DİNLER TARİHİ ARAŞTIRMALARI - VI

SEKÜLERLEŞME VE DİNİ CANLANMA

SEempozyum
(22-23 Ekim / October 2008 Ankara)

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ANKARA 2008
TÜRKİYE DİNLER TARİHİ DERNEĞİ

Yayın No: 6

ISBN: 978-975-94505-4-0

Bütün Yayın Hakları Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Derneği'ne Aittir.
Birinci Baskı: Kasım 2008, 700 Adet
CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION: ERNEST GELLNER IN TURKEY

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Abstract

With the examples of modern Muslim societies mostly in mind, the late Ernest Gellner argued that society cannot be both 'civil' and imbued with significant qualities of religion. The 'civil' and 'sacred' just cannot abide each other. The essence of civil society is that the civil trumps the sacred, but not the other way around. This paper explores the validity of Gellner's argument, both in light of the logic of Gellner's claims and as well as in light of the history and present-day context of Turkey, especially in terms of the status of religious studies.

Turkey has a special claim on the attention of anyone concerned with the future of liberal societies ... and Islam. (Gellner 1994b, 81)

Being Here

I am not here to make Turkey into some kind of social laboratory for my research. But, I do want to learn about and try to understand modern Turkey, not only because I have cared for many years about the relations between religion and politics, but also because I care about the future of relations between the Muslim and Western worlds. These twin concerns have also brought my engagement in the work of the recently deceased philosopher and sociologist, Ernest Gellner, to a new resting place in my interest in the study of religion in Turkey. Before I begin, let me confess what will become soon obvious, namely that my knowledge is severely limited when it comes to both Turkey and Islam. I am trying to learn all that I can, but I do not want to presume to be some kind of expert in Turkey or Islam. But, I do know some things — have some strong opinions! — about the study of religion and its history, and want to say something about them. I shall try to do this by bringing what I know about the study of religion to bear on the study of religion in Turkey in the same way that Gellner brought his North African sociological work to bear on Turkey. I must say in this connection that in researching and writing this paper, I feel privileged to have become acquainted with so many exciting thinkers bravely addressing issues of pressing concern. With apologies out of the way, let me get on to Gellner's notions about civil society.

For some years, I have found the theoretical writings of Gellner stimulating and useful to my own work in the intellectual history of the study of religion for his persuasive way of showing how one might defensibly and consequentially link ideas to their socially facilitating bases. Thus, my own break with my training in Anglo-American analytic philosophy of religion can in some sense be traced to my avid reading of Gellner's stinging critiques of Oxbridge philosophy such as
Words and Things (1959) and Thought and Change (1964). I also benefitted from Gellner’s positive attempts to propose a constructive approach to the study of ideas in context, The Legitimation of Belief (1974). In recent years, partly in response to the changes in our world wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of religious nationalism and, of course, as an American, of 9-11, I, like others, have shifted our attention to that great mass of issues stirred up by these great historical transformation. Luckily for me, Gellner was already there with a series of thoughtful and enlivening books and articles speaking to such issues as civil society and religious nationalism. Moreover — and this is what matters most to me — Gellner shows students of religion how to engage such two critical issues (and more) using the comparative study of religions, and not only of the Western and Muslim worlds, but also with an occasional foray into South Asia. Thus, atop his theoretical interests, Gellner has given us two important works on Islam, Muslim Society (1981) and Saints of the Atlas (1969). These have received wide acclaim and perhaps stirred even more controversy for their attempts both to provide compelling accounts of significant aspects of Muslim societies, such the relation of a “folk Islam,” distinguished by devotion to marabouts, those traditional Muslim saintly parsonages, and the High Islam of the cities, replete with its complement of legal, philosophical and scripturalist scholarship. Gellner also took on the issues of the dynamic of economic, political and religious change in a comparative Islamic context, the prospects for Muslim civil society.

Especially in his work on the relation of Folk to High Islam, Gellner stands out among other Western scholars of the Muslim world, as we will see, for his attempts to understand and explain religious and political change. He posits a universal theoretical model of the circulation of elites, or as Gellner critic, Michael Lesnoff puts it, a “circulation of autocracies.” (Lesnoff 2002, 77) In Muslim societies of the “arid zone” – from the Atlantic to the Hindu Kush – social and political change has been driven by a dynamic struggle between tribal “Folk Islam” and central state, urban “High Islam,” updating, as it were, the theories of the great medieval Muslim thinker, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 CE). What matters to us here, however, is that Gellner saw the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently Kemalist Turkey — at least in most respects — not as another instance of Khaldun’s universal model, but as the great exception among Muslim societies in establishing a “stable and long-lasting... dynamic autocracy,” the proverbial ‘exception that proves the rule.’ (Lesnoff 2002, 77) For this reason alone then, we need to ponder Gellner’s remarks quoted in my epigram, “Turkey has a special claim on the attention of anyone concerned with the future of liberal societies ... and Islam.” (Gellner 1994b, 81) Part of what I shall talk about here today has to do with the dynamic of the future of liberal societies, at least insofar as this concerns the study of religion. Much of this discussion can be gathered under the rubric of the discourse about civil society.

Civil Society, Civil Societies

In his 1990 Tanner Lectures on Human Values, “The Civil and the Sacred,” Ernest Gellner claimed that “what really is of burning concern now are the preconditions of civil society.” (Gellner 1991, 345) Nearly two decades later, I would argue that if not the historical “preconditions” then the actual facilitating “conditions of civil society” ought to be issues of “burning concern.” Civil
society is important for Gellner because it is presupposed by conditions of political, economic and ideological pluralism that Gellner and other liberal modernists celebrate. Civil society achieves these goals of pluralism because it is "large, powerful and organized" enough to insure that the state is doing its job and no more (Gellner 1991, 303) This commitment to pluralism means that Gellner is uncomfortable with an overarching unifying sacred in any of the states composing Atlantic civilization - at least should they also wish to remain 'civil.' Gellner thus claims that "if any doctrine or idea-carrying institution would claim monopoly of truth or access to truth, this once again could and would inhibit the exercise of checks on government." Much worse, of course, is the case where the government supervises or becomes identified with this "truth." Thus, a unique truth, identified by procedures which are themselves under governmental control, can then validate government and its procedure in a way which precludes criticism, by damning it actually a priori (Gellner 1991, 304)

Students of Turkish history might recognize in this ideal something of the beginning of the Republic and its embrace of corporatism and Solidarism from such well-known Western thinkers, such as Émile Durkheim, and Turkish interpreters like Ziya Gökalp. Both sought to reconstruct Ottoman society into Turkish national society by encouraging the formation of professional, commercial and labor 'corporations' or unions, that would interpose themselves between the state and the individual. Durkheim had in mind a view of society that resembled associations of medieval European guilds; Gökalp hearkens back to the old "independent" Turkish "guild organizations" as a kind of model of what he means for the new solidarist corporatist social organization of the early Republic. Like Durkheim, Gökalp does not wish to resuscitate these medieval institutions. Instead, says Gökalp, "they must be abolished and replaced by national organizations having their centers in the national capital." (Gökalp 1968a, 106) He, like Durkheim, saw the "professional group" or "corporation" as the basis for his new project of social construction. (Durkheim 1902, xxxv) Durkheim lamented the abolition of the European guilds by the French Revolution, or to be precise, lamented their abolition without the creation of some sort of updated institutions, such as labor unions, to fulfill the function the old medieval guilds had performed. Without any mediating institutions between the individual and the state, Durkheim feared that the individual would be left unprotected from possible predations of the state. Durkheim was wary of the power of the state to crush such intermediary grassroots organizations, and noted that in ancient Rome, the system of artisan and workers' unions formed there was finally ruined by being subordinated to the state administration. (Durkheim 1902, xxxvii-xxxviii)

On the other hand, in periods of nation-building, especially when the very existence of the nation is threatened, unity is at a premium. Both Durkheim and Gökalp felt that their corporatist solidarist model of society could provide another vital benefit. The formation of such subgroups could corral the reckless "self-interest" of extreme individualism that might weaken state unity precisely when it was needed. The subgroups forced the individual to take into account something beyond themselves, something of the general welfare of society. They gave individuals a "taste for altruism, for forgetfulness of self and sacrifice." (Durkheim 1902, xxxiv) It is in this context
of national interest and nation-building that we should also see the Kemalist corporatism urged by Gökalp, and indeed the beginnings of what we might call Turkish civil society.

