Ziya Gökalp on Modernity and Islam: The Origins of an Uneasy Union in Contemporary Turkey

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The ideological forefather of Turkish nationalism is the sociologist Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924). In this article, I attempt to show the ways in which he wavered on the question of religion. In Gökalp's political philosophy, the Islamic faith is the most important determinant of the Turkish national identity after language. Scholars including Tunaya have interpreted this move as Gökalp's recognition of religious public opinion at a time when people were skeptical of the principle of nationalism which did not correspond to religious distinctions. On the one hand, Gökalp's insistence on the pre-eminency of the Islamic faith in the Turkish national consciousness denies this conclusion. On the other hand, Gökalp systematically criticized Islamic values and morality, and likened its effects to a form of corruption of the Turkish people. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's (1881-1938) nationalist and secular reforms in the 1920's and 30's were to a large extent inspired by Gökalp's teaching.

The possibility of the European Union's (EU) eventual expansion to Turkey has given rise to an exceptionally passionate debate on the continent. The critics of the move are not merely concerned with the difficulties of digesting a populous Islamic nation which lags noticeably behind Western Europe in terms of human welfare and social development; for them what is at stake is the future character of Europe. The core issue here is not the future of the European economy and security or changing demographic patterns, although all of these do in various degrees factor in the debate.

In the end, though, what worries many Europeans most in their possible integration with Turkey is a cultural issue; they see expansion as a threat to their historical heritage and contemporary way of life. Indeed the most influential critics of Turkey's bid for the EU, including the former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the current president Nicolas Sarkozy, the current German chancellor Angela Merkel, and Pope Benedict XVI, all vehemently oppose the idea of a multi-cultural Europe. Broadly speaking, they argue that Islamic and European values are fundamentally at odds with each other. However, their evaluation of Islam does not as such correspond to the case of secular Turkey, which is a nation-state.
The ideological forefather of modern Turkish nationalism is the sociologist Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924). The most advanced exposition of his thought is *The Principles of Turkism* (1923). There Gökalp symbolized his political philosophy with the catchy formulation, "I am of the Turkish nation, Islamic community, and Western civilization." From the start, however, his association of the Islamic faith with Western Civilization was a dubious enterprise. Nevertheless, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's (1881-1938) nationalist and secular reforms in the 1920's and 30's were to a large extent inspired by Gökalp's teaching. Therefore, any defect in the latter's thought would possibly surface in the subsequent development of the Turkish Republic, established in 1923.

Although short of Atatürk's radicalism, Ziya Gökalp is aptly referred to as a secular nationalist. This is partially because a commitment to nationalism in itself implies a secular conception of life. Even in Europe, the evolution of the nation-state system and the growth of nationalism were developments inherently hostile to religious authority and traditions. The milestones in the evolution of the nation-state system were the Augsburg (1555), Westphalia (1648), and Utrecht (1713) peace treaties. Each of these was a heavy blow to the Holy Roman Empire and the political influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

In tandem, patriotism and, later, the development of a national consciousness in various parts of Europe were causally related to the practice of vernacular liturgy and attacks on the social and political authority of the clergy. By the same token, Ziya Gökalp’s call for a primarily national instead of religious self-identification was in itself a sign of his secular commitments.

In addition, Gökalp sought to exclude Islam from Turkish political life and limit its societal influence. However, he did not hope for an eventual exclusion of the Islamic faith from the Turkish national consciousness. Apparently he believed that a reformed conception of Islam could be reconciled with modernity, but the contemporary rise of political Islam in Turkey and the Islamists' increasingly effective campaign against modern values including secularism, toleration, and the republican idea of citizenship point towards a decisive shortcoming in Gökalp’s political philosophy.

Until the 1910's, Turkish nationalism was not a popular ideology among the Ottoman elite. They ruled over a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, and could not reconcile nationalism with their loyalty to the empire. However, in the latter part of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire had entered the final phase of its disintegration and its remain-
ing subjects in the Balkans had embraced the ideals of the French Revolution. Christian or Muslim, these people always had a clear sense of their distinctness, but the overall decay of rule and order only added to their anxiety. Given their elevated sense of nationalism at that time, the idea of living in a multi-ethnic empire under Turkish rule seemed unbearable to them.

