

Kenan Tekin

Reconfiguring Science and Religion in the Late Ottoman Empire

Abstract

This paper is based on the final chapter of my dissertation which traces the shifts in the concepts of (and religion) from early modern to modern Ottoman history. In the preceding chapters, I argue that early modern Ottomans conceptualized science in a manner that was inclusive of various disciplinary discourses including religious sciences as well as disciplines that came to be designated as pseudo-sciences. Yet, the early modern conceptions of sciences was not homogenous since sciences were classified hierarchically reflecting certain values. I have asserted that those classifications were situated and represented interests of the milieu such as the court or rural madrasas. By the first half of nineteenth century there was a major shift in the notion of science owing to the encounter with the European colonial-imperial discourses as well as to the changing conditions of knowledge making in the Ottoman Empire as reflected in new institutions such as schools, academic societies etc. These social and institutional changes combined with the emergence of mass media contributed to the reconfiguration of previously established conceptions of science (*ulum ve fünun*), religion, politics, literature et al. The process of change can be seen in a variety of print and archival documents, including official documents, newspapers and journal articles, translations, reform proposals, textbooks, and curricula. All of these show how new conceptions of science et al. were negotiated, contested, and performed as they were being reconstituted. I will begin by analyzing documents from the archive that concern matters related to *ilm* (science, knowledge) or *ulum ve fünun* (sciences or sciences and arts). Following the archival documents, I will discuss conceptions of science as reflected in Ali Suavi's journal entitled *Ulum* (sciences), and then consider public/private correspondence between Ahmed Midhat and Fatma Aliye. All of these figures were prolific writers who participated in the reconfiguration of science, and hence, religion.

The Prime Ministry Archives in Istanbul, from which I draw materials, includes a heterogenous body of knowledge and a variety of documents. These documents manifest the role of various agents including the state, in the formation of categories such as science, religion, and politics. They also show both positive and prohibitive state actions that either delineate boundaries between these categories, and hence effectively bringing them into being as distinct realms. I assert that the Ottoman state was the major actor in the reconfiguration of concepts of science and religion. Of course, the government had many branches that were involved in issues related to the making of science, including regulating publications, establishing, administering, and staffing educational institutions, controlling movement of foreign scholars, and rewarding scientists. Hence, the documents are not homogenous, and difficult to classify unless one simply follows the bureaucratic division. For my own purposes, I group them in terms of the content, and consider their positive and prohibitive role in the making of science and religion. Examples of the former include documents related to state funded projects, institutions, societies, texts, and rewards (such as promotions, monetary rewards, and medallions) to mention a few, in order to further scientific progress, which effectively condones a certain understanding of science to the exclusion of other possibilities. Examples of the prohibitive or negative power of the state overlaps with some of the same powers such as administering, appointing, funding which can be

used to negate certain individuals or institutions from enjoying state patronage for their endeavors. Moreover the state exercised the power of controlling, regulating and allocating permission to non-official initiatives. Therefore, it also was shaping the civil initiatives related to science and religion.

In the second part of my paper, I will discuss a periodical produced by Ali Suavi. This periodical, *Ulum*, included various topics. However, most of its sections were devoted to history, politics, political economy, etc. It is interesting that despite Ali Suavi's background in religious disciplines, they do not figure much in his periodical entitled *Sciences*. This, I argue, reflects the impact of the new understanding of science which slowly limited and excluded religious disciplines from that category. Last but not least, I consider a discussion between Ahmed Midhat and Fatma Aliye regarding concepts of *alim* (learned men), *hakim* (sage), and *feylesof* (philosopher), which further shows the influence of the new understanding of science on these archetypes.

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