disloyalty is potentially punishable in the court of law—should be troubling for anyone that holds it to be evident that the heritage bequeathed by Atatürk and by those who have claimed to be following in the footsteps of the founding father stands unequivocally for enlightenment. Kemalism can ill afford to be perceived as being at odds with modernity; ultimately, the liberal disavowal is a call for a reexamination of the Turkish secularist experience, and in particular of how it relates to Western, emancipating traditions.

Yayla argues: "Contemporary civilization is defined by liberal democracy, market economy, human rights, limited government. But for whatever reason, these are all things that Kemalists are generally uncomfortable with."⁹ It is undeniably striking, as Yayla observes, how "certain Kemalists perhaps unwittingly place Kemalism in the authoritarian-totalitarian camp, when they take pride in stating that although Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Hitler have fallen as idols, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is still standing."¹⁰

Atatürk, however, on at least one occasion identified himself with idols of an altogether different kind, who have indeed remained standing: "I have always been

inspired by the lives and accomplishments of Washington and Lincoln,” he once declared to an American journalist.¹¹ He corresponded with Franklin Roosevelt, not with Hitler, Mussolini, or Stalin. Yet, conspicuously, Kemalists have never been heard to take pride in saying: “Like Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt or Churchill, Atatürk is still venerated for his contributions to further the cause of freedom.” That omission is not accidental. It betrays more than a nationalistic reluctance to put the “great leader” (*ulu önder*) on an equal footing with ordinary mortals in the Western world. Indeed, it betrays a historically deeply rooted, ideological estrangement from the West, particularly from the liberal, emancipating values that have defined the very meaning of the Enlightenment in the Western world. However, set in motion by the urgency to modernize the state, the secularizing enterprise in the Ottoman/Turkish realm was never sustained by the kind of societal dynamics that had given impetus to Western Enlightenment; it has made Turkish secularists intrinsically non-disposed toward identifying their creed with liberal, Western ideas and symbols. Having once charted a course that led it in a different direction than Western secularism, Turkish secularism does not show any signs of evolving along liberal lines. On the contrary, Kemalism has during the last decade dug itself even deeper behind the walls of a xenophobic nationalism, animated by hostility toward a Western world that is perceived to be scheming to partition Turkey. The participants in the “Republican meetings,” the secularist-nationalist mass gatherings in 2007, notably rallied not only to the call “No to Shari’a” but to the call “No to the United States and no to the EU” as well.

Kemalists of the leftist mold have always privileged the anti-imperialist account of Atatürk, deploring that his successors, and to a certain degree Atatürk himself as well, chose to make Turkey a Western partner instead of a champion of the “third world.” However, what has gradually changed during the last two decades, since the first Gulf War, when Turkish and American strategic perceptions and priorities have tended to diverge, is that the reclusive, anti-Western, leftist-nationalist interpretation of Kemalism has come to be adopted by the once reliably pro-Western Republican establishment as well, most notably asserting a strong influence in the military.

That change is above all due to the Kurdish issue. The Kurdish insurgency since 1984 and the seemingly unstoppable rise of Kurdish nationalism have sapped the Turkish nationalist confidence in the ultimate viability of the nation-state construction. It has made Turkish nationalism more defensive and not least prone to view the West, which is suspected of upholding Kurdish aspirations, with great mistrust and even outright hostility. Meanwhile, the intractability of the Kurdish issue has led liberals down a radically different road, to the conclusion that the Republican enterprise is misconceived in its entirety.

The liberal criticism of Kemalism is obviously in keeping with Enlightenment tradition as it objects to state oppression and authoritarianism and when it makes the point that the nationalism that pervades Kemalist discourse precludes the enlightened embrace of universal, libertarian values. Yet, the liberal condemnation of Kemalism nevertheless ultimately betrays an equal inability to move beyond the

restraints of a cultural heritage that reins in liberty, free thought, and individual autonomy. In fact, both strains of Turkish modernism—Kemalism and liberalism—essentially remain trapped in the same non-libertarian worldview. Despite their modernist appearances, they are both in collusion with religious conservatism. Indeed, Turkish liberalism is explicit in its reverence for Islam, while Kemalism has implicitly acknowledged its dependence on religion.