The crisis in the state led to an equally vibrant debate among the ruling class as well. Since the 1860’s the “Young Ottomans,” or the “Jeune Turquie” had sought ideological responses to the decay of the empire. Up until then, in contrast to their Christian and Jewish subjects, the ruling elites of the Ottoman Empire, or Muslims who were mostly Turks, had limited exposure to and interest in European ideas and institutions. Although Turkish history since the beginning of the 18th century can be characterized as a saga of westernization — westernization not being distinguished from modernization at the time — the beginnings of the development were very slow and subject to interruptions. However, by the end of the 19th century, several ideological responses to the decay of the empire were on the table. Islamism was among the most popular.

Like most Young Ottomans, Islamists argued that religion was not a hindrance to progress. However, Sultan Abdülhamid the Second (1876-1909) called for Islamic unity within the empire turned out to be a failure in the long-term. Although like him, his predecessors were the Sultan Caliphs [leaders] of all the Muslims, Arab tribes successfully revolted against the Ottomans under the tutelage of the British in World War I. As Bernard Lewis points out, there was another and, arguably, more significant cause for Islamism’s eventual abandonment. “Islamic loyalty still dominated the sentiments of the great mass of Turks, as it had done for centuries past, but its modern political avatar, pan-Islamism, had won only limited successes, and held, moreover, a diminishing appeal for the Western-educated, westward-looking younger intellectuals.”

Throughout the last century of the empire, the Ottoman elite had drummed up the notion of loyalty to the Ottoman state irrespective of religion and ethnicity, but as Lewis points out this was a stillborn idea. There was not an Ottoman nation and it was impossible to create one. Interestingly enough, however, the theoretical framework of Ottomanism was to a large extent supported by Islamic undertones. This seems to explain why the leading figure of the debate to save the empire, namely Namık Kemal, known as the poet of the homeland and freedom, is at times mistakenly referred to as an Islamist.
Kemal believed that freedom, a constitutional monarchy, and an effective parliamentary representation would save the empire from an imminent dissolution by correcting the abuses of the administration and by winning back the non-Muslim subjects of the empire. In a revolutionary attempt, Kemal granted a portion of the source of political sovereignty to the people, the rest being laid in Allah and his earthly representatives, and he insisted on the separation of powers. Paradoxically, however, it was the more traditional minded Ali Suavi whose teaching legitimized rebellion. In broad terms, both Kemal and Suavi argued that Islam was the foundation of right, liberty, and democratic representation—or direct participation—in Suavi’s case.

This in itself is sufficient evidence to prove that they were not devoid of a critical approach towards a traditional interpretation of the sources of the Islamic Civilization. Thus, for instance, Kemal favored the schooling of females and an emphasis on the use of national language, or Turkish, over Arabic and Persian in education. Suavi, in his turn, made a pioneering call for a secular political order in the Ottoman Empire. All of these, however, cannot overshadow these thinkers’ attachment to traditional values and Islamic morality.

As Sherif Mardin notes, “It is often forgotten, however, that Young Ottoman theories were partly of Islamic origin. In the ideas of the Young Turks this substratum is weaker and it disappears completely in Atatürk.” Kemal and the Young Ottoman’s simple hearted naiveté showed itself most particularly in their hopes to re-earn the loyalty of the non-Muslim subjects of the Empire who were by that time under the sway of the ideas inspired by the French Revolution, including, but not only, nationalism. In retrospect, the point of no return had already been reached.

In contrast, the school of thought most alien to religious traditions was Westernism and its leading figure was Dr. Abdullah Cevdet. Although unpopular at the time, Cevdet’s ideas were a noteworthy influence on the secular reforms of Kemal Atatürk in the early days of the republic. (Incidentally, after their sweeping electoral victory in 2002, the governing Islamist party renamed a prestigious residential street in Ankara situated near the presidential palace which was originally named after Cevdet.)

Another unpopular school was the liberalism of Prince Sabahattin. The exiled prince supported a decentralized administration and promoted individual initiative. In his own words, he favored the English model over French republicanism. Turkey followed the latter course and
Sabahattin and his call for hired English mentor administrators in Ottoman provinces was long forgotten until the recent wave of liberal reforms in Turkey as a result of European Union pressure. The success of these reforms might open the way for a re-evaluation of Sabahattin’s legacy in modern Turkey.

It was not until 1913, however, the year the empire lost all of its western lands with the exception of Eastern Thrace as a result of the Balkan Wars, that Ziya Gökalp, the ideologue of Turkish nationalism, although an ineffective orator, rose to the central committee, or the highest organ, of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), then the ruling party of the constitutional monarchy.

