Review of Social Studies

Gender and Migration

London Centre for Social Studies
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The role of religion in modern politics is topical and controversial; it (re-)surfaced as a collective identity marker after the Cold War, for instance, in the Balkans and the Muslim world. In *State, Faith and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands*, Frederick F. Anscombe proposes that the relationship between religion and society is a recurring theme—he says it is was notable important theme in last 250 years of the Ottoman Empire and in the post-Ottoman nation-state building (in the Balkans and Arab world). The author also argues that scholars, politicians, and journalists in their analysis of post-Ottoman countries give too much credit to political nationalism over religious politics.

Anscombe explains that the Ottoman state was religious, and that its subjects were categorised, and self-identified, in religious terms. He points out that post-Ottoman nationalist politics were unsuited to addressing regional social realities and therefore caused a number of problems. A Turkish proverb is used to summarise this perspective, *Balik bastan kokar* (The fish starts to smell at the head).

This book fills in a gap in the literature, it helps us understand the role of religion in the late Ottoman Empire, and especially during the transition period when the Ottoman millets separated to became independent modern countries. Anscombe explores the role of religion in modern politics in three chapters. In the first chapter, he analyses the Ottoman era, with a special focus on the late Ottoman period. Then, in the second chapter, he examines the transition period, investigating the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of new national states. In the last chapter, Anscombe analyses contemporary developments in the post-Ottoman lands, specifically referring to religious politics. The historical timescale and geography of the book is broad. It examines three important post-Ottoman territories: the Balkans, Turkey and the Arab lands.

In the first chapter Anscombe addresses the role of religious politics in the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman lands. Islam played a crucial role in transforming the tribal Ottoman state system (the *din-u devlet*, the religious and dynasty state). Meanwhile, Anscombe explains Ottoman understanding of the political world as the Abode of Islam *vis-a-vis* the Abode of War. In addition, religious justice is highlighted as a source of social order and authority. These ideas are applicable to the Ottoman classical age and the latter years, continuing until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.
Anscombe discusses the transformation period under Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1838) as “breaking of the pre-modern Islamic State” (p.61). He then says the Ottoman State became a “reconstructed Muslim state” (p.90). This contrasts with other academics who propose that Islam as a political system generally proves incompetent. To legitimise the transformative politics of the Ottoman Empire, Anscombe explores the Hanafi School terms of ‘common good’ and ‘public interest’ in the context of empowering the Ottoman Empire (Abode of Islam), through a model of European organisation, against the European infidels (Abode of War); this topic forms the conceptual framework of the chapter. In contrast to the generally good relations between religious bodies and the Ottoman State, a break occurred here with the reorganisation of politics by the secular Young Turks.

In the second chapter, Anscombe considers the legacy of religion in post-Ottoman state-building, and the significance of nationalism for state authorities. In the redrawn borders of the post-Ottoman countries, new states required different ideologies to legitimise the borders and to persuade society. Nationalism spread rapidly as the ideological tool of choice among stronger states of Western Europe since the middle of the nineteenth century. It was also the principle cited by post-Ottoman states to legitimate their creation. Therefore, Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbians lived in a world shaped by nationalist interpretations of education, language, and the myth of nation.

The political authorities of the post-Ottoman countries knew the collective consciousness of their people had been shaped by their status as Muslim or non-Muslim, and that locality provided much stronger identities than ethnicity. Nevertheless, each post-Ottoman state in the Balkans promoted a particular national consciousness that “first begun in the Balkans and then in Anatolia at the last in the Arab lands” (p. 142).

Nationalism and state building in the Balkans were complex. Each new state was multi-ethnic, along with diverse religions and languages, making communal separation of peoples difficult. Furthermore, families had intermarried across different ethnic groups, and cultural differences between ethnic groups were nuanced with cultural cross-overs.

In post-Ottoman Arab lands, separated by Franco-British interests, the new states meant the construction of borders, for the flow or prevention of goods and people, where none had existed previously.

The old regime had rested upon the din (Islam) and devlet (the Ottoman Dynasty); the new modern state rested upon a more European form of organisation: the nation-state and government. Despite the new
secular system, clearly ‘Turkishness’ and its connection with Muslim identity were immutable components. Interestingly, only non-Muslim populations were perceived as a minority in Turkey according to the Lausanne agreement.

In the third chapter, Anscombe considers contemporary issues in world politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, also loosely termed in the West as ‘the end of history’. This Western view is criticised, “rather the return of history and, indeed, of politics in post-Ottoman lands” (p. 219). In the Middle East, the war in Kuwait “seemed to mark the death not of socialism but of Arab solidarity, leaving a void into which Islamism grew” (p. 219).

In Turkey, the military and Kemalist politics have lost their power, while political Islam has risen up. In the Balkans, leftwing politics and class consciousness has diminished, replaced by identity and religious politics. It is unsurprising that religion remerged in politics, because nationalist regimes have failed both economically and politically across the post-Ottoman region—populations lost faith in nationalist leaders.

Anscombe concludes by pointing out that throughout the turbulent history of Ottoman and post-Ottoman lands, particularly in the past 250 years, “both the state and the majority of society perceived an urgent, existential threat to the empire because of its status as ‘The Abode of Islam’ ” (p. 292) However, there has been no basic consensus on the nature of threat in the post-Ottoman lands. Therefore, post-Ottoman lands experienced not only strong foreign foes but also domestic ‘threats’. These threats produced violence within territorial borders, which targeted civilians resistant to a non-consensus regime ideology.

This book is useful for anyone studying Ottoman history the post Ottoman states, Islam, or Islamic law, but may be too intense for new researchers as the structure of the book is thematic rather than descriptive. Still, Anscombe uses Ottoman and British archival resources and his expertise on the Ottoman studies and Balkans and Gulf regions gives a chance to analyse the regions in depth.

Although the primary focus is religion in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman lands, the book also considers whether the Ottoman Empire is compatible in Islamic terms, a point that Anscombe could have discussed further. Many scholars speak of the Ottoman Empire as state bureaucratic legacy of the Byzantine-Christian civilisation, while some Islamic scholars prefer to discuss the Islamic characteristics of the Ottoman Empire within the Islamic terms which are underestimated in the book.
Perhaps the most stressed element of religion in the Ottoman Empire is that it could not be changed, while the example of non-Muslim independent movements is undervalued by Anscombe who writes, “the empire saw almost no significant uprisings led by indigenous non-Muslims until the First World War” (p. 91).

Finally, this book achieves its goal in analysing the historical roots of current politics infused with religion. Despite speculation by some scholars about the Ottoman legacy in post-Ottoman lands, notably in the context of current politics, Anscombe asks historians and social scientists to rethink religious politics in Ottoman studies.

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