That Durkheim's and Gökalp's vision did not bear the kind of long-lived fruit in the economic sector of Turkish national development that they had envisioned is a familiar theme in the histories of the early days of the Republic. Şerif Mardin, for example, claims the economic bases for civil society involved in such schemes of corporate social organization were not in place. The industrial and economic efforts of the corporate state were in this sense premature. (Mardin 1995, 294) But, when we think about a civil intellectual life and traditions of civil discourse, what seem to have been in place in Turkey for some time were perhaps other — religious and general social — resources constituting the indigenous ground of a Turkish civil society. Here, one thinks of the work of anthropologist, Michael E. Meeker on the role of "coffeehouses" as bases of public discussion and debate all over the nation, or the existence of grass-roots, voluntary religious "networks" (tarikat) that Rainer Hermann discusses. (Hermann 2006; Meeker 2002)

The prospects and struggle for civil society concern me because Gellner suggests that a society cannot be both civil society and imbued with significant qualities of the sacred. Similarly, as well, and in particular reference to Turkey, Gellner's view is shared in many ways by the Turkish scholar, Şerif Mardin. In the classic statement of his skeptic's position, "Civil Society and Islam," Mardin argues, in sum, that civil society is an institution peculiar to the West and incompatible with Islam because of the radically different histories involved. He lists numerous points of crucial contrast, serving in his mind to disqualify Islam, on its own, from ever being hospitable to a recognizable notion of 'civil society.' Among the many listed are the claims that, even as late as the 19th century, Ottoman folk were never considered "citizens," but merely "subjects," (Mardin 1995, 292) or that Islam lacks any notion of the "legal force of contract," (Mardin 1995, 291)and submits to "political obligations set by the Qur'an," or by "Qur'anic commentators," or by the "ideal of social equilibrium created under the aegis of a just prince."(Mardin 1995, 285) Nor, despite efforts to create a strong market based economic structure did even the leadership of Mustafa Kemal succeed in creating what would hopefullyamount to the economic base that Mardin feels is a necessary precondition for civil society.(Mardin 1995, 294) As for the present day, Mardin notes efforts by Islamists to dream their own "dream," and thus begin "slowly emerging as a force in Turkey, but what this other dream means in the frame of contemporary social life" is still to him, at least in 1995, an "enigma." (Mardin 1995, 295)

Yet, as formidable as Mardin's historical analysis might be, they are not necessarily the last words. As I have pointed out, recent work by anthropologists working in Turkey, such as Michael E. Meeker, point to the possibility for creating from indigenous sources the functional equivalent of what is known in the West as civil society. The tarikats ("networks") reported by Hermann are no longer the hierarchical and shayk-based pious groupings they were in the past, but are now organizations, led by "independent urban intellectuals." (Hermann 2006, 272) Or, in other cases, the tarikats have evolved into large and more flexible 'networks' (cemaaat) often convened and coordinated by mass electronic media. One such network centered around the controversial figure of Fethullah Gülen (1938-), a follower of a figure of early 19th century
Muslim renewal, Nursi Said. Still, I believe, living in exile in the United States, Fethullah Gülen was indicted of promoting a religious state to replace Turkey’s present arrangements. On the other hand, his reputation is also as someone who urges moderation in political matters, tolerance and dialogue with other religions, and a thoroughly Turkish kind of Islam. (Hermann 2006, 270) Others, like Binnaz Toprak have taken a more traditional route and cited political and social preparations for that civil society that in Turkey one might trace back into the early Tanzimat period. (Toprak 1996)

Meeker’s work in rural Antalya led him to the conclusion that civil society might have a homelier basis than Gellner’s independent guilds, towns or baronies that for Gellner became the primordial bases of what would later flower into democratic institutions. These are none other than the “coffeehouses” found in many Turkish towns and villages. Here, “men,” those who could be said to “represent the general public,” convene to sort through all matters of common public business. In this sense, according to Meeker, then, the coffeehouses were, and are, “forums of public life, for the town, but also for the entire district.” (Meeker 2002, 342) When Meeker asked local residents what these observed gatherings meant, they would reply that “the public is sitting.” Elaborating, Meeker says, “The interactions that occurred in coffeehouses were based both on the assumption of common public norms and the existence of a general public body.” (Meeker 2002, 343)

As far as it is possible to speak meaningfully of ‘Muslim’ societies in general or across cultures, Meeker’s observations also jibe with those of Robert W. Hefner who stresses as well the grass-roots sources of religion-political revival against the so-called “secularization” theorists who have long argued for the gradual disappearance, and/or privatization, of religion in the modern world:

...contrary to conventional secularization theories, religion in modern times has not everywhere declined as a public force, nor been domiciled within a sphere of inferiority. Not a reaction against but a response to the modern world, the most successful religious refigurations thrive by drawing themselves down into mass society and away from exclusive elites. (Hefner 1998, 97-8)

Taken together, Meeker and Hefner underscore that today’s sources of both civil society and public religion seem to be found in the ferment among members of small affinity groups and popular culture.

To this general social ferment that is Muslim civil society in general, I would like to alert my European and American colleagues about the exciting and consequential recent discussions among Turkish intellectuals across a wide ideological spectrum specifically about religion, the study of religion and related matters. Names such as those of public intellectuals and theorists involved in the discourse of religion and modernity, such as Yaşar Nuri Öztürk, Ali Bulaç, Fethullah Gülen or Fehmi Koru among others need to be read in the West. Similarly, those involved in the somewhat more specialized field of Qur’anic studies, with its lively debates about the status of scripture, with its natural ramifications throughout the Muslim world, deserve serious attention outside Turkey as well. Such scholars as Ebu Bekir Sifil, Ali Ünal, Yasin Aktay, Sadik Kılıç, Taksin Görgün, Ismail Albayrak, Halis Albayrak, Mehmet Pcaç or Ömer Özoy need to be made
available in English translation as well. If civil society at the intellectual level means anything in the world of scholarship about religion, it means what we see today in Turkey in its abundance of public debate about religion and the study of religion. (Albayrak 2006; Hermann 2006)

**Gellner’s Dilemma: the ‘Civil’ or the ‘Sacred’**

Gellner, however, would at this point want to intervene, and dispel some of the perhaps too eirenic sweetness and light with which I have suffused this paper. I must admit that I, at least, admire the existence of a public discourse about religion and the study of religion driven by the thinkers I have named, as far as I have come to know them. This is not the same as saying that I concur with what such a wide range of thinkers say. How could I? Agreement and concurrence will come only after I have come to know them better. But, the very fact that there exists such a public discourse about religion and the study of religion is sufficient for my giving the benefit of the doubt to the idea that in the world of scholarship about religion the civil and the sacred might — I say might — somehow cohabit in ‘real life.’ By ‘real life’ I mean, for example, in the kind of general society that Islamists imagine as a nation-state in which Islam will have some prominent place. The dream of such Turkish Islamists, as far as I have been able to acquaint myself with their politics, would respect the secular constitution of the Republic, will tolerate dissent, unbelief, women’s equality and such. (Hermann 2006) In the more specific context of the ‘real life’ of the university and scholarship, Islamist intellectuals seem to dream that scholarship in the study of religion could somehow be made ‘Islamic,’ yet not abrogate “modernity,” or violate principles of scientific inquiry. In the words of Reşat Kasaba

Equating the collapse of state-centered models of modernization with the collapse of modernity itself would mean that we are still reading history through the lens of a very restrictive model. Far from extinguishing the promise of modernity, the ongoing eclipse of these models releases, in theory and in practice, the liberating and enabling dynamics of modernization. Stripped of the artificial certainties and uniformities of yesteryear, the world appears not chaotic and insecure but full of possibilities. (Kasaba 1997, 33)

While such hopes present intriguing possibilities, their actual realization seems to me still obscure. Worst of all, the precedents in other Muslim countries for new Islamic modernity such as embodied in the propagation of “Islamic sciences,” such as in Pakistan should discourage such talk in Turkey. (Hoodbhoy 1991; Hoodbhoy 2007)

To be sure, the desire to inform and enrich the sciences with religious perspectives and perhaps content is hardly a Muslim or even Islamist preoccupation. One finds the same sorts of proposals, along with, I am afraid, the same sort of obscurity, in recent calls for a “Christian scholarship” touted by American Protestant historian, George Marsden. He loudly proclaims that this kind of Christian scholarship would remain academically sound in a recognizable way. (Marsden 1997) Such thinkers, whether Christian or Muslim, in effect, dream that a scholar’s religious commitments and perspectives, or lack of them, would not transgress upon scholarship. Instead, the claim is that such new perspectives, liberated from the false dichotomizing of sacred and secular, private and public, would enrich scholarship. (Marsden 1997, ch. 5) Theorists like Ali Bulanç and some, at least, of the Qur’anic scholars of Islamist tendencies, however divergent these
may be, give indications that they tend to share this optimistic view of reconciliation. (Kasaba 1997, 33; Yavuz 2003, 117-21) But, as with any optimistic forecast of the future, is this optimism warranted? Gellner, for one, would clearly be dubious.

