

Özlem Denli

# Liberal Thought and Islamic Politics in Turkey

Converging Paths



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*For Thomas W. Pogge*



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Notwithstanding, any flaws and shortcomings of this work are solely my own.



# Foreword

Thomas W. Pogge  
Yale University, Department of Philosophy

I have followed Turkish politics and political discourse ever since my first visit to the country in the summer of 1980. That visit came just before Turkey's third military coup, and an ominous air of crisis was hanging over Istanbul. Young people were talking politics, were passionately involved in political education and organizing, but with a heavy sense of foreboding, speaking openly about the impending military coup and fearfully about the severe repression that was bound to follow. I had left the country by the time the coup hit on September 12, but I followed the subsequent horrors in the media: hundreds killed or executed, hundreds of thousands arrested and tried, newspapers closed, associations forbidden, movies banned, passports denied, 1.7 million citizens blacklisted and thousands of teachers, academics and judges fired from their positions. This was the military that, beholden to its historical hero Kemal Atatürk, saw itself as bearing ultimate responsibility for the proper functioning of the state and for the preservation of its modern, secular order. This military proceeded to reorganize the state and its economy, had a new constitution written up and approved by referendum, and installed coup leader Kenan Evren as President for seven years (1982-89).

It took me 23 years to return to Turkey in the summer of 2003 for the pentannual World Philosophy Congress in Istanbul. After winning the 2002 national elections, the conservative Islamic Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP; Justice & Development Party) was then in power, or at least in government, still constrained by the military's distrustful supervision on behalf of secular Kemalist ideology. This military background power was very much in evidence, with plenty of soldiers in the city and a strictly enforced prohibition against headscarves worn in public buildings.

The Philosophy Congress was huge, and some of the many parallel sessions were held in public buildings with the regular result that many women were stopped by armed soldiers from attending, even when they had joined groups of foreign guests. After having in this way lost a good part of the potential audience for my lecture in the Military Museum, I

sought out the veiled women for conversation afterwards. In the discussion, I proposed to them the founding of a tolerance movement. The young women were enthusiastic about this idea, and we deliberated at length about a suitable emblem for the movement and a catchy slogan, something like: “Compatriots, please support our right to wear a headscarf and we shall forever support your right to wear one or not as you see fit.” We agreed to discuss it further the next day. By then, however, my new friends had changed their minds (or had it changed for them). They told me that all good women ought to wear a headscarf and that, ideally, the state should not be neutral in this matter but should at least strongly encourage women to do what is right. I was surprised by this dramatic reversal, and a bit disappointed that liberal tolerance seemed not to have much of a foothold in Turkey beyond a relatively small circle of Western-influenced intellectuals. The military’s professed fear of a return to a religious state was perhaps not all that far-fetched after all.

During the days of the Congress, my partner Lynn Tong and I spend some time exploring the historical treasures of the city with philosopher Armen Masoobian, editor of *Metaphilosophy*. He is of Armenian descent, and his first visit to Turkey was therefore a rather emotional experience. Thanks to him, we spoke a good bit about the genocide (1915-23), also and especially with Turkish intellectuals who, despite their country’s persistent denials, were quite open to the topic and broadly knowledgeable about the pertinent facts. This openness greatly increased a year later through the appearance of the book *Anneannem* (English: *My Grandmother: an Armenian-Turkish Memoir*) by lawyer and human rights activist Fethiye Çetin. In it, Çetin tells the story of her Armenian grandmother who, as a little girl, had been saved by a Turkish policeman, converted to Islam and given a new Turkish name and identity.

Right after the Congress, I went with Lynn and my former student Ferda Keskin on a wonderful tour through the Western part of Asian Turkey: breathtaking coastlines with beautiful traditional villages and affluent resorts, amazingly rich night skies and clear, sun-drenched landscapes. If only Van Gogh could have seen this!

