Markiewicz on Yılmaz, 'Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought'

Review published on Thursday, December 6, 2018


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*Caliphate Redefined* is a remarkable book because it is a complex and detailed work of intellectual history tied to a relatively simple and straightforward point. Modern interpretations of the caliphate still focus on how the caliph was defined by Muslim jurists as the temporal successor of the Prophet Muhammad charged with the affairs of the entire Muslim community. Many of these jurists argued that such a successor should also be a member of Muhammad’s tribe, meaning that the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate with the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 is widely viewed as marking the end of the historical caliphate. For decades, modern historians have debated the extent to which Ottoman sultans sought to lay claim to the caliphate on juridical grounds. In this important new book, Hüseyin Yılmaz demonstrates that Ottoman intellectuals certainly redefined the caliphate in the sixteenth century, but not in relation to Islamic jurisprudence. Instead, they offered a new conception of the caliphate as the political expression of the spiritual ideals and expectations articulated by Sufism.

*Caliphate Redefined* fills a major gap because it is fully immersed in the wide range of mostly unstudied works of Ottoman political thought. In undertaking this study, Yılmaz joins a number of scholars who, in recent decades, have sought to re-examine the political and intellectual dimensions of post-Mongol Islamic history—that politically fragmented and culturally complex historical terrain between the so-called classical period, ending in 1258, and the rise of the national historiographies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yılmaz shows us how ideas, concepts, and political structures developed in earlier periods took on new meanings through the active and conscientious engagement of later generations with received traditions.

The first two chapters are the most chronologically oriented of the book. Chapter 1 surveys the array of political writings produced in Ottoman lands from the early fifteenth century through the late sixteenth. Yılmaz offers a periodization that defines the age of Süleyman as exceeding the reign of Süleyman (r. 1520-66 CE) himself to encompass the entire tenth Hijri century (1494-1591 CE). The periodization is, in part, informed by the paucity of works of political thought produced within the Ottoman domains in the fourteenth century and the explosion of political writing in the sixteenth. His book presents the evolution of Ottoman discourse on rulership through three ages and in this manner grounds his discussion of political thought in the wider political, social, and cultural contexts that informed them. The proposed periods—the Age of Angst (1402-53 CE), the Age of Excitement (1453-1517 CE), and the Age of Perfection (1517-late sixteenth century)—are sensibly tied to major watershed moments in the political trajectory of the Ottoman sultanate, yet little space is given to
articulating why the broader features of these ages suggest angst, excitement, and perfection. Instead, Yılmaz focuses his discussion on those works that are particularly emblematic of the ages he identifies.

A second, more fundamental, purpose of the chapter is to differentiate forms of political writing according to the methodological or epistemological perspectives they assumed. These perspectives—ethical, juridical, bureaucratic, and Sufistic—were each grounded in particular literary traditions that informed their authors’ handling of fundamental questions of rule and its ideal expression. All of these traditions predated the Ottomans, yet the explosion of the Sufistic approach is, for Yılmaz, a unique feature of the Ottoman landscape. This mode of political thought was the most diverse, yet it was unified through its concern with situating rule within the parameters of Sufi cosmology, by means of which it examined the temporal and spiritual aspects of rulership and advocated their union in a single individual as the ideal ruler.

Chapter 2 builds on this central observation by exploring two interrelated developments of the post-Abbasid period in Anatolia. The first concerns the mystical turn in the redefinition of the caliphate. Yılmaz identifies Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi (d. 1191) and his illuminationist philosophy as a key early proponent of a new vision of rule that emphasized intuitive knowledge and divine light as fundamental characteristics of the ideal ruler. For Yılmaz, thirteenth-century western Anatolia, a marginal political and cultural space within the domains of Islam, became the main theater in which the political and intellectual implications of Suhrawardi’s challenge played out among a “new breed of Sufi leaders and rulers” (p. 112). The chapter sets these broader political, social, and intellectual developments in relation to the trajectory of the Ottoman sultanate up to the mid-fifteenth century, a period in which Ottoman sultans cultivated ties with antinomian Sufi leaders. Beginning in the reign of Murad II (r. 1421-44, 1446-51), such relations gave way to a broader sultanic-Sufi alliance that extended to the urban and learned Sufi confraternities, the intellectual output of which refashioned Ottoman rulership in a new language.

In chapters 3 and 4, Yılmaz engages most thoroughly and perceptively with the central ideas that animated political thought among Ottoman authors of the period. Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of the sultanate (saltanat), or executive power. Depending on the intellectual orientations—ethical, juridical, bureaucratic, or Sufi—of an author or work, the particular conceptions or qualifiers varied in accordance with the underlying epistemological perspective. Even so, the majority of these authors exhibited aspects of the Sufi sensibility and broadly agreed upon four key aspects of rule. First, they defended the need for political authority on the basis of certain ontological assumptions about human nature. Second, they tended to emphasize grace from God—as opposed to merit or force—as the most legitimate source of rule. Third, because divine favor could be shown to worthy and unworthy candidates alike, Ottoman writers exhibited a moralist tendency in seeking to influence the behavior of rulers by emphasizing the cultivation of ethical traits—often synonymous with the cardinal virtues—as the fundamental features of the ideal ruler. Fourth, rulers occupied the highest rank among humankind, on a par with prophets, since they assumed responsibility for the welfare of their subjects.

