

Nurettin Topçu and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek: Stories of 'Conversion' and Activism in Republican Turkey

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Abstract

In the 1940s, Islam started to re-emerge in the Turkish public sphere after the secular reforms of the Kemalist revolution. Two public intellectuals, Nurettin Topçu and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, played a decisive role in modelling Islamic activism in the new Republican environment. This paper will focus on these two intellectuals' activism and personal stories of intra-faith conversion, as well as their encounters with the Naqshbandi Sufi order, which survived the official ban on religious orders because of its informal structures and practices. On the one hand, the Naqshbandi practices inspired in these two authors a new methodology to propagate religion within the strict limits of secular Turkey. On the other hand, the new 'modern' intellectual environment also forced Islamist intellectuals to change their way of advocating religiosity through academically accepted standards and values.

Introduction

Although they are little known outside Turkey, Nurettin Topçu and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek were at the forefront of Turkish Islamism in the wake of the Kemalist revolution. In the new political, social and cultural context that emerged in the aftermath of World War II, they reformulated the methodology and content of Islamism in the country.

Influenced by anti-modernist and anti-materialist Turkish conser-

vative thinkers during the 1920s, they went to France in the 1930s to complete their studies. There, they were further exposed to the thoughts of the French philosopher Henri Bergson and they read the works of Louis Massignon on mysticism and Sufism. After their arrival back in Turkey in the late 1940s, both Topçu and Kısakürek were influenced by two different Naqshbandi¹ Sufi masters who guided their 'conversion' to Islam and the early stages of their political activism. Topçu and Kısakürek were both from a Muslim background, so the term 'conversion' here must be interpreted as an '*intra-faith* conversion,' a term used by Sophie Gilliat-Ray to refer to "the process whereby an individual makes a dramatically renewed commitment to their [sic] existing faith tradition, and their religious identity and conviction become[s] altered, changed, stimulated, strengthened, energized, revived and invigorated."²

Their Sufi masters Abdülaziz Bekkine and Abdülhakim Arvasî (Üçışık) both had a key role in re-establishing Islamic discourse after twenty years of one-party regime, in which religious education, activism and Islamic intellectuals were excluded from the public sphere. As we will see in the last part of this paper, the Naqshbandiyyah played a key role, after the 1950s, in the *inkişâf* (reappearance)³ of Islam and in the organization of a conservative movement. This was accomplished because of the ability of mystical orders to pass undetected in public life, and because of their focus on individual aspects of religion rather than on formal and external aspects.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Topçu and Kısakürek became very

1 On contemporary Naqshbandiyyah: Itzchak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London-New York: Routledge, 2007) and Marc Gaborieau, Alexandre Popovic and Thierry Zarcone (eds.), *Naqshbandis, Historical Developments and Present Situation of a Muslim Mystical Order* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 1990).

2 Sophie Gilliat-Ray, "Rediscovering Islam: A Muslim Journey of Faith," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, eds. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (London-New York: Cassell, 1999), 316.

3 The word *inkişâf* (*inkishâf*, uncovering, reappearance) has been used to express the re-emergence of Islam into the Turkish public sphere in the 1950s and 1960s by Şaban Sitembölükbaşı (*Türkiye'de İslamın Yeniden İnkışafı* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Araştırma Merkezi, 1995) who actually translated in this way the word 'revival'. However, *inkişâf* stresses more the fact that, as we will see below, Muslim practices were relegated underground but remained in existence in Turkey.

prolific authors and they both created intellectual circles that were very influential in shaping contemporary Islamism in Turkey. In particular, their activism, their interpretation of nationalism and their reformulation of Islamic history have all had a huge influence on today's Turkish Islamists. While the political and social context of Islamism has changed after the 1980s because of social and economic transformations, the main role players in Turkey come from conservative religious and political circles that trace their origins, in one form or another, to these two Turkish intellectuals and to their followers.

This paper will analyse Topçu and Kısakürek's biographies while focusing on two major aspects of their lives and careers: firstly, their encounters with their masters and their subsequent 'rediscovery' of Islam, along with the masters' influence on their thought and on their activism; secondly, the methods that they adopted for their activism, with specific reference to their building of cultural circles to influence conservative youth.

Before examining these two authors, however, some notes on the Islamic and Islamist *inkîşâf* in Turkey in the 1950s seem necessary for the authors' roles and impacts to be understood better. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Nurettin Topçu were born in Istanbul in 1905 and 1909 respectively. During their childhood, they experienced the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1919), a vibrant period of Turkish history, not only for its dramatic political and military developments, but also because of the intellectual debates that accompanied them. However, in the 1920s, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, painful military defeats, occupation and the consequent National Struggle favoured the emergence of a secular elite.