I returned to Turkey the very next summer for a magical culture festival in Diyarbakır, a provincial capital of 1 million mostly Kurdish citizens. Diyarbakır is an ancient city surrounded by a spectacular wall that is about 6.5 kilometers in length, ten meters tall and four meters wide. During the festival, large crowds were gathering on top of the wall, eating, singing, dancing, and watching the various events below. This seemed dangerous to

me, seeing that there was no railing or barrier of any sort; but, when I asked some of the locals how many people, especially children, were falling off in an average year, I was very seriously assured that no one of any age had ever met with such a misfortune.

My global justice lecture (with Turkish powerpoint, thanks to Ferda) drew a large and entirely non-academic audience, perhaps because it was in the same session as a group of five whirling dervishes who performed with dazzling endurance and precision. Celebrating into the evening, I learned that the intense happiness and good cheer all around were due to the fact that the longstanding oppression of Kurdish culture had recently been relaxed. In particular, it had become permissible to speak Kurdish and to sing the old Kurdish songs that had been banished for so long. And this is what we did that evening: sing old Kurdish songs under the stars in an old cobblestone courtyard, accompanied by a diversity of musical instruments and with the younger people dancing.

I returned to Turkey four more times in subsequent years, in 2008, 2010, 2015 and 2016, visiting Ankara and Bursa, Koç University and my former doctoral students Aysen Bilgen, Özlem Denli, Ferda Keskin and Nedim Nomer. Turkey changed dramatically during this period, with the Islamists, led by the AKP and its leader Erdogan, becoming increasingly dominant and assertive and the military's secular Kemalist ideology increasingly on the defensive, a trend that culminated in the failed July 2016 military coup against Erdogan's government, which enabled Erdogan to bring the Turkish military fully under his control.

During this period, following Denli's work on contemporary Turkey gave me a great opportunity to understanding much greater depth Turkey's fascinating modern political history and, in particular, the significant role played therein by Turkey's political intellectuals. Here the political ideas and writings of the broadly liberal intellectuals are especially interesting. They had their own vision of a liberal Turkey integrated into the European Union – a vision that might well have become reality if the EU had seized the historical opportunity rather than subjected Turkey's 1987 membership bid to decades of humiliating delay even while Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia were all admitted. This liberal, European vision put them in opposition to both Kemalism (for its anti-democratic privileging of the military as well as for its suppression of freedom of religion) and Islamism. But, as Özlem Denli shows, Turkey's liberals in effect joined forces with the Islamists during the crucial years of contestation

*Foreword*

and thereby, unwillingly, played an important role in putting Turkey firmly on the path of Islamism.

Turkey is a fascinating country with an amazingly rich history and culture, a country of great importance for the future of the Middle East, of Europe and beyond. The book before you is an excellent guide to its recent political discourse and history.



# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## **1. Introduction**

Turkey has undergone significant social, economic, and political changes since the military coup in 1980. A noteworthy development during this period has been the emergence of liberal doctrines and the growing influence of liberal ideas and concepts in public debate. Liberal economic policies have been implemented and defended in Turkey for over thirty years now. The introduction of ideas, values, and principles associated with a liberal political order and of liberalism-inspired political critique followed gradually, gaining significance in the 1990s.

Another important development in the Turkish political scene after 1980 has been the changing trajectory of Islamist movements and doctrines. The Turkey of the 1990s was the scene of Islam's rising public visibility and political significance. In this period, Islamist doctrines and movements of various strengths came under the influence of the global wave of radicalization. The tendency towards radicalization was, nonetheless, complicated by internal differentiation and growing discursive and political diversity among the Islamist ranks. During the 1990s, various Islamist thinkers and circles developed original reinterpretations of Islam, and distanced themselves from the political goal of establishing an Islamic state.

A significant—and initially confusing—consequence of the junction of these two developments is the support that liberals extended to the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party – AKP) and its political project. My initial interest in writing this dissertation came from a curiosity to understand the changing trajectory of Islamism in Turkey and its crossing paths with liberalism in the 2000s—a development that I call the “liberal-AKP rapprochement.” Put more specifically, my aims in this dissertation are twofold:

First, I discuss the specific brand of liberal thought that developed in the Turkey of the 1990s, the first one to be articulated as an internally coherent doctrine. I deal with this topic with a view to uncovering the concepts, ideas, and modes of analysis that figure in liberals' endorsement of the AKP.

