

Noel Malcolm,

Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750,

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Ottoman historians in the last decade have focused a lot on Ottoman political thought. This means how the thoughts and writings of different Ottoman scholars, which mainly included the religious strata and other intellectuals, influenced political thought and political decisions in the Empire. Now with the book written by the Oxford Professor Noel Malcolm, we have another side of that story.

Malcolm, in his book, as the title itself clearly shows, has written not about the Ottoman political thought itself, but primarily wrote how western intellectuals saw the Ottoman political thought, Ottoman state and Ottoman society in general. Nevertheless, Malcolm is very rich in primary sources, where we can notice how meticulously he connects different intellectuals' writings with a similar topic, thus compiling Western writings about the Ottoman Empire.

The book explains fundamental questions, for example, how did western writers know about Islam in general and the Ottoman Empire in specific, that is to say, what were their primary sources? When facing the 'positive' writings of intellectuals towards the Ottoman Empire, Sir Malcolm also questions why many wrote positively about the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, he gives the answers in an understandable way, where he interprets that it was not that they had an affinity towards the Ottoman Empire, but many things, as it was the issue of 'devotion in prayer' was something that at that historical context was lacking in the European societies; thus the European writers in a way were trying to give the message to their readers, that even the Ottoman "infidels" were more devoted to praying, even though their religion was "not the true religion," thus "*we should become more devoted than them.*" Malcolm also writes about the issue of relations between the early Protestants and the Ottoman Empire. He narrates a meeting between the Polish diplomat Hieronim Laski and Sultan Suleyman, where the Sultan asked Laski for information concerning Martin Luther, thus after Laski briefed the Sultan with information, Sultan concluded for Luther that "Whoever he is, he is a great man, but he has not yet arrived at the enlightenment that we enjoy."

The main chapter for the issue of political thought is the Chapter 12 of the book “Islam as a Political Religion”. This chapter deals with how the western writers saw the relationship between the Islamic religion and the Ottoman state and how Islam served the Ottoman Empire. Malcolm gives different opinions from western intellectuals. For instance, the Swiss Protestant orientalist Theodore Bibliander observed that Ottomans made war for religion and dominion. Bibliander continues writing that these wars are dictated by Islam, which for him ‘orders them to propagate their religion by the force of arms.’ Like Bibliander, the famous British writer Francis Bacon wrote, “it is a fundamental law in the Turkish empire that they may (without any other provocation) make war upon the Christendom for the propagation of their law.”

In the same chapter, Malcolm also informs the reader about how European intellectuals defined jihad in early modernity. For example, he narrates the writing of the Dutch scholar Adrian Reland, where he writes that “It was wrong to kill infidels before efforts had been made to convert them, though this applied only in cases where the infidels had never heard of Muhammad or Islam; and it was always wrong to kill women, children, or old men’.

Additionally, Malcolm writes about how Machiavelli saw the political system of the Ottoman Empire. Machiavelli wrote for this issue that “A single ruler governs the whole monarchy of Ottoman Sultan, and the others are his servants.” Machiavelli also writes about the administrative division of the Ottoman Empire, “Dividing his kingdom into sanjaks, he sends various administrators to them, and changes them as he wishes” and continues writing, “Therefore those who attack the Sultan must expect to find his state fully united.”

Being passionate about Ottoman political thought, this reviewer finds this book to be a marvelous work on this topic, even though, as argued in the beginning, it does not strictly deal with the Ottoman political thought, but it gives the readers and the scholars the other part of the medal, how the Ottoman counterparts saw their political thought. So, in a nutshell, this book is a must for all scholars, students, and anyone curious about the history of the Ottoman political thought and the appearance of the Ottoman political thought in Europe.

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