This is so, because Gellner believes that, in general, the civil and sacred just cannot abide each other; civil society and the sacred are always at odds. Gellner, in fact, defines civil society as trumping the sacred, and never the other way around. For Gellner, civil society requires "ideological pluralism" and independence of governmental control. And, correlatively, "ideological pluralism" requires from Gellner a general diminishment of the sacred altogether, at times seemingly to the point of being innocuous. (Albayrak 2006, 465) This circumscription of the sacred for Gellner, means that while citizens of liberal societies are "not forbidden to feel moral outrage, or even to express it in public.... they are not really allowed to use it as a terminal decision procedure in debate." (Gellner 1991, 304) At best, Gellner permits the invocation of the sacred, here apparently religion, in a society deemed civil, only as long as it is not "invoked too much." Gellner thus posts a warning for anyone who would wish to maximize the pluralism characteristic of civil society and maximize the power and publicity of the sacred at the same time. For Gellner, this simply cannot be done, and the lack of civil society in Muslim Arab society, for instance, would seem to prove it. Gellner's account of why civil society is absent from the arid zone societies of Islam is one we will pick up later in this paper.

**Grinding Gellner's Axe**

Yet, despite his great intellectual flair, Gellner may be distinctly unqualified to guide our thinking about the sacred in politics in Turkey. Distinctly and perhaps irrationally uncomfortable with the sacred, he does not really know what to do with it, and would, or so it seems, at any rate, do without it altogether. He freely admits that he has real doubts as to whether he has an "understanding of religion," in part perhaps because, as he says, he has "never been inside religion" nor has he ever "had the slightest yearning to be." (Davis 1991, 71) Gellner thus has no qualms about admitting having — from the outside — a special affection for analyzing "other people's commitments" — being "intellectually attracted by systems which claim closure," but of keeping personal commitment to such systems out of his life. (Davis 1991, 69) Indeed, Gellner himself declared: that "throughout my life (I have been) deprived of convictions and faith. I have never gone through any period of conviction for any faith. People who have faith irritate me, fascinate me...." (Davis 1991, 69)

Fair enough, one is tempted to add, but, not disqualifying. More troubling, however, are those earlier cited remarks that although citizens are "not forbidden to feel moral outrage, or even to express it in public.... they are not really allowed to use it as a terminal decision procedure in debate." (Gellner 1991, 304) Is this an opinion that can blithely go uncontested after, say, Kristallnacht? Or, how does one countenance Gellner's view that citizens may be permitted the invocation of the sacred in a society deemed civil, as long as it is not "invoked too much"? Ought Dreyfus be sacrificed to reasons of state, or should the sacredness of his humanity trump the need for the army to save face? How does one put this skittishness about commitment to values with what is clearly throughout his oeuvre a voice of principled moral thought?
But Gellner’s resistance here is even more deeply rooted than anything just involving religion. Gellner is uncomfortable with morality as well. This discomfort with values as such seems as severe as that of his awkwardness regarding the sacred and religion. This compels one to ask why we should not see his alienation from the sacred as rooted in Gellner’s discomfort with values as such? Thus, Gellner assumes a skeptical Nietzschean position that places “doubt”, “criticism” or the “critical attitude” towards values at the pinnacle of his own value hierarchy (sic). Ironically, of course, even a Nietzschean position – say to transvalue values – assumes a value position in itself. The history of Gellner holding this position is a long one, going back into his earliest writings at least to 1964 (Gellner 1964) While it does nothing to change his mind, Gellner is aware of the self-confuting nature of this move as he remarks in comments on Nietzsche’s awareness of the same dilemma:

What makes, for instance, certain later passages of Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals so moving is that we are watching a man knowingly, with superb lucidity, approaching the middle point on the way to some new beetle-hood, to something alien to his starting point, and seeing his world disintegrate him: Nietzsche attacks and rejects a certain kind of ethic in the name of honesty and truth, but also sees full well that the high valuation of honesty and truth which impels him to it is itself part of that ethic. The element of hysteria in the writing is due to a kind of frantic and self-defeating urge to speed – he must saw off the branch before, as a result of his own endeavours, it has broken off under him (Gellner 1964, 54)

Gellner’s conclusion to the skeptic’s dilemma is to grasp the nettle – although rather gingerly and with heavily gloved hands – and to affirm a Popperian liberalism characterized by an ethic of “‘openness’.” (Davis 1991, 69, 70-1; Gellner 1964, 111-2) Thus, Gellner does not wish us to think that he offers a positive worldview or ideological position other than this “openness,” and thus no sacred, or so it would seem. Paradoxical in asserting this, as Nietzsche himself did, Gellner comes slowly around to admitting a fairly standard off-the-shelf liberalism, noting that the “corrosive waters of doubt” that typify his ethic of openness, “can, surprisingly, also provide a basis for values.” (Gellner 1964, 110) Presto, Gellner declares his sacred, his values. Thus, Gellner says “I warmly subscribe to the ethic of openness; what gives life value and attraction seems to me precisely the fact that the future is open, that endless possibilities remain and forms of experience, are not congealed.” (Gellner 1964, 112)

So, fine. Gellner reveals himself as a Popperian liberal. But why all the agony? Why does it seem as if he’s being dragged into a value position, digging in his heels as he slides slowly across the line like the last man at the end of his side in a tug-of-war? I have no quarrel at all with Gellner on the status of these classic liberal values. Indeed, I embrace them myself. What I do find odd is the distinct discomfort Gellner displays in giving them full-throated voice, in the style of someone like Tzvetan Todorov, to name only one prominent liberal and critical humanist (Todorov 2002) One imagines that Gellner’s having done so would have thrown too great a counter-weight at his polemic against the sacred. Maybe no one will notice how committed Gellner is to his own kind of sacred to notice, and thus raise the awkward questions that still, I believe, remain about the possibility of cohabitation of the civil with the sacred that he leaves unresolved in posing his original question?
The main reason, however, that Gellner finds values awkward is firmly rooted in his mode of life. He finds values, the sacred and such disagreeable because he finds sociability and community membership awkward, if not down right distasteful. Thus, it is especially significant, returning to Gellner for the moment, that he lumps his doubts about understanding religion, and aversion for it, with a clear confession of his alienation from any sort of community – never of “having had a faith and never having had membership of a community either.” (Davis 1991, 71)

As any Durkheimian knows, this linkage is not accidental, nor is the linkage to morality, as we will see. What are the lessons to be learnt from Gellner’s agonies for the sake of more deeply engaging the issues of Muslim modernity?

**The Civil May Need the Sacred: Hefner’s Challenge**

Gellner presents us with a marvelous object lesson of someone who takes the implications of his notion of the incompatibility of the sacred and the civil to their logical conclusions. I have shown that, for Gellner, it is not just the religious sacred that cannot cohabit with the civil, but even some putatively ‘secular’ sacred of morality that has, at the very least, a problematic relation to the civil. Gellner thus sheds an equally marvelous light on the significance of the thinking about the sacred and the human prospect undertaken by the Durkheimians, especially Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, during the two decades or so between the world wars. What makes the Durkheimians interesting is that, unlike the opposition posed by Gellner between societies dominated by notions of the ‘sacred’ and those regulated by civility, the Durkheimians argued, *avant la lettre*, that civil society, like any society, was *impossible* without the sacred – and this in the face of contrary views by fiercer and fancier aficionados of the sacred, those members of the Nietzschean wing of the Durkheimian movement, in particular, Georges Bataille. Indeed, the Durkheimians argued that particular kinds of associations formed by citizens – professional societies, modern guilds and the like – were critical to the constitution of what we might call “civil society.” I am arguing, therefore, that it is Gellner’s dismissal of the sacred, infused as it is with Nietzschean conceptions, that will make civil society impossible. This, I shall argue is why the likes of Georges Bataille fail to produce anything that could be called civil society, while Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss do. There is no civil society without values; no values without a sacred; and no morality without society. Because Nietzscheanism undercuts all these links, it undercuts the possibility of civil society. This would not have surprised the Durkheimians, Hubert and Mauss, nor Durkheim, during the period between the world wars. Much of the future depends upon how we today understand civil society and how that fits with their development of the sacred. We choose our sacred and our society *at the same time*. Indeed, it is the same choice. So, the choice Gellner poses to us is in a way a false one. It is not a matter of whether to have society and the sacred or not, but one of what *kind* of sacred and what *kind* of society to have. One such society – a predominantly Muslim one – is the Indonesia described at length by Robert W. Hefner in his *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*

In recent studies of Muslim societies, in fact, the compatibility of the sacred and the civil has been a major theme. We already know the forces arrayed on one side in the persons of
Gellner or Şerif Mardin, both of whom argue, in their different ways, against the idea of a Muslim civil society. (Mardin 1995) On the other side, is Robert W. Hefner’s Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia, and its articulation of another way forward. Hefner cites the stirring examples of modernist Muslim intellectuals, such as Nurcholish Madjid as proponents of a “civil Islam.” Giving the lie to Gellner’s attempts to rule out a civility that is informed by the sacred, Hefner sums up the program of Madjid and his ilk:

Civil Muslims renounce the mythology of an Islamic state. Rather than relegating Islam to the realm of the private, however, they insist that there is a middle path between liberalism’s privatization and conservative Islam’s bully state. The path passes by way of a public religion that makes itself heard through independent associations, spirited public dialogue, and the demonstrated decency of believers. (Hefner 2000, 218)

To this account, the names of prominent proponents of a Turkish Muslim civil society ought to be listed: Ali Bulañ, İremi Koru, Fethullah Gülen, İsmet Özel, Hayrettin Karaman, Sezai Karakoç, Yaşar Nuri Öztürk, among others.

