

Dialectical Encounter: Contemporary Turkish Muslim Thought in Dialogue, by Taraneh R. Wilkinson. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), x+269 pp., ISBN: 9781474441537 £20.00 (pb), £80.00 (hb)

This is a highly intelligent book; it concentrates on two contemporary Turkish theologians (Recep Alpyağıl and Şaban Ali Düzgün) but actually does a lot more than that. It provides an accurate snapshot of the state of the discipline of theology as interpreted by higher education institutions in Turkey in modern times, and given the significant role of religion in the country in recent years under the AKP regime this has wider relevance than merely being academic. Wilkinson carefully delineates what the various concepts and names are used for theology in Turkey, how the profession is organized and most interestingly to me its roots in the Ottoman period. Turkey is an unusual country in that it is very close to Europe and the West in general geographically and culturally and yet persists in often being rather mysterious. Although many of the theologians she mentions in the book were trained at least partially in Western institutions, they often have an agenda and orientation which is quite distinct, as one would expect of any respectable culture with deep historical roots in a period with which many outsiders are entirely unacquainted. Here Wilkinson suggests plausibly that it is the attempt at rediscovery of and renewing the Ottoman roots of contemporary cultural trends along with the application of Western theoretical methodology that is proving to be such an intriguing and profitable enterprise.

One unusual, and to my mind refreshing, theme in the book is the desire to get away from the hoary religion versus reason debate that has bedeviled treatments of modern Turkish culture for far too long. There are so many books on tradition and modernity in Turkey that I breathed a sigh of relief to read one apparently not on the topic, and a book actually arguing that such a dichotomy is not helpful. Wilkinson is not keen on dichotomies at all, and her account of the thought of Recep Alpyağıl approves of his search for a description of theological problems that avoid such an either/or approach. On the other hand, it is difficult to read his work and that of Düzgün also and feel that they

are not both searching for an intellectually respectable role for Islam in a cultural climate that is inimical to Islam, and faith in general. This might seem Eurocentric, something they try to avoid, but as Fazlur Rahman pointed out some time ago, these challenges to religion have to be taken on by Muslims as they have been by others. It is all very well to say that historicity is a kind of narrative in itself, yet it is a relevant question in religion to ask what actually happened, since it is not just our idea of what happened that is important, but what really happened that means something to how we determine what we are going to do in our lives. Rahman has had a profound influence on Turkish theology and surely a benign one since few thinkers can compete with him for clarity and perspicuity. His role in the discipline is one of the reasons that Turkish theology today is so rich and variegated.

One theme of the thinkers Wilkinson discusses here is the need for openness, a very profound idea and far less easy to embody than one might think. The problem is to be open but not sucked up into a world of ideas that are not authentically your own, but rather balance that openness with a respect for one's own culture and religion. It is easier of course to be open to ideas that are relatively distant and exotic, and it is remarkable that there is not one reference in the book to Shi'a Islam, despite the large group of Turkish members of that Islamic denomination. Of course, the organization of official religion and its study in Turkey is profoundly Sunni, no openness there.

Dichotomies do sometimes have a role to play, and many modern religious believers experience the dilemma of trying to hold onto their own culture while acknowledging the force of ideas coming from elsewhere. The point is not to resolve the dilemma but to find accurate ways of explaining and describing it, and this is what many of the Turkish thinkers whom Wilkinson discusses go on to do so well. By the time the reader gets to the end of the book it might be felt that some of those old dichotomies have managed to worm their way back into the narrative after all. Nonetheless, this is a remarkably clear and helpful book for anyone seeking an account of the rich character of Turkish theology and will surely be the standard text dealing with the topic for some time to come.

Oliver Leaman

University of Kentucky
oleaman@uky.edu