The Shallowness of Kemalism

Şerif Mardin, the doyen of Turkish sociology, stirred a major debate in Turkey in 2008 when he proclaimed Islam's victory over the Republic. Religion is victorious, he declared, because "The republic has not given the question of what is good, right and aesthetic any deeper consideration. That is the deficiency of Kemalism."¹² Political scientist Metin Heper meanwhile holds that "Atatürk accomplished a cognitive revolution; he did more than change the way people think, he above all taught them to think for themselves."¹³ The verdict of Şerif Mardin, is however, disheartening:

While an innumerable amount of text has been produced in the West since the days of Immanuel Kant, while not least the seculars have given deep thought to developing ideas about what is good, right and aesthetic, the republic has nothing of the kind, no philosophy of ethics, to display.¹⁴

The absence of a Kant on Turkish soil suggests that the "cognitive revolution," indeed the "enlightenment" that Kemalist discourse postulates was introduced with the Republic, has not sunk any deeper roots; it would thus seem that the kind of emancipation of the mind to which Heper refers remains an unfulfilled promise.

What lends originality to Mardin's analysis is the implication that Kemalism has been unsuccessful, not because it has been applied with uncompromising vigor and insensitivity to popularly held beliefs but because Republican ideology has remained philosophically arid, being insufficiently—if at all—connected to and fecundated by any liberal heritage of the Enlightenment. "The Kemalists themselves have not properly understood Atatürk, let alone [are] able to explain Kemalism and secularism and have these embraced by society,"¹⁵ writes Mehmet Ali Birand in an assessment that runs counter to the conventional view of Kemalism, which holds it to have been doomed because it was Jacobin. According to Samuel Huntington, Atatürk's revolution was predestined to defeat since it challenged the "natural" order of things in its Muslim environment. Huntington consequently advised Turkey to "do a South Africa," "abandoning secularism as alien to its being as South Africa abandoned apartheid."¹⁶

Şerif Mardin implies not that the Republic was doomed by nature but rather that it doomed itself to defeat by failing to develop intellectually in the line of Enlightenment tradition. Historian İlber Ortaylı concurs:

The Republic has not succeeded in producing a republican individual. That was up to the school system to accomplish. Atatürk created examples to be followed, but his successors did not continue on the path laid out by him. If they had, the educational system would have nurtured a republican type.¹⁷

Others, commenting on Mardin's statements, made the point that the development of secular notions of good and right, of secular ethics, has been deliberately impeded by the right which has governed the country for most of the time. They reminded that a center-right government removed philosophy from the high school curriculum in the 1970s and that the rightist military regime of the 1980s united religion (i.e. Islam) and ethics as a single subject in the curriculum. The change was even written into the Constitution, underlining the importance ascribed by the military junta to what amounted to a statement that there could be no secular ethics indeed in Turkey. Obviously, that is a deed that challenges the conventional perception of the Turkish military as a stalwart bastion of secularism.

The fact that successive Turkish governments have refrained from enacting any active policies of "Enlightenment" is easily established. The crucial question is rather how pertinent it is to interpret that in terms of a betrayal of an initial, supposed promise. İlber Ortaylı expresses the longstanding conviction of the radical Kemalists, who have always thought of the Republic as having gone astray after the death of Atatürk. Such a narrative has an obvious appeal; it is seductive in the same vein as the narrative of radical Islam, which in similar terms depicts the history of Islam after Muhammad and his first three successors as one of betrayal of Islam's original promise. Ortaylı does not elaborate on how the "Republican individual" would have looked: one can, however, surmise that he has in mind a modern individual of the kind that was promoted by Atatürk—Western in outlook and freed from superstition and religious orthodoxy. Expressing the conviction that was a typical appendage of the optimistic liberalism of the nineteenth century, Atatürk anticipated that "the citizens will be able to exercise their political freedom in the best way" once the emancipation of the mind from religious constraint and indoctrination had been firmly established.¹⁸ Yet, the fact that Ortaylı holds forth a "Republican type" as an ideal, not a liberal or democratic individual, is telling; it reveals an incomplete perception of what "enlightenment" implies.