A major question for us must be what does that part of civil society called ‘religious studies’ look like under a regime described by Hefner, especially in Turkey? Honesty demands that we face the fact of suspicions, resentments and fears on both sides of the larger political question of whether there can there be a democratic and civil Islam or civil Islamism? This larger political question has its own correlate at level of academic and intellectual concerns as to whether, for example, there can be an Islamist study of religion that is recognizably akin to or in conformity with ‘civil society,’ its pluralism, intellectual ‘openness’ and so on? Here, I recall a disturbing series of questions that Gellner’s first visit to Turkey, quite long ago now, in the 1960’s prompted him to articulate. A very great deal has happened in Turkish history since then, but still in all it might be interesting to rehearse Gellner’s observations of a generation ago. Gellner had been invited to lecture at a conference on the subject of the role of religion in modern Turkey and its socio-political role. Although the pre-conference information led one to imagine a rather quiet event, when Gellner arrived at the conference, he realized that beneath the surface, things were far more acute. Thus, he tells us that

... the preoccupations of its Turkish participants were far more sharply defined and focused, and I learnt a very great deal from them. Their concern could also be summed up but briefly, and vigorously: how on earth do we stop the Anatolian peasantry, and the petty bourgeoisie of the towns, from voting for the party, or for any party, which chooses to play the religious card? That was the problem. (Gellner 1994b, 84)

But, what if it turns out that you cannot, at least in this particular country, be both secular and democratic? What if, as soon as you have genuine elections, an excessive proportion of the electorate votes for the party with a religious appeal? What if subsequently, this victorious party endangers the Kemalist heritage itself? What then? If secular democracy votes itself out, what is to be done? (Gellner 1994b, 84)

Given the experience of political and religious life in Turkey since 2002, reinforced by the recent July elections, many of the same suspicions – fairly or otherwise – still lurk among
a large portion of the Turkish population. It seems neither an exaggeration nor insulting to say that the whole world is watching to see how the present changes in Turkey develop. Here then is another reason to pay some attention to Gellner’s words in my epigram: “Turkey has a special claim on the attention of anyone concerned with the future of liberal societies ... and Islam.” (Gellner 1994b, 81)

**Civility, Science and Openness**

Beyond what Gellner says and reports about the political and social dimensions of civil society both in Turkey and elsewhere, there is at least one salient way in which the civil and sacred are incompatible, and this brings us around to the issue of ‘civility’ as it applies to the study of religion. There is, in brief, at least one sense in which the sacred and civil cannot abide one another when it comes to intellectual matters. This occurs when particular ideas, theories, theses, documents and so on are ‘sacralized’ by being rendered unassailable to criticism or declared absolute. Taking a dose of my own medicine, it would be ‘uncivil’ for me to refuse to entertain arguments about the ideas put forth in this paper. It would be ‘uncivil’ of me, in effect, to violate the rules of Karl Popper’s ‘open alternative,’ to open my ideas to falsification. (Hoodbhoy 1991, 146-8) That is to say that I would be violating the conditions of civil society – I would be ‘uncivil’ – if I were to declare my point of view ‘sacrosanct’ and above critical inquiry – even if I might argue to defend it. Remembe:: real openness does not entail an absence of values. This sense of civility in intellectual matters applies, as well, to a further clarifying assertion I wish to make, namely that the scientific study of religion is a project of civil society. Conversely, I am arguing that if the study of religion would be civil, it must be scientific. It must be as open as possible to counter-arguments – even those made against the general claim that a civil study of religion must be scientific.

The basis for defending this position as something compelling requires us to take one step further, and situate the mode of knowledge that is a scientific study of religion in a material base. Our commitment as modern civilization to this material base selects for the kinds of regimes of knowledge that we employ. Here, Gellner seems to me a reliable guide to what is admittedly a subtle, doubtless, controversial point: “Civil Society,” says Gellner, “may or may not be the unique social corollary of the kind of scientific-industrial mode of life to which mankind is now ineluctably wedded; but at any rate a certain number of the visible and advertised alternatives to it are unlikely to be compatible with it.” (Gellner 1994a, 214) This is to say that scientific study – whether of religion or any other subject matter – is linked internally to the mode of knowledge that also gives us modern science and technology, and thus that gives us what I would identify as modernity. We might reject modernity, and with it science and technology, and in doing so reject the style of knowledge particular to it – Popper’s ‘open alternative.’ But, I would also argue that one cannot hope to have science and technology and reject the ‘open alternative’ that is the essence of intellectual civility. And, herein lies the secret weakness behind the apparent coexistence of authoritarian religio-political regimes and their possession, indeed often to the point of fascination, of high technology. As Pervez Hoodbhoy has shown, virtually no innovation emerges from societies that attempt to have their technological and scientific ‘goodies’
without paying the price in terms of fostering the kind of open regime of knowledge that makes science and technology possible. (Hoodbhoy 1991, ch 4) Parasitism in the world of knowledge can only sustain a society so long. After one has consumed the products, intellectual or otherwise, created by the open societies that create science, one is left destitute. One becomes even more dependent upon those who can and do create. So, if one seeks a material basis for my scientific approach to the study of religion, one should seek it in the modern commitment to science and technology. It is civil society’s base as well.

**Being Civil about Islam’s Place in Turkish History of Religions**

Now the scientific study of religion is typically a very small part of the national educational agenda worldwide. That certainly is the case in the United States. Yet, from time to time, and in place to place, the issues in which religious studies can claim some competence, may make it seem much more important. Turkey is, I believe, one of those places, and today is one of those times, when the way the study of religion is conceived figures to be a great deal more important than otherwise might be the case at other times. How then do issues of ‘civility’ arise in the Turkish context of its approaches to the study of religion?

One example from the recent past of how both religion and how we ought to study religion become a big issue comes from the situation of Turkey as a new nation, seeking to take stock of its identity. Here, religion is likely to be quite sensitive and important, even perhaps ‘sacrosanct’ and beyond critical inquiry. When as well, the idea of a Turkish nation is at stake over against an older identity such as the Ottoman, religion has indeed mattered a great deal. Thus, it is not surprising when we find an earlier generation of Turkish religious studies scholars engaged in the enterprise of questioning the nature of the “original religion” of those one wants to call Turks. Such might be seen as part of the vocation of Hikmet Tanyu (1918-92), for example, about whom our host, Ali Isra Güngör, writes in his recent article in *Numen* on the study of religion in Turkey. (Güngör 2007)

Although during his rich career, Tanyu studied local beliefs in Turkey as well as encouraging his own students to study Judaism and Christianity, earlier on he concentrated on the original religion of the Turks, and not of any other of the peoples who populated the Ottoman empire, even in Antalya. Tanyu is not interested in the original religion of the Arabs, Armenians, Bosniaks, Circassians, Kurds or Greeks, but of the Turks. (Gökkır 2003, 255) Güngör tells us that Tanyu argued, for instance, that this original Turkish religion was not some primitive ritualism, concerned with magic, tabus or totems, nor was it even a variant of Altaic or Yakut shamanism. In Tanyu’s view, these were not even ‘religions,’ in the strict sense of the word, as he uses it. Instead, the original religion of the Turks was “‘Monotheism,’” pure and simple, and reflected the ability of the Turks to participate in something “transcendent, something that ‘went beyond history.’” By the way, of course, this primal monotheism fit snugly with Turkey’s Islamic past and future.

If such a rhetoric sounds familiar to this audience, I am sure they will see the parallel efforts by someone as famous in Turkey as the sociologist, Ziya Gökalp, to achieve similar results for the new nation. Leave to one side the fact that Gökalp and Tanyu disagreed about the identity of the original religion of the Turks, they followed a common strategy in the early foundational
days of the Republic of pursuing a nationalist project. What were Turkey’s ancient roots, whether they be religious or, as in Gökalp’s case, preferably broadly cultural and particularly linguistic? Thus, Gökalp articulated a vision of what one may call national myths — an imaginative interpretation of Turkish history, within the larger context of what one might call a Turanian mythos. He saw all Turkic peoples originating from a single source of the heart of Asia, and retaining in however faint a form, the fundamental traits of the old Turks. Balancing Gökalp’s adventures in the mytho-poetry of national identity were his own practical proposals for the reform of the language spoken in Turkey. Gökalp argued that in Turkey two languages existed: Ottoman (“Ottoman Esperanto,” Gökalp called it). This was a written language, used in Istanbul, but that was not spoken. It was an amalgam of Turkish, Arabic and Persian. The other language was the popular argot of the people, that was spoken but not written. It was what one might call simply, ‘Turkish.’ It was Gökalp’s ambition to return Turkish to a kind of primal purity to serve as the national tongue. Famously, a similar ‘search for roots’ of the Turks also drove the agenda of Mustafa Kemal’s First Historical Congress, and the foundation of the Turkish Historical Society (Türk Tarih Kurumu) here in Ankara in 1932, as well as the work of historical linguists such as Ismail Hami Danişmend (1889-1967), who argued for the Indo-European origins of the Turkish language.