Gökalp was not the only nationalist thinker at the time. Most notably, Yusuf Akçura called for the union of all Turkish speaking people in Asia Minor, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Akçura’s ambitious designs had not received more than a mixed reception. However, with most of the multi-ethnic empire gone by then, the Ottoman elite and the intelligentsia had little reason to hesitate from embracing a moderate notion of Turkish nationalism.

In other words, the establishment of nationalism in Turkey as the basis of the political order was, by and large, an imposition of the circumstances. (In contrast, the preference for French style secularism, or laicism, was rather deliberate.) Even at the time of Kemal Atatürk’s founding of the nationalist republic in 1923, Turkish people were far from having a distinctly national identity or consciousness. Therefore, fostering a sense of nationalism was the immediate task of the state-builders.

Until the very end of the Ottoman era, the primary source of identification in the empire was religious, but this was especially the case for Muslims because they were slow in secularizing. Social life in the empire was organized around ethno-religious communities, e.g. Islamic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish. “Turk” was used to denote peasants and to be called one was regarded by all as a private injury.

It was a challenging task for the nationalists to progress without insulting religious sensibilities. Traditionally Islam does not recognize nations but only the distinction between the community of believers and all the others, or the infidels. However, engaging in an uncompromising campaign against Islam was neither a politically feasible nor a very desirable option for the nationalists.

Therefore, from early on in his career, Gökalp sought to achieve a
compromise between political reality and religious loyalties. In effect, from being the focal point of self-identification, he relegated religion to only one of the several ingredients that make up a nation. "A nation is a community of individuals who have in common their language, religion, ethics, and aesthetics, acquired through a common education." While sufficiently reverential of the people's faith, this was quite a revolutionary step.

In his definition of nationhood, Gökalp emphasized the importance of a common culture acquired through widely shared educational experiences. According to this conception, the national language would have an elevated status because of its role in facilitating a common education. "[T]he language that we love the most is our native language. We have acquired all of the feelings of religion, ethics, and beauty which embody our spirit through this language."

Although subservient to language, religious uniformity was the only other major determinant in defining the common bond of nationality. In other words, Gökalp closely tied Islamic faith with Turkish nationalism. This, of course, was partly due to the circumstances. Recent Ottoman history had proved that the Christian subjects of the empire were determined to keep up their fight for political sovereignty.

In contrast, the Kurdish people who were Muslim had not yet developed a national consciousness at the end of World War I and were content to live under the banner of a Muslim nation; only more than half a century after the founding of the republic did they begin to question the bargain. While the Kurdish issue is a major challenge to the stability of Turkey, paradoxically it is also evidence of the success of the republic in fostering a sense of national consciousness. Secularism has worked its way through the people with such thoroughness that ethnicity and culture, as distinguished from religion, have become the primary sources of identification even in the most backward regions of contemporary Turkey.

Gökalp believed that a secular Islamic nation could become a part of Western Civilization. As he said of himself, "I am of the Turkish nation, Islamic community, and Western civilization." In order to integrate the Turkish nation with Western Civilization, it was important for him to reduce Islam to a private matter that is detached from immediate policy implications.

However, Gökalp's political philosophy appears problematical for several reasons. Above all, if Islam was to remain a major component of the Turkish identity, how could Turks embrace modernity and
become a part of Western Civilization? In fact, the renowned Turkish constitutional historian Tarik Zafer Tunay believes that Gökalp made a concession to the religious and conservative political climate of his formative years. “Mr. Ziya Gökalp’s three-legged formula of Islamism, Westernism, and Turkism is established on an inconsistent intellectual foundation whose elements cannot in any degree agree with each other but conflict.”

As Bernard Lewis points out, the traditional interpretation of Islam rejects the separation between church and state, and is unfavorable to liberal democracy. “The duty of jihad, incumbent on all Muslims, has as its first task, before tackling any external enemies, to destroy the tyrant at home and thus make possible the restoration of a truly Islamic society governed by Islamic law.”