The Turkish state has in fact sought to nurture a "Republican type," a docile, rather than an enlightened, citizen. Political scientist Füsün Üstel has given an account of how the education of the "good" citizen has remained dictated by the needs of the state—in particular by the national security imperative—with citizenship remaining defined almost exclusively in terms of the fulfillment of duties towards the state.¹⁹

However, observing that "[f]reedom is as much about the relation of the individual to the state, as it is about the independence of states,"²⁰ Bernard Lewis has assessed the fundamental importance of the accomplishment of Atatürk in a different, libertarian light: Lewis suggests that Atatürk indeed privileged individual freedom: "What distinguishes Atatürk from every other revolutionary in the twentieth century is that

he strove to obtain not only the freedom of Turkey, but of the Turks as well.”²¹ Indeed, Atatürk did express that the very purpose of government is to guarantee individual liberty, a striking statement by the president of an authoritarian one-party state, and that at a time (1931) when precious few political leaders in Turkey’s vicinity or in the world were inclined to take such a view of governing.²² It is telling that the book that includes that and several other, similar statements that display Atatürk’s affinity with Enlightenment philosophy. His liberal predisposition is unknown to most in a country that is otherwise inundated with Atatürkist memorabilia. Atatürk authored his civic instruction with the intention of having it used as a high school textbook, but the generations that went to school after 1938 were never acquainted with it; it was apparently deemed too sensitive and was not reissued until three decades later and even then only with parts of it censored. The first, uncensored edition of what deserves to be called Atatürk’s liberal—and undeniably anti-Islamic, and generally anti-religious—tract was not published until 2003.

While Atatürk, at least as he authored his civic instruction, took the autonomy of the individual as frame of reference, Ortaylı’s regret that a “homo republican” has not been nurtured serves to underline how Turkish secularists, almost unconsciously, tend to confuse the emancipation of the state with the liberation of the individual, revealing the statist impulse that has propelled the secularizing enterprise from its conception. Putting the emphasis on “republic” is revelatory, indicating as it is that it has been the state, not the individual, which was to be empowered.

What preoccupied the Ottoman modernizers more than anything else was the survival and strength of the state, which had become dangerously prey to the ambitions of rapidly developing, technologically advanced European great powers. Modernization and secularization, which was a “naturally” evolving process in the West, imposed itself as a necessity for the Ottoman rulers; it was from its conception a revolution from above, intended to shore up the state. Most importantly, Ottoman, and subsequently Republican, secularization has implied a very different relation between the state and the individual than the one that had both made possible and sustained secularization in the West.

Why “Secularism” Did Not Emancipate the Mind

At the heart of the Turkish secularist endeavor is a congenital state-individual estrangement. In the West, the secular state had a natural ally in the individual in its challenge of the authority of the church. Western secularization was driven by societal dynamics, the rise of capitalism and of its bourgeoisie, which had empowered individuals, and of the concomitant evolution of natural sciences that expressed an emancipation of the mind that undermined the church’s claim to the truth. The challenge from below to the dictates of religious morality and to the religious worldview in turn sustained the emancipation of the state from political theology. In the Ottoman realm nothing of the kind occurred. The Ottoman state, gradually, tentatively secularizing from the end of the eighteenth century on, was deprived of the support of the individual in its attempt to break free from religious encirclement.

It has become fashionable in Turkish academic and public discourse, bent on reappraising the Ottoman experience, to assert that the Ottoman state was not a theocracy. Yet, it is a non-refutable fact that Ottoman political power was ultimately religiously legitimated. However much the sultans may have made use of religion for political purposes, and even though legislation was admittedly never based exclusively on Shari'a, religious law was nevertheless supreme, and it was religion that supplied the ultimate meaning of politics; what legitimated power was the perception that it upheld a religiously defined order.

The Ottoman reformers of the Tanzimat (Reorganization) era (1839 to 1876) did not attempt to tear down the religious foundations of the state; above all, the fundamental inequality between believers and unbelievers, between Muslims and non-Muslims, remained codified, in fact dooming the empire. Nevertheless, Ottoman reform did express a desire of the state to henceforth define its own legitimacy independently, not necessarily relying any longer on the ultimate sanction of religion. However, the reformist rulers stood alone in their challenge of religious authority; the individual remained cocooned in a religiously defined world which, unlike the Western one, remained stable. The Ottoman order had not been shattered by capitalism, science, or ideological relativism, which centuries of intra-religious strife had fostered in the West, undermining Christianity from within. Instability, ultimately creative, had paved the way for secularization in the Christian world. It was matched by the immobilizing stability of Ottoman society, which was challenged only from above, by the state and for the sake of the state. That has caused a lasting, liberal ambivalence to the secularizing reforms.