While the examples of Tanyıı, Gökalp and the 1932 meeting of the Türk Tarih Kurumu show us a study of religion and culture particularly appropriate to the Turkish early nationalist project of a driving ‘search for roots,’ what does their example say about the way religion ought to be studied in a period when, at least, some of the ethnic questions of Turkish identity seem to have been settled, or at least put to one side in favor of more pressing national goals? What kind of study of religion is appropriate for a confident nation, renowned for its deep-rooted dedication to education, fostered both by the traditions of Islam and patriotic duty, and now poised to approach the European Union, or otherwise to engage the modern world in terms that Turkey has yet to define for itself? How, at the very least, can a study of religion be constructed that is appropriate to civil society — again however that be understood, such as in the sense articulated by Muslims themselves by Robert W. Hefner in his classic, Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia? What style of knowledge, further, best suits the Turkish future?

In the case of Turkey, I would argue, for example, that an approach to the study of religion — especially in the case of the history of religions of Turkey — must be judged as deficient in civility if it ignores or attempts to leap over the Muslim history of the nation. In this sense, for all its laudable promotion of a scientific study of religion, both since the inception of the Republic and earlier in the late Ottoman period, something is clearly amiss with the early nationalist attempts to construct a history of religion in Turkey that, in effect, treats the history of Islam in the nation and the empire as something that can be relegated to a lower level of importance than the study of some mythic ‘old Turkish’ religion of some speculative primordial age of ‘the origins.’ We have seen the same misdirected attempt to pass over the relatively more recent history of the religion of a particular place in favor of some imagined ‘archaic’ religious substratum in the
works of Eliade and his epigones, like David Carrasco. Where Eliade would have us believe that he can virtually fund the religious consciousness of modern folk with the sacred archetypes of “archaic man,” Carrasco would likewise have us believe that the most important facts about the present-day religions of Meso-America are to be found in the determining archetypes of the Aztecs. Significantly, the histories of the religion of Counter-Reformation Spain and Mexico are, in Carrasco’s works one sprawling void, as if this recent history was illusion by contrast to the deep eREALITIES of the archaic pre-Conquest world. Decades ago, G. E. von Grunebaum pointed out the tendencies for nationalism in Muslim countries to foster an anti-Islamic and secular outcome. (Grunebaum 1956) Repeated at the level of the study of religion in Turkey, Bilal Gökkir claims that the “secularist and nationalist policies of the Republic, then, were instrumental in the creation of this new religious and secular history of modern Turkey.”(Gökkir 2003, 251) While it may be understandable that the nationalists wished to clear a certain kind of space round the subject of religion in order to break the monopoly that the Islamic forces maintained over all discourse about religion, it is quite another thing to deny the objective place that Islam has had in Turkish history of religions. In the history of religion, the ‘civil’ thing to do seems to me, at the same time, the scientific thing to do: the study of religion needs to be ‘open’ — in the Popperian sense — to the recognition of Islam’s full place in the history of Turkey. This should, at least, be so because unless one understands one’s history, one cannot understand oneself.

In terms of the ideals of civility, the early nationalist history of religions might be accused of having compromised its scientific character by producing primordial Turkish ‘myth’ instead of history. This is profoundly ironic, since the promotion of the historical sciences — even in extreme positivist form — should be seen at once as the strength of modernism over against fundamentalism — even if that means admitting the perceived enemy of modernism into a more prestigious place than modernist ideology would prefer. Thus, it is nothing short of ironic that the history of religions that came to the fore in the early nationalist period should have been so unhistoric, and in consequence have produced a history of religions uncivil to Islam!

In America and Western Europe those of us who have traditionally been organized under the banner of the scientific study of religion, have as well produced something of an uncivil history of the history of religions by ignoring the work of biblical scholarship as if it had nothing to do with the history of religions. I discovered in researching previous treatments of theories in the study of religion in preparation for writing Thinking about Religion that virtually none took account of the critical study of the Bible! They seemed to regard biblical scholarship, replete though it was with great shows of archeological, comparative, historical, linguistic and cross-cultural comparative expertise, all, of course, that made a massive impact upon Western culture, as virtually irrelevant to the study of religion! My response to this act of incivility was thoroughly to integrate the history of the study of the Bible into the treatment of the ‘usual suspects’ of the study of religion — Max Müller, Robertson Smith, Frazer, Durkheim, Freud, Weber, Eliade and others. While it was fairly well known that William Robertson Smith worked in biblical scholarship, it was less well appreciated that he worked with the leaders of that field at the time, Julius Wellhausen and Paul Lagarde, and even less how this kind of learning bore on the theoretical work in the study of religion for which he was better known by historians of religion.
Similarly, it was not widely known that Max Müller, for example, learned his philological skills in part at the feet of the critical biblical scholars of his day in Germany. Nor, was it appreciated that among the vast numbers of publications in anthropology or sociology, that Durkheim required key members of his research team to become adept and current in the latest discoveries of biblical scholarship. Thus, a ‘civil’ study of religion will regard scriptural studies, whether of the Bible, Qur'an or any other, as integral parts of the study of religion at large.

**Fundamentalism, ‘High Islamic’ Modernization and Global Civility**

But, one might worry about this suggestion of mine to depart from the tradition of Tanyu, lately reinforced by Eliade, to encourage recognition of the historical role of Islam in Turkish history. Does this not open the door to the study of religion being overrun by religious traditionalists and fundamentalism? Does this not threaten the very modernist and scientific nature of the study of religion already established in Turkey? Would a study of religion, under an Islamist regime, moreover, become ‘uncivil’ with respect to scriptural study if became fundamentalist or literalist? Would the study of the Qur’an, for example, not become uncivil if it sacralized the text in such a way that it consigned the study of the Qur’an to a privileged category of immune to critical study.

In the United States, for example, the pressures to reserve a special privileged place of the study of the Bible, to segregate it from historical study, have made too much of the study of religion among us distinctly uncivil. Various kinds of questions are ruled out of order, and intellectual inquiry is stifled. The Biblical text becomes, in my view, over-sanctified, indeed, arguably made into its own kind of fetish that seems at times to replace even a divine author. Let me explain why I think that a fundamentalist approach to religion should be seen as ‘uncivil,’ and therefore, not appropriate for modernity. In order to argue my case, I shall first have to take on a most surprising proponent of the idea that fundamentalism fits with Muslim modernity – Ernest Gellner!

If the early nationalist historians of religions get confused about history, Gellner comes off little better, especially in his perception of the place of fundamentalism in Muslim modernity. One of the distinctive features of Gellner’s view of Muslim societies – Ottomans and Turkey included – is that they are uniquely equipped to modernize from within, so to speak. They are not compelled to borrow modernizing modes since they have a long history of a literate, high culture from which to draw their models of reform and high culture modernity. Geliner calls this kind of Islam “High Islam.” Thus, Muslim societies can escape the dilemmas faced by other societies seeking to modernize, and who are placed in the unenviable situation of choosing either to Westernize uncritically, or to take the populist alternative and romanticize their own indigenous folk traditions as sources of a new modernity. Muslim societies can, and have, modernized by “embracing wholeheartedly” their “own literate high culture... at the expense of Folk Islam.” (Lesnoff 2002, 78) The result of this indigenous Muslim modernizing is the creation of a kind of “Protestant” Islam in the self-conscious spirit of Max Weber – replete with “its egalitarianism, sobriety, hostility to magic and emotional excess, discipline, orderliness, puritanism, moralism and as well as its scripturalist emphasis.” (Lesnoff 2002, 79) So far, no problems.

Critics of Gellner have noted accurately that this so-called Protestant Islam also holds to ideals not at all congenial to, at least, Reformation era Protestants, namely absence of separation
between mosque and state, the religious and the secular, shari’a and statutory law, political and military functions, or the realm of individual rights and social duties. In fact, to some critics, Gellner’s example of High Islam modernity looks like traditionalism, armed now with the considerable weaponry of the modern totalitarian nation-state. (Lesnoff 2002, 80f) I shall join the critics.

As if to apply yet another self-inflicted wound to his arguments, Gellner adds fundamentalism to the list of the features of an indigenous Muslim modernity. It must be counted as additionally odd in terms of our concern with education and religious studies scholarship for Gellner to believe that High Islam’s fundamentalism should be seen as a modernizing agent. While there is clearly a sense in which fundamentalism or scriptural literalism are symptoms of being situated in modernity, indeed, as epiphenomena of modernity, this point requires closer attention. On my view, fundamentalism is a feature of modernity precisely because it is a defense against it. In modernity, notoriously a world of floating and competing values, untethered to any firm ground, it is natural enough to seek the guidance provided by fundamentalism or scriptural literalism. There, at least one can rest on a firm ground of unchanging and supposedly eternal values. This ability of fundamentalism or scriptural literalism in providing such a foundational guidance to lives troubled by the perplexities and inconclusiveness of life in modernity is perhaps also why the papacy and its doctrine of infallibility, seem to have increased in esteem as time has moved on.