Second, I discuss the post-1980 transformation of Islamism, with particular focus on the developments of the 1990s and 2000s. My discussion of Islamism, in turn, takes place on two levels:

1. The transformation of Islamic discourse as illustrated in the forms of Islamic political critique and proposals for alternative political organizations emerging in the 1990s.
2. The transformation of the main mold of Islamism in Turkey, which has been represented by successive Islamist political parties since the 1970s. I focus, particularly, on the change of course that took place in the 1990s, and the transformation of the Islamist legacy by the AKP in the 2000s.

The official interpretation and practice of secularism in the Republican period is key to understanding Turkish modernization, as well as the state-society relationship throughout the Republican history. The political significance of secularism is also evident in the liberal critique of Kemalism, and in the role this critique played in the “liberal-AKP rapprochement” in the 2000s. The dissertation, thus, incorporates an essay discussing official secularism in conjunction with the cultural ethos of the Republican regime.

I argue that the trend towards incorporating liberal ideas into Islamic thinking in Turkey has been a development both influenced and celebrated by liberals. This tendency, most explicitly expressed in the abandonment of the vision of an Islamic state, which I call “partial internal secularization” of Islamism, did not entail “internal liberalization” of the Islamic legacy. Instead, the latest stage in this trajectory is characterized by the unique blend of neoliberal economic policy, Islam-inspired cultural conservatism, and political authoritarianism represented by the AKP.

In the case of Turkey, the emergence of liberal doctrines incorporating a coherently articulated political content can be dated to the 1990s. The influence of liberal ideas and political critique has steadily increased in the two decades that have followed. Liberal influence in Turkish politics has not been based on mass appeal or electoral success; rather, the impact of liberalism on Turkish politics manifests itself in two interrelated and concomitant developments:

First is the emergence of a family of liberal doctrines. Second is the transformative influence of liberalism on other theoretical and political traditions such as Islamism, socialism, and feminism, through the gradual incorporation of broadly liberal ideas and principles into the discursive frameworks of these traditions. The interaction between liberalism and Islamism constitutes one of the more striking aspects of this development, and is a major focus in this dissertation.

The dissertation is a compilation of five essays.<sup>1</sup> Each essay deals with a specific aspect of the post-1980 political dynamic in Turkey. Essay 1 and Essay 2 are especially closely related to each other, and should be read together.

In the following part of this general introduction, I present my use of basic concepts and the general approach employed in this study. In the third part, I summarize the individual essays comprising the dissertation, and discuss their connection with one another and with the general topics and concerns of the study. In the fourth and final part, I provide an outline of the history of religion-state relations in Ottoman-Turkish history.

## **2. Basic Concepts and Ideas**

### **2.1. Islamism**

Academic literature on Islamism is ridden with terminological diversity. According to the definition adopted in this dissertation, Islamism comprises those modern interpretations that claim a role for Islam in guiding how Muslims are to lead their public lives. Islamists, in this broad sense, do not understand Islam as merely a religion of individual salvation. To the contrary, they insist on taking Islamic principles as the normative perspective from which they evaluate the existing institutional framework.

I define “radical Islamism” as a subset of the broader category of Islamism. In my interpretation, radical Islamism is the kind of public, mobilizing religion that aims to turn a particular interpretation of Islamic belief and practice into a total social project to be implemented through the authoritarian use of state power. In relevant literature, other concepts such as “Islamic fundamentalism” have been employed to define a similar concept. I steer away from using the term “fundamentalism,” due to the association of the concept with some Protestant doctrines, and to specific phenomena emerging in a Christian context. Another reason for this choice is my wish to conform to the established usage in Turkey, for the term “Islamism” has been revitalized and become part of public debate since the 2000s.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Three of these essays are revised and expanded versions of previously published work. Specifications are given at the beginning of each essay.