In effect, any ruler who sought to impose secular rule would qualify as a tyrant. Although there is a broad consensus on the merits of secularism in contemporary Turkey, the popular acceptance of the notion that secularism is compatible with the Islamic faith is due to government indoctrination and appeal to individual good sense rather than a theological interpretation. This weakness has been effectively exploited by Islamists in Turkey since the 1950’s, as they have taken advantage of the existing democratic liberties and systematically enlarged their camp. Interestingly enough, despite his high regard for the role of Islam in defining Turkish nationalism and culture, Gökalp systematically carried on a religious criticism. This fact supports the argument that he paid deference to the Islamic faith principally due to practical political reasons. It might also be argued that he saw some benefit in a secularized form of religious belief—that is, as a source of ethics and morality. He was exiled to Malta by the British after WWI and there he developed a low opinion of Western morality.

“After the armistice, we began to see closeup and get acquainted with the English and the French. Their first noticeable aspect is the corruptness of civilized ethics.” Gökalp had a fairly long list of grievances including theft and undignified treatment. However, he did not point towards an Islamic morality. Instead, Gökalp led an effort to recover an ideal Turkish ethics that was rooted in the pagan tribal era.

“Civilized ethics relies especially on the nobility of individual character. In the religion of the ancient Turks, there were symbols that corresponded to character...” Thus, in laying the framework of Turkish national culture in the realms of civil ethics, individual morality, family ethics, sexual ethics, professional ethics, and international conduct,
Gökalp’s point of reference was the ancient Turkish religion, not Islam. For instance, he stated that the ancient religion of the Turks was tolerant towards women and peaceful towards other nations. “Among the ancient Turks, religion was free from strict ceremonies, perverse forms of worship, bigotry, and monopolization; therefore, it made them very tolerant towards women and other nations.” In other words, under the guise of promoting an authentic Turkish morality rooted in the pagan era, Gökalp was implicitly criticizing the Islamic tradition as a source of corruption.

It is often argued that in addition to morality, religion is supposed to provide a sense of inspiration for the people, and that the love of a divine being and the belief in an afterlife save people from the sense of nothingness that comes from an uncompromising attachment to positive evidence and skepticism. However, Gökalp denied by implication the elevating influence of religion. For him, the ideals of Turkish nationalism would be the major source of inspiration. “The distant ideal of Turkish nationalism is Pan-Turkism... [T]he distant ideal is a very appealing dream to which men aspire in order to elevate their spiritual joy to infinite heights.”

Gökalp was the inspiration for some of the most critical reforms of the secular nation-state. For instance, he called for worship in the vernacular tongue. This was one of the few reforms of the secular republic that was subverted after the first democratic election. He was also behind the successful effort at replacing Arab and Persian words by their Turkish counterparts—if necessary by creating new words. However, Atatürk went further and replaced the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet. The combined effect was momentous in making a break with the Islamic heritage of the country.

Gökalp argued that civilization is distinct from religion. This assumption, in its turn, was the foundation of his belief as to the vocation of a secular Islamic nation for joining Western Civilization. In distinguishing between religion and civilization, Gökalp relied on an interpretation of historical reality that emphasizes geography and conquest rather than faith.

After the Romans inculcated this civilization [Mediterranean Civilization] to the hundreds of nations that they gathered under their sovereignty, they got divided into two independent states called East Rome and West Rome. But the effects of this political division did not remain limited to the realm of politics. It led to the separation of Mediterranean Civilization into Eastern and Western branches. As the
Europeans were the inheritors of West Rome, they identified with West Roman Civilization and advanced it. From this was born contemporary Western Civilization. As the Muslim Arabs were the political aspirants of East Rome, they assumed the East Roman's place in civilization as well. When East Roman Civilization passed to the hands of the Muslims, it took the name Eastern Civilization.

Even if Gökalp's genealogy of civilizations might be considered a fair reflection on the past, his focus on the origins of civilizations does not necessarily help one fully understand the present character of these entities. The fault line between Islam and Christianity has assumed a critical significance in the contemporary era. The historical conflict between the followers of these religions has transformed into a war of civilizations, despite their common origins. In other words, each religion is entrenched in the camp of a different civilization. Even if this is considered to be a fact, it does not mean that the merits of the fact should pass unchallenged. It seems that Gökalp sought to secularize the notion of civilization as well.

Gökalp's secular conception of the notion of civilization seems to be the reason why he flatly refused the term Islamic Civilization. "The Ottomans did not take East Roman Civilization directly from Byzantium: As the Muslim Arabs and Persians had taken it before them, the Ottomans took it from these co-religionist nations. Therefore, some thinkers were misled in considering this civilization to be Islamic Civilization."