Presenting the liberal case against top-down secularism, Atilla Yayla writes that liberalism may indeed endorse reforms, provided they are not implemented by authoritarian methods and under condition that they enhance the freedom of the individual:

The reforms implemented during the Ottoman era as well during the Republic were—with a few exceptions—aimed at saving or founding and strengthening the state, at the expense of the individuals, rather than aimed at expanding and institutionalizing individual liberty.²³

Nevertheless, the proclamation of the legal equality of all subjects with the Tanzimat had offered the prospect of individual freedom and of equal citizenship by breaking up the hierarchies of the millet system—although the discrimination against unbelievers, the disavowal in principle notwithstanding, persisted in practice. Yet, “when the new system was established, the potential of freedom was not realized,” writes Etyen Mahçupyan, one of Turkey’s prominent libertarian-democrat intellectuals.²⁴

The conditions which gave rise to “modern” Turkey created an individual that was condemned to not challenge the restrictions on the freedom which it had been offered: It was an individual that had accepted to remain within the

confines of the freedom handed to it by the state. Truly free individuals and a truly free society consequently did not emerge.²⁵

Adnan Adıvar, a leading liberal dissident who had left the Turkey of Atatürk, has stated that “it is impossible to prove the existence of a tradition of free and critical thought in Turkey.”²⁶

Among others, Taner Timur has observed that the Ottomans failed to produce an enlightened class: “Unfortunately, Turkey has not produced an avant-garde that would have been capable of setting off a real cultural revolution.”²⁷ Neither the Islamic oriented “Young-Ottomans” nor the ultra-nationalist “Young Turks” qualify as enlightened liberals. The Young Ottomans defended freedom of expression and called for the institution of representative government, yet they held Shari’a to be the supreme guide. Their version of “Enlightenment” meant return to the pure, supposedly democratic, Islamic origins. “The scientific and philosophical issues that have defined the era of the Enlightenment called for intellectual deliberation and for internalization by an “enlightened elite,” which did not materialize.”²⁸

The shallowness of secular, Republican thinking that Şerif Mardin has called attention to is an Ottoman inheritance, a consequence, in part, of the specter of freedom having been offered—at least in theory—not surrendered, to the Ottoman individual. What did emerge as a consequence of Ottoman/Turkish secularization was “a standoff between an emancipated state that knew perfectly well what to do with its freedom and a society that, liberated by the intervention of state, was not quite capable of figuring out what it was to make of its freedom.”²⁹ The top-down, authoritarian implementation of secularism ultimately proved incapable of adapting the secular classes to the universal, libertarian values of the West, notes Maḥçupyan. However, that does not in itself explain why the potential of freedom was not realized by individuals that had nevertheless been offered emancipation from a religiously structured societal order. Nor does it account for the absence of a liberal avant-garde, with its accompanying culture of free deliberation and dissent.

One explanation is that the secular middle class was nurtured by the state and was to remain more or less dependent on it. The secular bourgeoisie of the Republic was intrinsically unmotivated to fulfill the kind of politically liberalizing mission with which the middle class in the West has historically been associated. To put it somewhat crudely, those who enjoyed the fruits of a freedom unexpectedly granted to them—a Westernized, permissive, bourgeois lifestyle that set Turkey apart from most Muslim countries—did not feel any particular urge to search for and develop any deeper understanding of what was “good, right and aesthetic” in a philosophical Enlightenment perspective.

In a more fundamental sense, the potential of freedom has remained unfulfilled because Turkish secularism has never really broken with the orthodox mentality of the past. On a structural level, it may have replaced the *ümmet* with the nation, bound by the horizontal loyalties of citizenship rather than by the vertical loyalties of the religious community. That certainly implies a change of mentality that in turn holds an implicit democratic promise. However, liberalization has been hampered:

“On a mental level, secularization and modernization in Turkey replaced the immobilizing certitudes of the traditional world with the similarly immobilizing dogmatism of positivism.”³⁰

The assertion that Kemalism has sought to “eradicate the religious or spiritual value system of the patriarchal Ottoman universe, imposing a ‘modern and scientific’ alternative in its place” is a staple of the liberal as well as, obviously, the conservative and Islamist indictment of the secularist enterprise.³¹ Yet, if Kemalism has indeed attempted to supplant religion with science, then it must be concluded that it has not succeeded in that attempt: according to a 2009 survey of radicalism and fundamentalism in Turkey realized by Professor Yılmaz Esmer of Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul, a mere seven percent of the Turkish population believes in the evolution; 93 percent believes in the creation story.³² Fifty-six percent hold religion to be a more reliable guide than science for understanding the world. Nor are the findings of Esmer’s survey attributable to any recent Islamic resurgence encouraged by the rule of the AKP, as the results were almost identical in a similar survey conducted in 1990. Esmer concludes that Muslim religiosity has not increased since the AKP came to power, only that it has become more visible. The Bahçeşehir University survey reveals that the seculars as well tend to have a religious view of the world: there is certainly a striking disproportion between those—16 percent—who declare that “secularism rates as most important for me” and the mere seven percent who believe in evolution, suggesting that the “positivist” worldview has failed to supplant religion with science even among a majority of those who believe themselves to be “secular.”