Whereas chapter 3 deals with the most fundamental features of rulership in the abstract, chapter 4 considers how Ottoman authors conceived these features within the particular framework of the caliphate. A sultanate became a caliphate when executive power was “inspired by God’s governance
and modeled after the rulership of ruler-prophets” (p. 191) in an effort to unify temporal and spiritual authority. This conception of caliphate built upon the broadly agreed-upon aspects of the sultanate (explored in chapter 3), but to these were added several significant propositions, all of which bore heavily the imprint of Sufism. The first asserted that caliphal rulership should mirror the Unity of God in his creation. The proposition drew upon Sufi cosmological doctrines that posited the human soul as the microcosm of God’s creation and asserted that an individual attained his or her purpose through the active embodiment of the divine attributes, which were reflected passively in creation. Within Sufi spiritual discourses, this active embodiment is what defined the axis mundi (qutb) or God’s vicegerent (khalifat Allah), whose spiritual perfection maintained the broader cosmic order. When applied to political discourse, the doctrine described an ideal ruler as unifying temporal and spiritual authority through the perfect implementation of God’s governance on Earth. This approach to the caliphate diverged markedly from juridical notions that emphasized the caliph as the successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Rather than focus on jurisprudence or the example of the Prophet’s life, political writers underscored the continuous succession of God’s vicegerents on Earth and so tended to focus as much on pre-Quranic prophet-rulers like Adam, David, and Solomon as on Muhammad.

The last chapter (chapter 5) turns toward the reception and manipulation of these ideas in both the popular imagery and elite ideology of rule during the age of Süleyman. During this period, several broader factors conditioned both popular and elite engagement with political ideas and helped reinforce the pervasiveness of mystified notions of the caliphate. Foremost among these factors was the increasing interimperial rivalry of the Ottomans with their Safavid and Habsburg neighbors, the universal imperial aspirations of which fueled increasingly expansive claims to authority. Coupled with these rivalries, the approaching Islamic millennium (1591 CE) heightened eschatological expectations and substantiated a discourse that emphasized the role of Ottoman sultans on the grandest of cosmo-historic stages. These wider imperial and messianic contexts were equally reflected in the Sufi-inspired historical writing of the day, which Yılmaz explores through extensive summaries of sixteenth-century works that offer creative mystical interpretations of Ottoman genealogy or describe individual sultans in the grandest of eschatological terms as the expected harbinger of End Time (mahdi). The mystical turn in defining rule was at the heart of all of these formulations and demonstrates the extent to which Sufi-inspired conceptions of the caliphate underpinned wider political discourses in Ottoman lands.

Although Caliphate Redefined focuses on Ottoman thought in the sixteenth century, its central argument for the mystical redefinition of the caliphate in the post-Abbasid era demands attention from all historians working on Islam or political thought. In synthesizing a vast array of Ottoman political writing, Yılmaz demonstrates beyond any doubt that Ottoman authors were not concerned primarily with the status of Ottoman sultans as caliphs in the juridical sense. Instead, they developed creative ways to grapple with fundamental ideas about the place of humankind in the wider cosmic order, the nature of political authority, and the cultivation of good governance among powerful rulers. Caliphate Redefined highlights the rich texts that conceptualized such governance.

Yılmaz’s book is also fully aware of parallel developments in political thought that unfolded outside the Ottoman Empire during the period under study. For this reason, I was perplexed by Yılmaz’s assertion that the mystical features of Ottoman political thought are emblematic of a distinctly Rumi (Balkan-Anatolian) character. Such a claim largely overlooks evidence—cited throughout the book—suggesting that the mystical turn in political thought was, in fact, part of a much broader
development in Islamic lands. This has, in fact, been a central thrust of recent scholarship on the political and intellectual developments of post-Abbasid Islamic lands.[1] To be sure, Yılmaz acknowledges these broader developments and recognizes the extra-Rumi origins of a number of his key “Ottoman” intellectuals. Even so, neither this recent scholarship, nor his awareness of broader parallel developments across Islamic lands, nor the biographical features of his key subjects temper this important thesis of the work. The effect is somewhat distorting since it suggests Ottoman political thought developed primarily as an internal dialectic within Ottoman lands when it is clear that the geographical dimensions of these developments were much more expansive.

Part of the reason for this emphasis on Rum may stem from Yılmaz’s explicit decision to focus primarily on political ideas and only secondarily on the broader cultural and social contexts that informed them. As a consequence, although Yılmaz notes the biographical outlines of many of his subjects, Caliphate Redefined does not explore their implications by tracing and examining the relationships that existed between political thinkers across time and especially, space. Here, too, works are set in conceptual relation to one another, but less effort is made to establish their historical relationship (to identify who read precisely what). In this sense, political ideas mostly remain an abstraction or are tied without much substantiation to general political, social, or cultural contexts.

These two minor criticisms must be set against the outstanding achievements of the book as a whole, which introduces specialists and generalists alike to a vast array of Ottoman political writings from a number of literary genres, written in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, many of which are only available as manuscripts. In surveying and summarizing this literature, Yılmaz offers readers a book that is truly encyclopedic in its coverage. At the same time, he offers distillations of key political concepts and demonstrates how Sufi-minded Ottoman authors conceived of and defined the ideal ruler and defended a new vision of the caliphate divorced from juridical considerations. This masterly, comprehensive handling of the subject, coupled with a wholly persuasive central argument, renders the book foundational for the history of Ottoman political thought, and one that will remain a key resource for scholars decades from now.

Note


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