

KİTÂBİYAT / BOOK REVIEWS

Hüseyin Yılmaz,

Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought,

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, xvi+370 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0-691-17480-8

In *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought*, Hüseyin Yılmaz offers an evaluation of Ottoman political thought through the sixteenth century. He takes the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate at the hand of the Mongols in the thirteenth century as a pivot. This event, he argues, decisively shaped the character of later Ottoman political thought, rendering obsolete traditional juristic conceptions of political order and clearing the way for new interpretations, the most important of which was based on Sufi metaphysics. Sufi thought inspired many who thought and wrote about politics, Sufi and non-Sufi alike, giving rise to a distinctive understanding of political order that redefined the concept of the caliphate. The caliphate, traditionally conceived as an institution representing the rule of Arab Qurayshi caliphs and the political order instituted by the Prophet Muhammad, was reconceived as the representation of God on earth by morally and spiritually perfect human beings. Though Ottoman political thought was never monolithic, Yılmaz argues that this Sufistic view of the caliphate was a common thread that united the political thinkers of the age.

Chapter I presents a chronological survey of Ottoman political works from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Any such effort must reckon with the questions of how to define “Ottoman” and what to count as Ottoman political

thought. For the fourteenth and much of the fifteenth century, Yılmaz treats “Ottoman” as referring to political affiliation with the Ottoman dynasty; thereafter, it broadens, becoming closely associated with Rumi cultural identity (a sense of belonging to Rum, i.e., Anatolia and the Balkans). Yılmaz thus focuses in his survey on works produced by Rumi Ottoman scholars, often for the Ottoman dynasty and ruling elite. The works from Arabic-speaking world to the south of Rum and the Persianate world to the east appear here only tangentially. Yet he recognizes that Ottoman political thought was not distinguished by language, content, or form of exposition, and thus addresses ideas on rulership articulated in different languages (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) and across a range of genres (juristic, ethical, and Sufi writings, hagiographies, works of history and statecraft) and media (from manuscripts to coins). Drawing from this rich array of sources, Yılmaz displays his formidable knowledge of political works and their authors, comparing them and articulating the distinctive qualities of each.

Throughout the rest of his book, Yılmaz alternates between a chronological and a thematic approach to elucidate Ottoman political thought from different perspectives. Chapter II offers a vivid description of the political milieu of Anatolia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a period marked by co-existence between Sufi leaders and the emerging Turkmen rulers amid overlapping and often conflicting claims of authority. Using figurative language and allusive imagery, Sufi authors affirmed the authority of Sufi masters over both the spiritual and the material realm, particularly in political matters. The Ottoman sultans, rather than challenge these claims directly, instead appropriated Sufi vocabulary and imagery to assert their own unified authority. This was the context in which they began to use the title of the caliph. Many thinkers affiliated with the Ottoman dynasty interpreted this title in a Sufistic sense and presented the Ottoman sultans as representing God on earth.

Chapters III and IV present a conceptual history of the sultanate and caliphate, respectively. Yılmaz traces the varying relationships between concepts associated with the sultanate and caliphate—such as *dawla*, *farr*, *zill Allah*, and *qutb*—within the work of particular authors, as well as the similarities and differences in the usage of these concepts across different works. The author argues that changes in the usages and meanings of these terms in political works indicate the pivotal significance of the end of the Abbasid Caliphate in the thirteenth century. For example, in the post-Abbasid period, the idea of political rule as God’s grace (*dawla*, *farr*, *sahib-qiran*) gained wide currency and the juristic political

understanding, which paid particular attention to the ways of legitimate ascension to power, began to wane. Thinkers of a Sufistic bent in this period took the ruler's position as a given, concentrating on how to improve the ruler's morality and spirituality rather than debating his rule. For them, a ruler's sheer power did not confer him high status; for this, he needed to acquire moral qualities, which titles such as *qutb*, *zill Allah*, and, ultimately, caliph, signified. Yılmaz argues that this discourse had two functions: it augmented the authority of rulers by presenting them as wielders of both worldly and spiritual power, as representatives of God; at the same time, it had a prescriptive function of setting moral and spiritual goals for rulers to pursue in order to claim a higher status.

Chapter V changes the focus from the person of the ruler to the dynasty. It explores ideas concerning the Ottoman dynasty's right to rule, its status, and its future. In Yılmaz's view, the dynasty's apologists worked hard—through the use of such tools as astrology, divination, esoteric name and letter interpretation, and history writing/fabricating—to elevate the dynasty's status by “proving” its God-chosenness, its noble origins, and its being destined to provide the last rulers of the End Times, that is, to be the “Seal of Caliphate.” Here, Yılmaz again draws attention to the historical context of the period and to the competition between sultans and Sufis for spiritual and political authority—a competition which became more pronounced after the Safavids, Sufis-cum-rulers, ascended to power in the sixteenth century.

Exposing a variety of actors, connections, perspectives, and layers in the conceptual and institutional evolution of the caliphate under the Ottomans until the end of the sixteenth century, *Caliphate Redefined* offers a rich and insightful framework for the study of Islamic political thought in a period of transition from the medieval to the early modern era. The book is rich in terms of its sources and themes and innovative in its overall conception of the period and interpretation of particular sources. However, much of this will be lost on the casual reader, for the author often does little to highlight the originality. For example, while he introduces for the first time in this study a number of sources hitherto unknown and available only in manuscript form, his readers are forced to deduce this on their own from the lack of secondary material about them in the end notes. Yılmaz also underplays his often unprecedented reading of sources and the fascinating connections he draws between concepts and events. I was particularly exhilarated by his numismatic evaluation of coins from Orhan's time (pp. 105–7), his interpretation of the political nature of Sufi titles (pp. 122–23), his exposition

of the efforts to connect the Ottomans with the Abbasids (pp. 233–35), and his reading of the dream story of Osman in the light of Sufi imagery (pp. 238–39). Unfortunately, readers are not alerted to the novelty of any of this, but are instead left on their own to sift for these unanticipated gems among the familiar bits of information and discussions in which Yılmaz has hidden them.

Though Yılmaz’s explicit focus is the “mystical turn,” the prevalence of Sufistic interpretations of rulership, in Ottoman political thought, he recognizes that this vein of thought co-existed with other intellectual currents. Juristic conceptions, philosophical understandings, and realist accounts of political order all enjoyed varying degrees of favor, even sometimes in works where the Sufistic view was salient. These other currents in political thought are not something Yılmaz explores in depth, which is perhaps only natural—doing so would have required a book several times the size of this one. But I hope that what Yılmaz has done here will encourage other scholars to explore these other currents in a similarly comprehensive manner. Such studies, or even close examinations of particular works, will help to further illuminate the contours and dynamics of Ottoman political thought.

Yılmaz’s *Caliphate Redefined* is an admirable piece of scholarship and a must-read for scholars interested in pre-modern Ottoman history, Ottoman intellectual history, and the history of Ottoman political thought. Students of Islamic history and medieval and early modern intellectual history and political thought will also enjoy reading this book and find useful information and inspiration in it.

Abdurrahman Atçıl

Sabancı University