Religion has informed Kemalism more than the other way around: indeed, as Atilla Yayla reminds: “It is not uncommon in the world of ideas that movements and ideologies are influenced by and eventually end up becoming identical to what they had opposed in the first place.”³³ Etyen Mahçupyan notes that Kemalism has become a full-fledged religion, replete with its prophet, sacred texts, shrine, and appurtenant rituals.³⁴ Yayla writes that the “metaphysical language developed to describe Mustafa Kemal alone is enough proof that certain Kemalists are inclined to treat Atatürk as a prophet or a god.”³⁵ While Atatürk secularized Turkey, the Kemalists have, paradoxically, sanctified Atatürk. Indeed, the very fact that Kemalism has acquired the trappings of a religion is testimony to the enduring hold of a religious way of imagining the world.

According to historian Mete Tunçay, dogmatism is a trait that is shared by Islamic as well as Westernizing thinking in Turkish tradition.³⁶ Taner Timur’s observation, quoted above, that the Ottoman nineteenth century failed to produce an enlightened class of intellectuals, capable of deliberation about the deeper meaning of Enlightenment, is basically a statement about the inability to confront dogmatism. Timur thinks that a “progressive leap” should have been encouraged by the interaction with the West that developed during the nineteenth century. However, it was not only the material preconditions—capitalist development foremost—that were deficient. Crucially, the Ottomans were unaccustomed to dissent, as the Islamic universe had been “spared” the fate of Christianity. Persistent religious schism

within Christianity, marked by theological ambiguities and tensions, was instrumental in paving the way for Enlightenment; doctrinal differences rendered medieval Europe intolerant, dogmatic, and violent, but eventually the vicious religious civil war not only helped bring about the collapse of the scholastic monopoly of “classical” knowledge, it also unwittingly served to legitimize the notion that belief was a matter of opinion, fostering a culture of dissent, of tolerance of skepticism. Until recently, the universe of Islam had not been confronted with any comparable challenge; Kemalism, although it represents a revolt against political theology against the age old habit of appealing to divine revelation as a source of political legitimacy, is nevertheless itself a reflection of religious orthodoxy in so far as it is as unfamiliar and uncomfortable with dissent, indeed, with the notion of secular scrutiny of what is deemed to be sacrosanct.

It is no coincidence that neither a comprehensive Turkish-language biography of Atatürk that fully engages the subject, daring enough to break the taboos, nor any such film about the founding father has yet been produced in Turkey. Much about Atatürk’s life remains a state secret to this day; his diaries, kept away from the public eye by the vigilant General Staff, have not been fully disclosed; and the Turkish Historical foundation that Atatürk himself founded was responsible for the censorship of the civic instruction that he authored. It was thus not surprising that journalist and documentary filmmaker Can Dündar managed to create a fury with his 2008 documentary *Mustafa*, the first attempt ever, although flawed, to look behind the official façade of the semi-god into which Atatürk has been turned. A moderate Kemalist himself, Dündar committed the sacrilege of humanizing Atatürk; incensed Kemalists denounced Dündar either as a traitor or as a slanderer. The chairman of the Atatürk Thought Association (ADD) in Çankaya, Ankara, brought charges against the filmmaker for sullyng the memory of Atatürk. The reactions were not dissimilar to the Muslim outrage that followed the publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons of Muhammad. What caused particular outrage among the Kemalists was the depiction of Atatürk as isolated and depressed toward the end of his life, longing for escape from his “imprisonment” at the presidential mansion and at the Dolmabahçe palace in Istanbul. The film’s suggestion that the founding father had lost his zeal, worse, that he even may have felt, at some level, that he had failed, was too provocative. It is understandable that the members of the Kemalist minority, having their backs to the wall, are not psychologically disposed toward acknowledging that the icon to which they desperately cling may have had any flaws, or that he went to his grave an unhappy man, which implies that the specter of defeat may have haunted him. Although exceptional circumstances do account for the near-hysteria, the reactions to *Mustafa* were not exceptional in their expression of the crypto-religious dogmatism that has long since accompanied Kemalism.