In order to prove that there is no such thing as Islamic Civilization, Gökalp offered elaborate arguments on the continuity between East Roman Civilization and Arab music, literature, architecture, philosophy, and sciences. According to him, the rift between the East and the West was a result of the advances made by the Europeans after the Middle Ages. (However, he added, the opera and the chivalric culture appeared in the Middle Ages. The first established the foundations of authentic Western music and the second allowed for the participation of women in societal affairs.)

Hence, for him there is no such thing as Christian Civilization. This last claim is by and large accepted by contemporary European intellectuals. Despite the grimace of the Vatican, the European Union Constitution which was currently going through the ratification process several years ago does not include a reference to Christianity but to "the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe."

On several occasions, Gökalp referred to Japan and the Jews in
order to support his thesis that people of different faiths can adopt Western Civilization. "[A]lthough the Jews and the Japanese are alien to the Europeans with respect to culture and religion, they are partners of Europe with respect to Civilization."\(^36\)

The case of the Jews is an interesting example because Gökalp could not have known in his lifetime with certainty that Eastern Jews would successfully adopt Western ideas and institutions. As Bernard Lewis comments, "The majority of Israel's citizens came from countries with little or no democratic experience—in Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle-East, and North Africa."\(^37\) However, the contemporary Turkish historian İlber Ortaylı took on Gökalp's analysis of the nature of modernization in Japan. "Japan has not been correctly understood by us from then till now. No Eastern nation felt a stronger affinity to the European religion than the Japanese."\(^38\)

It might be said that Gökalp had a naïve understanding of the Japanese phenomenon. "[T]he Japanese are considered an European nation..."\(^39\) However, he admired Japan's success and he reflected upon it as a source of inspiration for fellow Eastern nations.

Gökalp might have had two interrelated reasons for dissociating religion from the core of the notion of civilization. First, this was the only way an Islamic nation could be associated with Western Civilization. Second, and more importantly because he was principally appealing to a domestic audience, it is politically more convenient to disparage Eastern Civilization rather than the Islamic religion. "Is not this historical phenomenon [the rapid advancement of Russia after Peter the Great] a proof of the fact that Eastern Civilization is an impediment to progress and Western Civilization a cause of advancement?"\(^40\)

Gökalp had a Darwinian approach to the conflict between civilizations. His lifetime had been a constant experience of losing battles against Christian powers—the only significant exception was the Turkish war of independence at the end of his life. He believed that if the Turks could not adopt Western Civilization, they would be gobbled up by the victorious powers like many other bygone nations in history. "As the replacement of Eastern Civilization by Western Civilization became a law of nature, this 'replacement' became inevitable in Turkey as well."\(^41\)

According to him, the only way for the Turks to embrace modernity would be to recover their authentic culture which covers a wide national heritage, including but not limited to, Islam and integrate it with Western Civilization. "In this context, the Ottoman Culture which
is in the framework of Eastern Civilization will inevitably wither away, and its place will be taken by, on the one hand, a Turkish culture with the Islamic religion and, on the other hand, Western Civilization.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition, Gökalp interpreted the modernization of Japan from an evolutionary perspective. \textquotedblleft[A]s a nation progresses towards a higher stage of its evolution, it will find it necessary to change its civilization. Japan, for instance, left Far-Eastern and joined Western Civilization in the last century.\textsuperscript{43} Thus, for Gökalp, Western Civilization was undeniably superior to Eastern Civilization. It is not altogether clear why he would prefer an Eastern religion over Western skepticism and enlightenment.

Despite his principal argument that civilization is unrelated to religion, Gökalp did not hold a consistent line on this matter. At times, he referred to the religious foundations of civilization. \textquotedblleft A civilization first begins as a religious community... The immediate transfer of the advancements and the wreckages of a nation of the same religious community is just like this. Religious uniformity has brought them to the situation of connected [water] containers\textsuperscript{44} which maintain the same level.

At other times, Gökalp likened civilization itself to a religion. \textquotedblleft[T]hose who accept a civilization with all of its principles cannot take only portions of it. And, even if they take it, they cannot digest it. Civilization, just like religion, should not be taken superficially, but internally. Civilization is just like religion. First, it should be believed in and one should be sincerely loyal to it.\textsuperscript{45}

However, the comparison of religion and civilization was the greatest strength of Gökalp's secular nationalism over alternative responses to modernization in the Islamic world. The notion of integrating the best of the two worlds—that is forming a synthesis of Eastern ethics and Western technology—does not work. (Or, it works in perverse ways, as happened on September 11.) This was Gökalp's point behind likening civilization to religion. One cannot have two religions and remain in a sane state of mind.