Yet, of course, fundamentalism’s being occasioned by modernity is not the same thing as its being appropriate to modernity or as a facilitating quality of modernity. Fundamentalism or scriptural literalism, for instance, run head on against historical consciousness as a key marker of modernity, a point made with elegance and, I believe, decisiveness over a generation ago by Van Harvey. (Harvey 1966) There, Harvey, along with many others before him rehearse the long hard lessons learnt in the West since the early modern period and its critical study of the Bible and critical history of Christianity. (Strenski 2006, ch. 2) The issue of the historicity of the Qur’an has also been the subject of lively debate here in Turkey, as recently detailed in a revealing report by Ismail Albayrak. (Albayrak 2006) Leading the ranks of those who bring historical-critical tools of interpretation to the Qur’an, and in doing so seek to understand the Qur’an by locating it within an historical context, are the three leaders of what has become known as the so-called “School of Ankara,” Professors Halis Albayrak, Mehmet Paçacı and Ömer Özsoy. (Albayrak 2006, 458)

Without denying the idea of a transcendent source of scripture, i.e. their divine inspiration, critics of fundamentalism or scriptural literalism point out that they make no allowances for the historicity of texts, for what we have come to learn about their human transmission, interpretation and composition. They run head on, as well, against the lack of consensus agreement about any extra-textual authority criteria for regarding texts as literally true. Thus, while the Pope vouches for the Bible and voices doubts about the Qur’an, Muslims are surely justified in remaining dubious about the extent of the Pope’s authority in making claims in behalf of the Bible and against the Qur’an.

Life in a globalizing world will require that believers from every quarter find ways to deal with varying claims to divine authority and inspiration for their respective sacred texts. We
are just now only beginning to realize that we live in this vast space of the globalized world, and no longer in our own self-contained towns, *settels*, villages and neighborhoods. This is to say that we are only now learning that we live in history – neither outside it in some timeless primordial realm, nor inside our own local history. Unless religions want to remain at loggerheads, there seems to me no other way to deal with their religious differences about the status of scripture, for instance, than to begin some fundamental conversations in which the ideal of fundamentalism or scriptural literalism would not be points of departure. Thus, if we return to the question of what criteria of knowledge are appropriate for the Turkish future, I cannot see how we can accept the fundamentalism or scriptural literalism Gellner thinks can be bundled along with the Weberian economic values typical of High Islam. Instead, as far as I have come to know them, the critical approaches by the University of Ankara’s own Baki Adam or Marmora University’s Omer Faruk Harman on the Hebrew bible are impressive works by today’s Turkish scholars. Fundamentalism or scriptural literalism, in my view, are perfect objects for a study of religion because they are widely held beliefs; they cannot be its tools of inquiry beyond their own circle because they lack the external authority appropriate for a world of globalized difference.

Thus, a ready supply of answers about our choice of a regime of knowledge in the study of religion comes not only from the examples of the scholars just mentioned, but also from a glance at the bold program for this meeting of the Turkish Association for the History of Religions, or from the religious studies curricula of many Turkish universities, such as our host institution here in Ankara, or from the reforming efforts of the institutions, such as the Institute of Islamic Studies, established in Istanbul University in 1953, under the leadership of Zeki Velidi Togan (1890-1970). To these institutional observations, we might also add the testimony of such widely-read Turkish observers of the modern scene, such as Andrew Mango. One benefit of the opening to religion in Turkey has been the “thousands of graduates pouring out of university faculties of theology, where comparative religion and sociology are taught....” Going further Mango adds the following hope, touched with an unmistakable trace of warning:

A few Turks still go to study theology at Al-Azhar in Cairo, the best-known religious university in the Muslim world. But the revival of religious thought in Turkey gives grounds for hope that the traffic may change direction, and that Muslims from abroad may start going to Turkey to study theology, as they already do for secular arts and sciences.

About those headed off to Al-Athar, Mango makes it immediately clear that, this said, “in the meantime there is a small, but dangerous traffic the other way.” (Mango 2004, 128)

To fill out this picture of how some remarkable Turkish scholars have tried to further a scientific study of religion, all the while cognizant of a ‘confessional’ Islamist program, I can do no better than to echo the sentiments of Zeki Velidi Togan, as conveyed by Bilal Gökkir in behalf of the scientific study of religion, including Islam. Making allowances for the use of the term, ‘Western,’ I believe that Bilal Gökkir gives one a sense of Togan’s vision. His Institute was not a faculty of theology, and that dogmatic and normative teaching of Islam had no place in its curriculum. Its goal was neither to train imams nor to assert the superiority of Islam over other religions. Its purpose was, rather, to produce experts in Islamic studies in the Western sense.(Gökkir 2003, 254)
As for the future, I cannot report on the present state of affairs at the Institute, but Bilal Gökkir, like Mango, sounds a warning note as of 4 years ago. A "new confessional approach toward the study of Islam" seems to have been gaining ground according to Gökkir, due to pressures from the local faculty of theology. (Gökkir 2003, 254) As unwelcome as this may be for the study of religion, I must say that Turkish students of religion should not feel alone. As an American, we are constantly also experiencing similar pressures by Christian theologians upon the scientific study of religion. These pressures to make the study of religion a 'confessional' enterprise are a fact of life for us, too.

What then might be a common ground for students of religion here and in the Americas? I would suggest that such a study of religion fit for our diverse and multipolar world must be scientific—and scientific in the sense of proceeding from the principle, as Gellner describes it, of "the existence of a culture transcending truth." It is this ideal of transcultural objectivity that makes it possible, as Gellner further states, for "cognitive growth and the denial of absolutism" (Gellner 1994a, 214) Part of what it means that the scientific study of religion is scientific as well as particular to civil society is the belief in objectivity. As Gellner puts it "... the existence of a culture transcending truth seems to me the most important single fact about the human condition, and indeed one of the bases of Civil Society." In effect, then, the scientific study of religion and civil society are inseparable. Having a scientific study of religion in one's society is one sign that one's society is 'civil.' And, not having a society in which the scientific study of religion is possible is, by the same token, a sign that absolutism reigns, at least on the level of knowledge.

Getting over the "Imposition" of Modernity: Leaving Resentment Behind

Yet, some religious traditionalists may be ready with a powerful reply to this assertion of modernism that I share with Gellner. They often do so by wheeling out the rhetoric of the 'imposition' of 'Western' ways. (Albayrak 2006, 464; Savran 1987, 5) Such a rhetoric would also include those who may not expressly use the word, 'imposition,' but who embrace its meaning. Thus, although he does not use the very word "imposition," Bilal Gökkir, has complained, as we have seen, about the "pro-Western attitude" of Turkish nationalist students of religion, such as Hami Danişmend (Gökkir 2003, 251) This kind of language amounts to the same as the explicit talk of 'imposition,' and merits some pointed comment.

The upshot of this language of 'imposition,' might be, for instance, that the view shared by Gellner and me about civil society is culturally specific to Western European and trans-Atlantic culture. Would it not be an 'imposition' to bring such criteria to bear on, say, Turkish society informed with Islamist principles? Moved in large part by the laudable ideals of pluralism and democracy, laments are heard, especially from Islamist quarters, against the imposition of a certain style of Western modernity upon Turkey, as by Mustafa Kemal and its continuation under Kemalist regimes for nearly a century or so. While I do not know to what extent this author shares Islamist opinions, Reşat Kasaba writes:

For Muslim intellectuals... the problem arose not because Turkey had broken with Kemalism but because the country stayed with it as long as it did. Islamists find the goals of Kemalist modernization intrinsically antithetical to the essential qualities of Muslim culture, which they see the people of Turkey as an integral part. (Kasaba 1997, 17)
According to Kasaba’s understanding of what seem Islamicist desires, there is a great optimistic, democratic and humanistic spirit at work, since “most men and women living in Turkey” want not merely to be (Kemalist) “objects of a project but also... subjects of their history.”(Kasaba 1997, 31) Consequently, Kasaba believes that an alternative modernity can be constructed on Islamist bases, and one that would be recognizably a form of modernity, not traditionalism dressed up à la mode.

There is no denying the top-down nature of the effort by Mustafa Kemal to modernize Turkey. Indeed, modernization in Turkey was, by and large, a Westernizing affair as well, led by a small elite, somewhat in this respect like the elite-led revolutionizing work of the Jacobin party in France. Abolition of the sultanate and caliphate, declaration of the Republic of Turkey as a nation-state, Turkey’s adoption of constitutionalism, the Swiss Code Civile, the Italian penal code, the Roman alphabet, the Gregorian calendar and international clock, banning the turban, veil and the fez, replacing Ottoman with a new Turkish language, purged of its Arabic, Greek and Persian loan words, as a national tongue, decreeing universal, free education, equalizing the social standing of women, and so on, all these were part of what Mustafa Kemal decreed from the vantagepoint of the commander of an elite-led modernizing social revolution.