Liberals Attribute Emancipating Potential to Muslim Religiosity

Although they hold the sanctification of Kemalism against it, liberals are nevertheless anything but anti-religious. In the West, liberalism has historically been

anti-clerical and represented the rejection of the notion that inherited loyalties, religion, or tradition have any binding authority. Turkish liberalism has a different history, one of alliance with pro-religious conservatism, dating back to the founding of the Republic. As Mustafa Kemal Atatürk embarked on his social revolution and laid down the foundations of authoritarian rule, his erstwhile comrades-in-arms, led by Rauf Orbay, favored social evolution and multiparty democracy. They parted ways with him, notably opposing the abolishment of the caliphate. “What need was there for hurry, for sudden and radical change?” they asked. “Thus spoke the voice of the liberal Turkish gentleman,” as Patrick Kinross put it.³⁷ It was a defining moment: the confusion of the defense of liberal democracy and of the supremacy of religion—enshrined in the liberals’ defense of the caliphate, seen as a counterweight to Mustafa Kemal’s power—was to bequeath an ideological contradiction that Turkish liberalism is yet to sort out.

Decades later another “liberal Turkish gentleman,” Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, would in the same vein as a Rauf Orbay denounce Kemalism as “prejudiced and narrow-minded” for having postulated that the Islamic tradition and culture accounts for Turkey’s weakness and underdevelopment.³⁸ Liberal intellectuals tend to embellish the Ottoman, Islamic past. They deplore the “unjust and needless” secularist reforms that “ravaged” the pluralistic, civil society that the Republic had inherited from the Ottoman era.³⁹ Ottoman nostalgia and the belief that the Republic’s break with a more authentic culture has left an existential void in Republican Turkey is, typically, a theme that runs through much of the work of Pamuk. The longing for the “authentic” is arguably a distinctly conservative undercurrent in the liberal judgment of Kemalism.

Repelled by the authoritarianism of Kemalism, the otherwise secular, modernist liberals are apt to look for deliverance by Islam, attributing an emancipating potential to religiosity by default. Orhan Pamuk maintains that it is not seculars like him that make Turkey European, that what is much more important is that a majority of conservative Turks want to join the EU. Secularism, writes Etyen Mahçupyan, left the individual alone and defenseless against an authoritarian state when it replaced a society composed of communities of the faithful with the nation: that meant that the individual was deprived of the protection that the religious community had provided.⁴⁰ The reassertion of a religious identity is welcomed as an expression of emancipation: “Those who today call themselves ‘religious’ are more libertarian minded [than the seculars] precisely because they are able to say that, because by doing that, they shed an identity imposed by the state.”⁴¹ It is thus the religious who possess an emancipated mind, since they don’t hesitate to venture beyond the ideological confines erected by the state.

Turkish liberals’ penchant to idealize Islamic conservatism as the antidote of Kemalism is on full display when Mahçupyan writes that religious conservatives in towns around Anatolia, seeking to reconnect to a multi-religious heritage, have become engaged in the renovation of deserted churches, if true an expression of a remarkable change of mentality that is, however, not substantiated by other reports from Turkey’s conservative heartland. The landmark study *To be Different in*

Turkey of the Bosphorus University in Istanbul and the Istanbul branch of the Open Society Foundation concluded, on the contrary, that the repression of deviations from the Islamic and ethnic Turkish mainstream is severe and widespread, and clearly on the rise, in Anatolia.⁴²

The Ambiguity of Kemalism

According to Yılmaz Esmer's survey on radicalism and fundamentalism cited above, 62 percent of Turkey's population rate religion first when asked to name what is most important.⁴³ Sixteen percent name secularism, with 13 percent placing democracy at the top. Turkey is a decidedly religious society, not only because religious conservatism remains entrenched but also as secularism itself has evolved into an ersatz religion. Turkish secularism abounds with paradoxes: Although the Kemalist revolution dismantled the power of religion over law and—initially—over education, it nevertheless implicitly postulated that Islam was going to be an integral part of the national identity that was constructed. The nominally secularist Turkish state has built more mosques than any other state in the Muslim world, relentlessly expanded the scope of religious education since the 1970s, and has always privileged conservative Sunni Islam as a de facto state religion, promoted by the state directorate of religious affairs, at the expense of the Alevi creed.

Turkish secularism has been distinguished by “a structural bad faith,” observes historian Perry Anderson.⁴⁴

The ambiguity of Kemalism was to construct an ideological code in two registers. One was secular and appealed to the elite. The other was crypto-religious and accessible to the masses. Common to both was the integrity of the nation, as supreme political value.