The conservative Turkish writer Peyami Safa (1899-1961) correctly referred to a growing need for and interest in Eastern mysticism in the West—at a time when Heidegger was developing his post-modernist teaching, and he called for a cultural synthesis in order to break the hold of underdevelopment in Turkey. \textquotedblleft Turkey which is in the junction of the East and the West should not hesitate to accept Western influences. But, these influences should remain at a level which should not spoil a cor-
responding influence by us, in other words it should not penetrate the beautiful and pure foundations of our culture." 46

However, Safa did not explain how technological and cultural progress could be attained in a traditional culture that denies speculation, questioning of authority, individual liberties, and women's rights. Despite the genuine merits of cultural authenticity (which Gökalp sought in pre-Islamic national origins), the traditionalist admiration of Islamic culture and call for a synthesis between the East and the West could not shed its reactionary character.

Indeed, Turkish political and social development since the 1950's is often cited as an expression of a counter-revolutionary tendency. The year 1950 witnessed a milestone in Turkish politics and democratic history. That year the first free elections in the nation's history took place. The decision to liberalize Turkish politics was influenced by the desire to join NATO. The elections brought Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti) to power with an overwhelming majority.

Among DP's initial policy implementations was effectively to bring a ban on religious service in the vernacular. Thus, the call to prayer—whose function is equivalent to that of church bells in the West—has been recited in Arabic since then. DP also closed down village cultural centers and libraries because of their official ties to the previous one-party government. However, in effect, cultural life in the countryside was relegated to the all-male village coffee house and the mosque.

All learning and enlightenment came to an end. DP's increasingly authoritarian style, which included restrictions on the freedom of press and pressure on opposition parties, and an economic downturn which followed a boom in their early years, brought about the military takeover of 1960. 47 Its leadership was executed as a result of the ensuing trials.

Nevertheless, along with further democratization in the following decades, the trend towards an increasing presence for religion in public affairs, social life, and education continued in Turkey. On the one hand, this development helped foster a bond between the people and the government. On the other, the revolutionary aura of the early 20th century is a far cry from the political realities of Turkey today.

One of the most serious challenges to a secular political order in the recent past is the state-sponsored Imam and Preacher High Schools. Once established in limited quantity in order to train prayer leaders, in time, as a result of populist policies, these schools soon came to embody
an alternative to the secular high school system in Turkey. Although only men can lead prayers in Islam, these schools train women in abundance.

The rift these schools caused to the political culture of the nation is enormous. They became the political symbol of the traditionalist effort to undermine the reigning idea of republican citizenship in Turkey in order to promote a religious based political and social restructuring. “The Welfare and Virtue” parties which preceded AKP [the currently ruling Justice and Development Party] put forward Ottoman-inspired ideas ranging from [Ali] Bulaç’s scheme for millet-style [italics in the original] religious federalism to charity programs in which wealthy families, in effect, “adopt” poor families.” In fact, one of the justifications for the so-called soft coup d’etat of 1997 was to increase compulsory education to eight years and, thereby, decrease the size and the duration of these high schools.

There are plenty of other examples to the challenge at hand: The 1993 fire in the provincial city of Sivas where 35 intellectuals were burnt alive because of their non-conformist religious beliefs or opinions, various other assassinations of enlightened public figures, attempts at implementing anti-temperance policies, increasing pressure against women rights. In the year 2004, the reigning Islamists attempted to pass a law that would in effect open the way for criminalizing adulterous women. They gave up the idea only as a result of strong international pressure, most notably exerted through the European Union’s carrot and stick policies.

These limited examples, of course, do not provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Besides, Islamists have their own grievances, most notably with regards to restrictions against wearing the veil in the public sector and education. However, since the 1980’s when the Mullahs came to power in Iran and the cold war effectively came to an end, a wave of Islamization grasped Turkish society.