2 In the 1990s, Islamist groups and individuals rejected the term “Islamism,” and insisted

Radicalization was a key aspect defining Islamist movements and doctrines in the 1990s. This global trend gave rise to radical revolutionary ideas in some Islamist groups in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as I will show, the impact of radicalization on the main mold of Islamism in Turkey remained moderate. The distinction I make between Islamism and radical Islamism also enables approaching “radicalization” as a continuum, and identifying tendencies of radicalization that may or may not amount to “radical Islamism” in the sense defined above. Accordingly, my chosen terminology can cover the specific forms of Islamism emerging in the Turkish setting.

## 2.2. Internal Secularization and Internal Liberalization

I call the gradual incorporation of liberal concepts and ideas into other political discourses a “process of internal liberalization.” This characterization does not imply a fully coherent and exhaustive accommodation of liberal ideas, but is not a matter of mere terminological shift either. I define internal liberalization to refer to the accommodation of a more modest set of basic political ideas and principles associated with liberalism.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Turkey, the process of internal liberalization (in the broader sense which incorporates Islamism, socialism, feminism, and so on), rests on a number of tendencies, which become more visible and prominent during the 2000s. To name a few, these are principles and ideas such as the impartiality of the state, individual rights and liberties, a certain private-public demarcation, rights-based thinking, limitation on state power, the desirability of strengthening associational life, and the understanding that political conflicts should be solved within democratic institutions

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on defining themselves as “Muslims.” Today, Islamism is put into use by Islamists themselves, and employed in debates on questions such as “Does AKP represent the end of Islamism?” or “Can Islamism be revived?” For diverging perspectives on the topic, see the compilation of essays edited by Mümtazer Türköne. Türköne, *Doğum ile Ölüm Arasında İslamcılık*.

<sup>3</sup> Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> This idea is distantly inspired by John Rawls’ concept of a “constitutional consensus,” developed in *Political Liberalism*. A constitutional consensus covers certain basic principles that establish democratic electoral procedures for moderating political rivalry within society; thus, implies agreement on certain basic political rights and liberties. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 158-9.

and procedures. I believe that this idea of internal liberalization presents a suitable basis for reflecting on the actual and changing ways in which Islamists relate to their comprehensive beliefs, and on their points of contact with the liberal strains of political critique in Turkey.

Even before the crystallization of liberal doctrines proper, the influence of basic liberal ideas on strains of Islamism was already evident. As will be discussed in the essay on the “Medina Constitution,” concepts such as pluralism, cultural heterogeneity, civil society, human rights, and social contract gradually entered into various Islamic doctrines as these concepts became an intrinsic part of the political vocabulary and public debate at large.<sup>5</sup> For Islamism, the impact of liberal ideas is also reflected in the abandonment of the political goal of establishing an Islamic state. I take this development as a significant moment, and term it “partial internal secularization.”

At this juncture I refer to the work of José Casanova, who develops an alternative understanding of modern religion. In *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova argues that the public significance religion acquired in the 1980s reveals a major shortcoming in standard theories of secularization. Casanova rejects the “alleged conclusions” postulated by these theories, such as the idea that industrialization, urbanization, scientific education, and so forth will necessarily bring about religious decline or the withdrawal of religion into the realm of individual conscience.<sup>6</sup> On his alternative understanding, there may be legitimate forms of modern religion that seek political significance and yet accommodate the fundamental values and principles of a modern society.<sup>7</sup>

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5 The propagation of these concepts was facilitated by various legal and political reforms that were half-heartedly implemented, partly in the context of Turkey’s negotiations over entry into the European Union or Turkey’s participation in international human rights regimes.

6 See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*. In this work Casanova puts forward the thesis that there exists publicly pertinent forms of religion in modern societies that challenge assumptions about the role religion can play in the contemporary world. Casanova studies five cases of “public religion” from two religious traditions (Catholicism and Protestantism) in four countries (Spain, Poland, Brazil, and the United States) that challenge assumptions about the role of religion in modernity throughout the world.