As was the case with the nineteenth century Ottoman reform attempt, Republican secularism has gotten stuck in the parochial, unable to move beyond it to the universal. The promise of Enlightenment continues to elude Turkish secularism: mirroring the failure of the secular-minded Ottoman reformers, who had initially held out the promise of universalism, enshrined in the concept of liberal citizenship, only to retreat in the face of Islamic reaction, the Kemalists have ceded to Islam and to parochial nationalism. Taner Timur writes:

As the West eventually came to identify itself with the rationalist and libertarian values of the Enlightenment, Turkish nationalism chose to emphasize those parts of our history that distinguishes us from the West. Indeed, without being aware of it, Turkish nationalism internalized the anti-Western emotional reservoir of a reactionary religious ideology.⁴⁵

The uncompromising Turkishness that Atatürk planted at the heart of his new republic disconnected Turkey from a heritage—the ancient Greek—that potentially could

have facilitated its Westernization. The personal experience of İlhan Selçuk, the publisher of the secularist daily *Cumhuriyet* and the leading intellectual representative of the Kemalist tradition, offers an illustration of how Kemalist nationalism closed the Turkish mind. It suggests that Kemalist nationalism—conventionally accused of having severed Turkey’s ties to its Islamic past—shut off Western sources of civilization as well. Selçuk, whose parents were immigrants from Crete, regrets having been denied the opportunity to learn Greek as a child:

My parents occasionally spoke Greek with each other, but they were intimidated by the coercion to speak only Turkish. These were the early years of the republic, when citizens were told by the state to speak Turkish. If only my parents had spoken Greek, if only I had learned Greek; then I would have been able to read the Greek classics.⁴⁶

Taner Timur notes that “with great intuition, Atatürk had initially sought to define the modern Turk in terms of civilization; yet the attempt soon acquired ethnic Turkic overtones, turning into an effort to prove the Turkishness of ancient civilizations.”⁴⁷ Conversely the non-Muslim was excluded from the supposedly secular, new community: the tiny Christian and Jewish communities were subjected to treatment—the ethnic cleansing of the Jews from the region of Thrace in 1934, the expropriation tax of 1942, the pogroms against the Greeks in Istanbul in 1955, and the expulsion of the last remaining Istanbul Greeks in 1964—that made it abundantly clear how fundamental the division between believers and unbelievers continued to be in Kemalist Turkey. In a 1990 survey, 59 percent said that they did not want to have Christians as neighbors, and 65 percent did not want to share their neighborhood with Jews.⁴⁸

The fate of Halûk Fikret, the son of Tevfik Fikret, the Ottoman/Turkish poet who occupies a prominent place in the pantheon of the “Turkish Enlightenment,” is a perfect illustration of the “structural bad faith” that has continued to haunt Turkish secularism. None other than Atatürk himself had honored Tevfik Fikret with his famous statement: “It was from Fikret that I acquired the spirit of revolution.”⁴⁹ Fikret had been accused of being a crypto-Christian by Mehmet Ali Âkif, the author of the Turkish national anthem and an Islamic conservative who went into self-imposed exile in Egypt after the secularizing reforms were introduced. It is, however, the heritage of Âkif, rather than that of Fikret, that has informed public attitudes about the proper religious affiliation in the nominally secularist republic. Tevfik Fikret’s son Halûk, who had migrated to the United States and converted to Christianity, was to be publicly ostracized in his former homeland. The news that Halûk had been ordained as a priest caused further consternation, not so much among the religious conservatives who had anyway written off his secularist father, as among those who prided themselves of being secular and who revered Tevfik Fikret as a harbinger of enlightenment. The front page of the nationalist-secularist daily *Hürriyet* on June 23, 1962, carried the news about Halûk’s ordination, presenting it “as if it was a crime.”⁵⁰ The destiny that Halûk chose to pursue could not be reconciled with the non-secular

definition of Turkishness that has prevailed. The widespread and persistent, religiously motivated societal intolerance toward “the other” indicates that eight decades of secularist rule never did encroach on Islam’s hold over minds.