But, against Kasaba, in what sense can this be meaningfully called an “imposition” that today might be gainsaid—specifically on the grounds that it did not bubble up spontaneously and organically from the masses? Let us assume for the sake of argument the justice of the complaint about ‘imposition.’ Does this end the matter? To wit, does something’s being an “imposition,” ipso facto delegitimize it? Just because something was an “imposition,” does this mean that it is either desirable or even possible to reverse the “imposition,” given the particular set of material constraints in place in the modern world at the time? And, what is to guarantee that some policy that did so ‘bubble up’ from below would, again ipso facto, be a better one than that which was “imposed.” And, better according to what criteria? In the United States, the abolition of slavery, school integration, racial equality laws and such were “imposed” upon the American South from above, from the seat of the federal government. By what criteria would the mere fact of this top-down effort lose its legitimacy merely because it did not ‘bubble up’ from the slave-holder and the white beneficiaries of black slave holding? And, how, if we argued that abolition should have ‘bubbled up’ from below can we say that this would have produced a better result?

As far as Turkey is considered, there are other reasons why we should rethink the negative rhetoric against so-called “imposition.” For one thing, “imposition” may in fact be uniquely, and in a funny way, Turkish. Gellner has argued that this Kemalist top-down process of change is unique and highly significant in the Muslim world. Turkey does not conform to the widespread pre-modern patterns of social and political change in the arid zone first described by Ibn Khaldun. And, that may be a very good thing.

Let us first consider the patterns of social change in the arid zone of the Islamic world. Referring to Ibn Khaldun, Gellner tells us that

...there exist two possible solutions to the problem of political organization. One is explored Ibn Khaldun, and in it political talent is supplied by tribes, whilst the cultural and
technical equipment is supplied by toy.rn, and the symbiosis of these two elements leads to the characteristic rotation of personnel which he described... (Gellner 1981, 77)

Thus, the outlying tribes that constituted what Gellner calls Folk Islam periodically rose up in rebellion against the laxity of the city, and forced upon the urban dwellers and their High Islam a series of religious and political reforms. Once ensconced in the city, the tribal rustics themselves grew lax as time passed, and became vulnerable to a new wave of Folk Islamic tribal militant reformers. The cycle begins again.

States are created by tribal conquests, but they really serve as a regulating mechanism for the larger society. Tribes create the state. But they can never allow it to become so powerful as to crush their autonomy. Cities depend upon the state for protection against nomadic assault. And urban religious elites therefore tend to legitimate and support governing regimes, but they also seek to protect the townsfolk from the arbitrary whims of rulers. Both tribes and cities have an interest in states powerful enough to express tribal domination and provide for urban security but still too weak to damage either tribal or urban interests. Thus, while religion is essential to tribe-town relations, the state is epiphenomenal. “A weak state and a strong culture — that seems to be the formula.” (Lapidus 1983, 423)

Significantly, this is the pattern that Gellner believes cannot eventuate in what one might call ‘civil society. Things in Turkey, however, differ. Thus in the arid zone of North African Muslim society, for example, civil society and its characteristic pluralism does not develop while in Northern European Christian society it does. This is interesting because many of the same structural preconditions for pluralism characteristic of civil society existed on both sides of the Mediterranean. Gellner is, of course, mindful that in many ways the Ottomans and modern Turkey depart from this ‘Muslim’ pattern, and will make the necessary adjustments in due course. But, here at any rate are the bare bones of his view. First of all, he notes that independent baronies in Europe and independent egalitarian tribal societies in ancient Muslim Algeria might equally well have founded civil society in both places, but only the European baronies did. (Munson Jr. 1993, 277) They provided the kind of resistance to totalitarian rule from the center that eventually would characterize civil society. The British barons forced the English crown to modify its own power in the Magna Carta. Yet, the independent tribal societies of North Africa played no such role.

Further, when the Algerian emir wished to unify his domain, populated as it was by independent tribes, he made jihad against them. He wheeling in the monotheistic Muslim sacred to trump the pluralism of ancient tribal Algeria. “Society was unified,” says Gellner, “and the central state imposed, by blackening the dissident pluralists as heretics rather than rebels.” What resulted, however, was not civil society, but a kind of theocracy, an umma. In medieval Europe. the kings too faced the pluralism of independent baronies, but reduced them militarily, not by a Christian jihad or ‘crusade.’ The centralizing, nation-building European monarchs, therefore, kept the sacred out of play. They “did not use religion as an ideological charter of unification.” (Gellner 1991, 310) Instead, the European kings built their nation-states by destroying the independence of each baronial domain piecemeal so that none could threaten the central power. In more recent times and in a less dramatic mode, national unity was achieved in the face of once
fierce religious rivalries by the Swiss or Germans. But churchmen served Christian princes as state bureaucrats, not as *ayatollahs* justifying the unity of the newly organized realms in terms of orthodoxy against would-be ‘heretical’ barons. By contrast, the Arabs – to this day, some would argue (viz. Iraq?) – oscillated between an “ideologically centralized condition” of an *umma* to a world of “segmentary pluralism and tolerant diversity.” (Gellner 1991, 311) As a “sacred” society, this *umma* is unified by an ardently held faith, where that faith itself is ordered, codified, and delimited with a neat structure and a clearly dominant apex. (Gellner 1991, 312) Right or wrong, that is at least the position of Gellner.

By contrast, then, Gellner has argued that Turkey is an exception to this rule of arid zone circulation for at least three reasons – that in turn produce a second model differing from Ibn Khaldun’s. First, the Ottomans had been able to forge a strong and durable state, while the city polities of the arid zone did not. There, “Tribes create the state.”

Second, the Ottoman state insulated itself from the tribes in forging an autonomous ruling elite of leadership and civil service who owed nothing to local associations.

... the other model which gradually emerged in the Middle East ... was brought to its greatest degree of perfection by the Ottomans. ‘Slave soldiers . . . had by the eleventh and twelfth centuries become the predominant military and administrative elite in all Middle Eastern states.’ (Gellner 1981, 77)

As the successor to the Ottomans Gellner believes that Kemalism was in large part a secularized version of the elites of the Empire: “the spirit in which Kemalism was formulated and upheld was, at any rate in first generation, a kind of perpetuation of High Islam. The spirit was projected onto a new doctrine. The content was new, but the form and spirit were not.” (Gellner 1994b, 86) And, rather than draw from the peasantry, from a discredited Folk Islam, the Ottoman elites ‘acquired’ a *Volk*.

In Turkey, a pre-existing military-administrative elite, well habituated to having and running its own state, had to acquire its own folk base, and almost contingently alighted on the Anatolian peasantry. Thereby it took that peasantry, not altogether willingly, into the European zone where modernity is nationalist, rather than the Middle East where it went fundamentalist. (Gellner 1994b, 89)

As a form of modernizing High Islam, then, Mustafa Kemal sought to ‘impose’ his rationalizing policies upon the disorderly array that was the Turkish Folk Islam of his day. He did so in a classic High Islamic Turkish style.

One final objection to the rhetoric of ‘imposition’ should be lodged at this point. While I agree with much of the spirit of independence and self-assertion that is embodied in the talk of the ‘imposition’ of so-called ‘Western’ influences, we need to do a better job at identifying precisely what is happening. This seems to be part of the approach of Suat Yıldırım of Marmora University, who urged his students to fret less about the genesis of ideas than about their content. He urges his students to “understand the West as it is and to evaluate the ideas of Western scholars, as far as possible, without any prejudice, subjectivity or emotion.” (Gökkin 2003, 256) This welcome bit of advice implies that the term ‘Western’ as well as the discourse about the West are just about as useful – useless – at the term ‘Eastern’ or ‘Oriental’ are in locating the offending item. Such broad

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brush approaches paint sloppily where detailed precision is wanted. Further, in doing so they mask the precise identity of the influences that really are at work, and that either need to be rooted out and replaced, or deepened and embraced. In particular, concerning the study of religion in Turkey, my sense is that a good hard critical look at the influence of the French orientalist Ernest Renan would be extremely useful, because as Bilal Gökkir tells us, it was “French” influences that mattered most in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Empire. These so-called “French” influences are most probably those of Ernest Renan, the most influential French critical of thinker about religion of the age. (Gökkir 2003, 250)

Renan’s powerful influence in Turkey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries will not be news to many who know something of Turkish intellectual history. Edward Said, is, of course, enlightening about Renan’s anti-Islamism. (Said 1978) And, Niyasi Berkes’ account of Renan’s place in the study of religion and Ottoman modernist, Namik Kemal’s critiques of Renan’s slanders against Islam are highly instructive. (Berkes 1998, 262-3) Among other things, Berkes makes the apt point that Renan’s anti-clerical approach to religion was highly specific to a certain program that Tzvetan Todorov has right indicted, not as ‘scientific,’ but as “scientistic.” (Todorov 1989) There should be no confusion between doing a “scientific study of religion” and pledging fealty to Renan’s “religion of science.” The scientific study of religion simply has no need for worshipers, or any other distracting effects of a “religion of science.”