The budding Islamist political parties of the 1970’s and 80’s came to power twice in the last decade. The question at this time is not merely to stick on the course of modernization and development in Turkey; perhaps as importantly, individual liberties are at stake in an increasingly democratic country. As long as a consensus is not reached on the merits of a secular political order where all are free in their most intimate choices, the war between populist Islamists thugs and the secular elite in Turkey promises to bring further instability.
In the end, religion stands among the leading obstacles to Gökalp’s westernizing vision for the Turkish nation. On the one hand, the social and political implications of Islam stand as a major obstacle on the way of modernization and development in Turkey. The rise of Islam as a political force has brought about a significant challenge against the separation of religion and politics, secular education, the idea of republican citizenship instead of a primarily religious identification, individual liberties, and women’s rights in Turkey. On the other hand, even those in Turkey who tend to equate modernization with westernization are by and large rejected by the European public based on their historical disconnection with the Christian heritage of the West. Arguably, their imitative course of copycat modernization is at odds with trademark western inquisitiveness and drive for innovation.

Nationalism became a dominant ideology in Turkey primarily as a result of international events which led to the break up of the Ottoman Empire. Even at the time of the founding of the nationalist republic, by far the majority of the people did not have a national consciousness. Therefore, defining the Turkish nation was left to intellectuals including Ziya Gökalp. In this article, I attempted to show the ways in which the most influential theoretician of Turkish nationalism wavered on the question of religion.

In Gökalp’s political philosophy, the Islamic faith is the most important determinant of the Turkish national identity after language. Scholars including Tunaya have interpreted this move as Gökalp’s recognition of religious public opinion at a time when the people were skeptical of the principle of nationalism which did not correspond to religious distinctions. On the one hand, Gökalp’s insistence on the preeminency of the Islamic faith in the Turkish national consciousness denies this conclusion. On the other hand, Gökalp systematically carried on a criticism of Islamic values and morality, and likened its effects to a form of corruption of the Turkish people. Moreover, Gökalp was the spiritual architect of several secular reforms in recent Turkish history which have most offended the traditionalist elements in Turkish society. Nevertheless, it seems he genuinely believed that a secularized Islam which is relegated to a matter of personal faith would be compatible with nationalism, secularism, and modernity.

Gökalp took into consideration the political, social, and historical circumstances of his time in other respects as well. Above all, while he was not altogether blind to the close relationship between religious and
cultural affinities, he believed that a secular Islamic nation could join Western Civilization. While a growing number of European intellectuals have emphasized the secular and humanistic heritage of Europe, so far Gökalp has been successful at convincing the Turks of their vocation for westernization. A deeply held ethno-religious sentiment still stands as one of the major obstacles against Turkey’s admission to the European Union.

At one time, Gökalp likened civilization to religion: one could not hold allegiance to more than one at the same time. This is the greatest strength of Turkish nationalism over alternative strategies for modernization in the Middle-East. Countries that have sought to synthesize Eastern culture with Western technology have met with miserable failures and paradoxical results. It remains, more than ever, the task of modernizers in Turkey to recast an honest discussion on the theoretical possibility of a secularized Islam compatible with the principle of nationalism, democracy and individual liberties, women’s rights, international peace, or, some of the most notable characteristics and aspirations of contemporary civilization.

ENDNOTES

2 Ziya Gökalp, Turkculugun Esaslari, (Istanbul: Inkilap, 2004), 60. (All the translation from Turkish sources are mine.)
3 Ferenc A. Váli, The Foreign Policy of Turkey: Bridge Across the Bosporus (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 60.
5 Iiber Ortayli, Imparatorlugun En Uzun Yuzyili (Istanbul: Hil Yayin, 1983), 208.
7 Lewis, Emergence, 344.
8 Ibid., 326.
9 Tarik Zafer Tunaya, Turkiye’de Siyasal Partiler Tarihi: Cilt III, Ittihat
ve Terakki (Istanbul: Hurriyet Vakfi Yayinlari, 1989), 205.


12 Gokalp, 18.

13 Ibid., 17.

14 Ibid., 18.

15 Ibid., 60.

16 Tunaya, Cilt III, 303.

17 Lewis, Shaping, 119.

18 Gokalp., 79.

19 Ibid., 150.

20 Ibid., 149.

21 Ibid., 22-3.

22 Ibid., 155-56.


25 Ibid., 51.

26 Ibid., 38.

27 Ibid., 51-3.


29 Gokalp., 47.

30 Lewis, Shaping, 54.

31 Ortayli, 18-9.

32 Gokalp., 58.

33 Ibid., 55-6.

34 Ibid., 38.

35 Ibid., 38.
Üner Daglyer

36 Ibid., 49.
37 Ibid., 81.
38 Ibid., 48.