7 *Ibid.*, 19.

For Casanova, the key criterion distinguishing legitimate forms of modern public religion from illegitimate ones is “privatization” or “disestablishment”, defined in a unique fashion. On this definition, modern religions’ demand for public pertinence is legitimate so long as they allow for religious freedom as a private choice that has to be protected from political intrusion as well from religiously based intervention. My concept of “partial internal secularization” is coined to express an understanding similar to Casanova’s.

Casanova’s definition presents a generic criterion for identifying “disestablished” yet publicly pertinent forms of religious expression, Islamic as much as Christian.<sup>8</sup> It can even be argued that the nuance he introduces is even more important in discussing Islam. Defining Islam as an immobile and ahistorical phenomenon is widespread in academic literature as well as public opinion in general. These views allege an inherent incompatibility of Islam with secularization, constitutional democracy, and human rights.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, whereas Christianity enables the development of autonomous social spheres, Islam, being a “total religion,” hinders the emergence of a secular state with its distinct spheres of politics and religion, and its secular morality and epistemology. As a consequence, the aim to restore the identity of religion and state in Muslim societies is regarded as the only possible Islamic political project.

Similar ideas have also dominated public debate on Islam and Islamism in Turkey. These views have often been based on the conviction that Islam is a totalizing religion, which poses a radical challenge to secular democracy unless strictly engineered and monitored. The distinction I propose between Islam and radical Islamism can also be seen as an identification of those forms of Islamic interpretation that accept their distance from the state in the sense defined by Casanova and those that do not.

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8 Casanova, “Towards a Constructive Engagement of the Fundamentalist Challenge.”

9 The assumption of a structural difference between Christianity and Islam in terms of the relationship between state and society, religion and politics, has its roots in the works of Western orientalist such as Lewis, Rosenthal, and Gibb. Ernest Gellner’s *Postmodernism, Reason, Religions* is a recent example of this widely held view. See Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. In “The Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel Huntington has similarly asserted the idea of inherent difference taking religion as the core element of a civilization. See Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” 22-49.

Casanova argues that the public relevance acquired by some religious traditions starting in the 1980s is the outcome of contingent factors such as cultural traditions, religious doctrinal principles, and historical circumstances. *Public Religions in the Modern World* deals with examples of modern public religion which have a positive role to play.<sup>10</sup>

In this dissertation I propose to accentuate Casanova's emphasis on the elements of historicity and contingency, and argue that publicly oriented modern religions can have varying political implications. I'll show that the AKP's version of public religion, for example, has authoritarian traits that fall outside of Casanova's examples of public religion: that is, public religion is not being used to establish a Sharia state in Turkey, but nor does it have a positive role to play as public religious movement.

I aim to understand Islamic expressions in contemporary Turkey not as manifestations of an immutable essence, but in the context of changing social dynamic and contingent power struggles. As will be discussed in detail in the last two essays in this compilation, I argue that Islamism in post-1980 Turkey has shifted away from the goal of establishing an Islamic state; however, it has evolved towards political authoritarianism and Islam-based cultural conservatism.

In the next section, I summarize the essays of the dissertation and the relationship between them.

### **3. Summary of the Essays**

In Turkey, liberalism had not been articulated as a coherent theory, and had not acquired any political significance until the 1990s. The 1990s marked the emergence of systematically articulated liberal doctrines, as well as the establishment of political parties that endorse liberal economic and political programs. It is important to remember that the power of liberalism in Turkey has not been based on its mass appeal or electoral success. Liberal political parties established in the period failed to mobilize substantial political

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<sup>10</sup> Casanova deals with the cases in which religion returns to public life not to defend its old social and political privileges, but to defend the values and freedoms of the modern project, and to hold the differentiated structures accountable to moral norms besides pure functional rationality and individual self-interest. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 222, 229.