

## Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire: Institutional Change and the Professionalization of the Ulema

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire: Institutional Change and the****Professionalization of the Ulema**, by Erhan Bektaş, London, I.B.Tauris, 2023, x, 216 pp., \$103,50 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-7556-4547-3

Erhan Bektaş's *Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire: Institutional Change and the Professionalization of the Ulema*, the product of many years of research, is a seminal work in the history of Ottoman *ilmiye* thought. Exposing a variety of perspectives and layers in the conceptual and institutional evolution of the role of Ottoman ulema throughout the late nineteenth century, *Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire* offers a rich and insightful framework for the role of Ottoman ulema in a period of transition from the traditional to the modern era in the Tanzimat period. The book focuses on the intellectual, educational, professional, cultural, and ideological capacities of the late Ottoman *ilmiye* members. To do this, the author creatively and uniquely examines and engages in many different archival documents from the Ottoman and *Meşihat* Archives.

Most of the existing literature identified the Ottoman ulema with backwardness, conservatism, and hostility to reforms from the Tanzimat Edict to the middle of the twentieth century. However, recent studies that use both Ottoman and Western accounts critically should rethink and question these Orientalist stories and ground Ottoman ulema in more reliable historical writing. Bektaş has produced one such study, a revised and expanded version of his doctoral dissertation which was entitled 'The Ulema in the Late-Ottoman Empire (1880-1920): The Formation of Ottoman Ulema Identity'. The author takes the Ottoman ulema's power in the late- nineteenth century as well as the social profile of the Ottoman ulema as his focal points and studies the topic in detail throughout the introduction, five chapters, and a comprehensive conclusion in which the author relates the finding for his research questions.

In the introductory part, the author familiarizes the reader with the research field and specificities of the topic, research questions, and sources and methods. Bektaş also surveys late-nineteenth century Ottoman ulema literature, tracing the trajectory of Ottoman *ilmiye* institution in this part. He divides writing on late Ottoman ulema during the nineteenth century's reformist era into two categories: the proponents of the deteriorating and weakening position of ulema during the Tanzimat reform movement and those who advocated their relatively stable role. He says that the current literature mostly claims that ulema's power declined during the Tanzimat period, regardless of whether they were anti-reformist or pro-reformist. Here, the author strongly opposes this paradigm of the diminishing power of the ulema. Using a range of conventional and unconventional sources, Bektaş advocates the continuity in the power of ulema in the late nineteenth century. One of the watershed moments that enabled ulema to maintain their importance in the nineteenth century political scenario, according to Bektaş, was their competence and merit.

Chapter two offers a vivid description of the institutional changes in the Ottoman *ilmiye* in the nineteenth century, too. In chapters three and four, the author discusses the educational and professional career of the Ottoman ulema. In the chapter 'Social Profile of the Ulema: A Prosopographical Study', the social origins, their educational life, and the importance of Istanbul as an educational centre, their professional careers like their recruitment process and their promotions is explained by inquiring about

Ulema's Sicill-i Ahval Records (Ulema's personnel records). Also, the graphics and tables found in that part are both beautiful and instructional. The book is a good example of a prosopographical study with these statistical analyzes. The comprehensive personnel records of the ulema enable the author to extend the prosopographical method of the study. Moreover, the survey of Sicill-i Ahval Records of late-nineteenth-century's Ottoman ulema that are related to professional and social characteristics did not exist before publication of Bektaş's book. In these matters, *The Ottoman Ulema in the Late Ottoman Empire* is a valuable contribution to Ottoman intellectual history as well as the professional history of a group.

In the final chapter, he argues that the Ottoman ulema as a form of political and Islamic leadership, which supposes one central state's hegemony over the district, played a mediatory role in the provinces in cases of conflict resolution. In so doing, he successfully underscores the profile of ulema, which in the late nineteenth century of the Ottoman administration, was an authority that maintains a balance of communication between local people and the central states in provinces. The author's proof of this claim by basing on concrete examples from the Ottoman and *Meşihat* Archives is more than enough to convince the reader that the ulema played a mediatory role in districts in the nineteenth century.


To recapitulate, *Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire* is a meticulous work that investigates the role and status of Ottoman ulema in the late nineteenth century. The work is a critical contribution to the field of Ottoman *ilmiye*, and specifically to discussions on the concept of the ulema in the political scene between 1880 and 1920. It is a regional history with a geographical scope extending to Anatolia. It greatly enriches our understanding of Ottoman intellectual and cultural thought in the nineteenth century. Given the ambitious scope of the study and the references to a wide array of authors and primary sources from the Ottoman and *Meşihat* Archives, the book will open new avenues of investigation not only for researchers of Ottoman studies but also for theologians interested in ulema. The Ottoman Ulema is an admirable piece of scholarship and a must-read for scholars interested in nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual history.

The book seems to have fulfilled its aim in terms of demonstrating that the late nineteenth century's ulema with their intellectual, educational, and professional capacities was still on the stage. In this regard, Bektaş's study fills a major gap in the scholarship by demonstrating comprehensively the continuing power of the ulema in the late-nineteenth century. Also, it is inspiring and a guide in the variegated use of archival sources for further studies to hear Ottoman ulema's voices. In this sense, *Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire*'s most praiseworthy aspect is perhaps the great variety of primary sources mobilized by the author in the quest for a competent understanding of Ottoman ulema. The success of the book can be attributed to its rich sources, clear and strong narration, and well-organized structure. The book's methodical organization and narration make it accessible to both specialists and non-specialists.

The fundamental contribution of the book is that promoting researchers to ask new questions about Ottoman ulema and pursue their answers. Still, the author's treatment of the late nineteenth century's ulema as a uniform power- 'the mighty Ulema!', I believe, might overshadow some later transformations, institutions, and groups in the Tanzimat period in the political, cultural, and intellectual life of Ottomans.

Finally, this book is not only welcome in its own right, but it heralds the way to new publications on several topics related to the personnel registries of other officials working in

different state positions in the Ottoman Empire, shedding light on the rich personnel records of civil servants.

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