My point here is a simple one: as far as the rhetoric of ‘imposition’ goes, it would be better for us all if the discussion about so-called ‘Western impositions’ — also all generalizations about ‘the East’ or ‘Islam’ — could be turned in a more fruitful direction. Today, and even longer into the past, many students of religion in the ‘West,’ notably Albert Sorel, but also Durkheim and his followers, would have regarded Renan’s hyper-positivist approach to the study of religion, for example, quite skeptically. (Sorel 1990; Strenski 1997, 105-9, 124-5; Strenski 2003, 116-21) Today, in this day of rampant methodological diversity, I would wager that it would be virtually impossible to identify some thing called a ‘Western’ approach to the study of religion. This is not to deny, that at certain points in history, one might well truly identify a narrow line of so-called ‘Western’ influence, such as when Renan seems to have monopolized the field in Turkey. But, such monopolies do not long survive, as the history of the study of religion in Europe, Japan, Korea, Africa, and the Americas shows. So, if villains of ‘imposition’ there be, and if we really seek to identify them, let us get it right. If Ernest Renan, for example, be the villain responsible for so-called ‘Western impositions’ upon the study of religion in the late Ottoman and early nationalist periods, let us straightaway indict Renan, and root out his real influences, rather than laying a barrage of charges across too broad and scattered a field.

**Islamist Optimism: Is It Warranted?**

Let me conclude this long discussion with some remarks on what an Islamist influence upon the scientific study of religion might hold for a Turkish study of religion that is not at the same time wedded to a “religion of science.” One impression I, at least, get from Turkish Islamism is its optimism. The Islamist answer to the Turkish situation brims with forward-looking energy about creating an alternative modernity to the Kemalist one — an Islamic modernity. As Kasaba, relates, “once the restrictive cloak of Kemalist ideology is removed, Turks will rejoin the Islamic
world and be perfectly capable of creating a society that is not only modern (which they take in the technological sense of the word) but also more equitable and “just” than the one created by the Kemalist elite after the Western image. (Kasaba 1997, 17) This optimism is based, in part, on the hope that populist vitality and creativity will be able to produce another sort of modernity – and one that is not simply the denial of Kemalist modernity, but some sort of parallel version of modernity. Note, that technology, and thus science, stay at the center of this vision. To think otherwise, to think in a fearful and narrow manner, Kasaba argues. It is to equate the collapse of Kemalist models of modernization with the collapse of modernity itself would mean that we are still reading history through the lens of a very restrictive model. Far from extinguishing the promise of modernity, the ongoing eclipse of these models releases, in theory and in practice, the liberating and enabling dynamics of modernization. Stripped of the artificial certainties and uniformities of yesteryear, the world appears not chaotic and insecure but full of possibilities. (Kasaba 1997, 33)

Given that Kemalist modernity is in large part French, say with its fierce separation of religion from politics, as an American, I can easily find much agreeable, and more importantly, plausible in these ambitions. This is especially so, given the fact, as the Islamists claim that under Atatürk, Muslims in Turkey were cut off from their religious traditions by force. According to them, once the restrictive cloak of Kemalist ideology is removed, Turks will rejoin the Islamic world and be perfectly capable of creating a society that is not only modern (which they take in the technological sense of the word) but also more equitable and “just” than the one created by the Kemalist elite after the Western image. (Kasaba 1997, 17)

But, of course, the question remains whether such an Islamist modernity can produce what Kemalist or other Western modernities have produced – to wit, civil society, science and technology. While I do not at all equate Turkish Islamism with its variants in the Arab world, the Arab variants do not inspire confidence in their ability to produce a distinctive modernity that would involve science, technology or even an attractive, much less viable, social order. Instead, among arid zone Islamists, we find an ironic pattern of hypocritical parasitism. Western science and technology are rejected as ungodly, yet, whether as mobile phones or hijacked airplanes, the science and technology of the West are routinely used to further the purposes of Islamist extremists. Such parasitism makes one wonder whether there is anything at all to the claims made for an Islamic science. In the case of Pakistani Islamism, instead of a new Islamic science or technology, according to Pervez Hoodbhoy, Pakistani Islamism has only produced a stifling obscurantism. In 1988, Hoodbhoy wrote a stinging review of the results of “First International Conference of Scientific Miracles of the Holy Qur’an and Sunna, organized by the Islamic University of Islamabad and the Organization of Islamic Miracles in Mecca, and inaugurated by General Zia himself...” (Dallal 1993, 175) In 1991, Hoodbhoy’s Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality carried on the fight. In his exposé of the anti-scientific policies, Hoodbhoy showed how the Islamist movement, Jamaat-e-Islami, fostered policies detrimental to anything one might call ‘science,’ through the agency of its public intellectual center, the Institute for Policy Studies in Islamabad – IPS. There he listed some of the recommendations of the IPS for writing “suitably Islamized science textbooks.” (Hoodbhoy 1991, 54) Some summaries of
the IPS’s recommendations such as these should make Hoodbhoy’s point. Here are three such recommendations:

(1) No phenomenon or fact should be mentioned without referring to the benevolence of Allah. For example, in writing a science book for Class 3 children, one should not ask ‘What will happen if an animal does not take any food?’ Instead, the following question should be asked: ‘What will happen if Allah does not give the animal food?’

(2) A science textbook should be written only by a man who believes strongly in Islam as the only code of life. And who is thoroughly familiar with the Qur’an and Sunnah. All possible care must be taken in this regard.

(3) Effect must not be related to physical cause. To do so leads towards atheism... Similarly, it is unIslamic to teach that mixing hydrogen with oxygen automatically produces water. The Islamic way it this: when atoms of hydrogen approach atoms of oxygen. Then by the will of God water is produced.(Hoodbhoy 1991, 54)

Hoodbhoy concludes that two brief observations are merited. First, the “basic assumption of science — that each physical effect has a corresponding physical cause — is being specifically refuted.” Allah intervenes to move things, things do not move each other. Second, and perhaps most tellingly for the prospects of an Islamist science as a force to lead us into the future, Hoodbhoy points out that “nowhere in the recommendations does one find a call to excite the curiosity of children, to develop in them an attitude of questioning, or to place the idea in the child’s mind that authority can sometimes be wrong.” In Hoodbhoy’s final view, such an Islamist science is “no mandate for real science. In a closed, static and pre-ordained universe, what use is it anyway?”(Hoodbhoy 1991, 55) As recently as August 2007, Hoodbhoy has updated and reaffirmed his observations of 1991. There, he reports that on his campus, Al Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad there are “three mosques with a fourth one planned, but no bookstore.” Or, consider the fact Hoodbhoy tells us that Abdus Salam, a 1979 Nobel Prize winner for his formulation of a “standard model of particle physics” is forbidden to set foot on any university campus in Pakistan! Then there is the bizarre case of government-funded Islamist scientists, who have devoted hours of research time and money to determining the “temperature of Hell” or the “chemical composition of heavenly djinns.” Hoodbhoy laments the fact that “none produced anew machine or instrument, conducted an experiment, or even formulated a single testable hypothesis.” Still in all, Hoodbhoy holds out the hope that “science can be returned to the Islamic world” if a “more pragmatic approach, which seeks promotion of regular science rather than Islamic science, is pursued by institutional bodies.... Bleak as the present looks... History has no final word, and Muslims do have a chance....” (Hoodbhoy 2007)

When it comes to an Islamist social vision, can we arrive at any clear answers to our question? What is the social vision informing the reconstitution of a caliphate, for example? As Şerif Mardin wrote over a decade ago, that the social and political futures projected by such anti-modernist groups remain an “enigma.”(Mardin 1995, 295) It may be that we will all need to wait and see. Posing the question of an Islamist social vision in terms of the study of religion, a parallel question needs to be asked. Just what would an alternative to a Western modernist study of religion look like? As this perspective applies to the study of religion, then, a first line of argument is that
the reforms known as modernism ought to be judged on their own bases, not, as I have already argued, upon whether or not they were “imposed.” (Kasaba 1997, 17) Therefore, I would resist arguments against doing religious studies in the manner practiced in the IAHR, for instance, simply because the IAHR has Western European origins, and thus might be said to imply an “imposition” of Western values upon indigenous Turkish ones. After all, would anyone seriously argue that we—in this case both Americans and Turks—should resent the Arabic number system or algebra as “impositions” because they came from top down and from other places that the USA or Turkey? Similarly I would reject the notion, say, that there is something peculiarly ‘Muslim’ about fundamentalism or scriptural literalism, and correspondingly something ‘Western’ about ‘scientific’ approaches to the interpretation of sacred scriptures. By this logic, we should expect to find Western fundamentalists or scriptural literalists such as right-wing evangelicals like Pat Robertson or James Dobson fasting during Ramadan and booking air tickets for the Hajj. So, putting aside such shaky and polarizing propositions, let us, nonetheless, be on the look out for cultural biases, and judge whether they are helpful or not. Let each culture and civilization likewise contribute what it can to the common treasure of humanity. Let us, in a sense, “impose” upon each other. But complaining about so-called “impositions” seems to me a non-starter.

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