After “Thomas Hobbes” Turkey Waits for a “John Locke” to Present Himself

Atatürk’s singular achievement was to secularize the source of political sovereignty: “Our principles should not be confused with the dogmas of the books that are supposed to be heavenly revealed. We seek inspiration, not from the heavens, but from real life,” Atatürk declared in his last address to parliament, on November 1, 1937.⁵¹ “Translated into the terminology of political science, his words describe the transfer of power from God to the Prince, something that we were first taught about by the likes of Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes,” recalls political scientist Baskın Oran, calling it Atatürk’s “greatest achievement.”⁵² (Oran is a liberal leftist, whose assistant professorial thesis about Kemalist nationalism was rejected for not being in sufficient conformity with the official, Atatürkist line; he was subsequently dismissed from the Political Science faculty of Ankara University during the rule of the military junta in the 1980s).

Thomas Hobbes’ great contribution was, notes Columbia University scholar Mark Lilla, to have found a way of separating claims to revelation from the thinking about the common political good, which prepared the ground for the eventual advent of democracy: “The truth is that the way modern liberal democracies approach religion and politics today is unimaginable without the decisive break made by Thomas Hobbes.”⁵³ Atatürk’s accomplishment is indeed Hobbesian to its nature: Hobbes “clearly wanted secular rulers to take control of Christianity and treat it as a merely civil religion calibrated to meet the demands of the state. There would be no independent church and therefore no potential struggle between miter and crown.”⁵⁴ Furthermore:

Hobbes believed that only an all-powerful sovereign who was simultaneously head of a common civil religion could possibly create the conditions under which unhealthy fear (caused by the cycle of superstition and violence into which political theology inevitably led) would dissipate, people would feel free.⁵⁵

However, Thomas Hobbes was succeeded by liberals, chief among them John Locke who, although they shared his aims, thought those same aims could be achieved only in a system based on limited government, separation of church and state, and religious toleration. No similar liberalization of the Kemalist Leviathan took place: the Kemalists, in the spirit of Hobbes, continued to opt for a state monopoly over public worship and religious teaching. Echoing Hobbes, who did not think it was possible to liberalize and enlighten the Christian churches from within, Atatürk had stated: “I cannot become a Luther.”⁵⁶ Atatürk had, however, toyed with the idea of religious reform, ordering the first Turkish translation ever of the Qur’an and introducing the call for prayer in Turkish. Yet, discouraged by his associates, he

abandoned the tentative. Islam was not to be reformed, it was to be controlled. Summing up the fate of secularism in the Middle East, essayist Jean-Claude Barreau notes: “With various success Kemalists and Nasserists undertook to modernize the state, but none of them, not even Mustafa Kemal, sought to modernize Islam. Yet, that was the great mission to be accomplished.”⁵⁷

However, no John Locke has presented himself on Turkish soil. Unlike Turkish liberals, Locke did not content himself with extolling the virtues of tolerance; he actively engaged Protestant divines in debates about the tenets of Christianity. “Locke thought it both necessary and possible to convince the Christian churches to liberalize themselves, doctrinally and organizationally.”⁵⁸ Liberal Turkish intellectuals tend to take such reformation more or less for granted. They are encouraged by in particular the recent rise of a pious entrepreneurial class, convinced that the “Islamic Calvinists” will eventually usher in a kind of Muslim reformation as a result of interacting globally in economic terms. Ironically, the liberals thus reveal themselves to be as positivist as the Kemalists they chide for that very reason. The conviction that the advance of modernity, the practical application of scientific knowledge, inevitably produces a convergence in—enlightened—values forms the core of positivism. The positivist creed animated Marx’s ideal of communism, informed the theories of modernization that were developed after the Second World War, and “it guides the architects of the global free market today.”⁵⁹ In their belief that modernization equals enlightenment the liberals are as trapped in the “modern myth” as the Kemalists used to be.

Yet, Kemalists and liberals are kin in a different, indeed opposite, respect as well: their modernism notwithstanding, both categories, a Kemal Atatürk as much as an Orhan Pamuk, dread the existential void of rationalism. Enlightenment rationalism was eventually to give way to the temptation of mystique even in the case of Atatürk himself: As the end neared, even he “needed a mystique of his own.”⁶⁰

A man without spiritual beliefs, he nevertheless felt the need to identify himself with something outside and beyond himself. Who was he and whence did he come? The answer was perhaps to be found in the history, stretching back to an age before man was troubled by religions, of a race—his race—spreading its various branches from the homeland of humanity itself over all parts of the world.⁶¹

The promise of universalism was distorted by the allure of the parochial, as the rational succumbed to the mystique of the primordial. The story of Turkish secularism is ultimately one about the promise of an enlightened modernity being overrun by the primordial forces of history and tradition. Meanwhile, Turkish liberalism is yet to engage religious conservatism in the spirit of a John Locke.

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