Indeed, when Nacip Fazıl Kısakürek and Nurettin Topçu appeared on the Turkish intellectual scene, the country had fallen under the rule of a one-party system and was controlled by the secular *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (the Republican People's Party, CHP), established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. Until the mid-1940s, Turkish politics might be described as a kind of 'Jacobean secularism.'⁴ Any public display of religion was

4 Şerif Mardin, "Kültürel Değişim ve Aydın: Necip Fazıl ve Nakşibendi," Şerif Mardin (ed.), *Orta Doğu'da Kültürel Geçişler* (İstanbul, 2007), 213. Originally published in English with the title *Cultural Transitions in the Middle East* (Leiden, 1994).

simply condemned as reactionary, and talk of belief in God and the virtues of moral living were not only strictly prohibited, but punished (often draconically) as crimes against the State.⁵ As Mustafa Kara summarizes those years from the perspective of Sufism:

For five years a strong wind blew against mystical Islam [*tasavvuf*]. With the Menemen episode⁶ the wind became a cyclone and twenty-seven people were executed. Consequently, talking or writing about these subjects, mentioning Sufis meant being convicted and crushed by violence.⁷

After the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the transmission of religious knowledge could only be maintained by a few primitive publishing houses and private religious institutions. Formal religious education was removed from the curriculum, and membership of mystical confraternities (*tariqah*) was outlawed in 1925. In their zeal to create an image of a modern Turkey, secular Turkish intellectuals and historians went a long way in the 1920s and 1930s to erase and belittle the Islamic or religious foundations of the Ottoman society, leading to a profound identity crisis for generations to come.⁸

In the second half of the 1940s, the one-party regime came to an end because of social discontent, economic stagnation, and regional inequality as well as external pressures from Western countries trying to push Turkey to side with the anti-Communist block. Many restrictions were lifted, but limitations remained to protect the main tenets of secularism and keep religious symbols out of the public sphere. As we will see, the

5 Mustafa Miyasoğlu, *Necip Fazıl Kısakürek* (İstanbul, 1985), 18.

6 On 23 December 1930, a small crowd demanding the reintroduction of the Shari'a shot and killed the local garrison commander and two guards in Menemen (today in the Izmir province). The government's reaction was severe, resulting in the hanging of 29 people and the attempted abolition of the Naqshibandiyyah confraternity, to which the organizer of the protest was linked.

7 Mustafa Kara, "Farklı bir Münzevi Sıra Dışı bir Muallim: Nurettin Topçu," *Hece*, 10, 109, 2006, 151.

8 Mardin, "Kültürel Değişim ve Aydın," 224.

two intellectuals operated within these constraints and suffered from them. In 1949, religious education was reinstated with the creation of the *İmam-Hatip* schools and the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University. The process of Turkification of religious practices (i.e. the translation into Turkish of all rituals) was also stopped; for example, on 17 June 1950, the call to prayer (*ezan*) was made again in Arabic.

'Conversion'

Necip Fazıl Kısakürek⁹ studied at various schools in and around Istanbul, spending five years at the *Bahriye Mektebi* (navy academy) on Heybeli Island, although he did not graduate. In 1921, Kısakürek enrolled for studies of philosophy at Istanbul University and, in 1924, he won a scholarship (before completing his degree) to study Philosophy at the Sorbonne University. In Paris, he preferred gambling to his studies and, in general, led a 'Bohemian' lifestyle rather than concentrating on his academic work. In the following years, he would come to regret the entire European experience and studying abroad as having kept him from the more important business of religious contemplation and mystical piety (*tasavvuf*). More importantly, he regretted this experience for having kept him away from his beloved Anatolia. Nevertheless his experiences in France were decisive as far as his intellectual career was concerned. In Paris, he met important intellectuals, attended lectures given by philosophers such as Henri Bergson,¹⁰ and gained a good working knowledge of French literature and history, which he frequently quoted in his writings. After arriving back in Turkey without having achieved his diploma, he was nevertheless able to make a living as a bank employee. He was also a French literature teacher at a private French school in Istanbul, then at the Ankara State Conservatory, followed by the Istanbul Art Academy, Ankara University and Robert College. Throughout those

9 On his life: M. Orhan Okay, *Necip Fazıl Kısakürek* (İstanbul, 2000); by the same author *İA²*, s.v. "Kısakürek, Necip Fazıl." The most important source of information on Kısakürek's life, however, is his fascinating autobiography *O ve Ben* (İstanbul, [1965] 2010).

10 Rasim Özdenören, "Necip Fazıl Kısakürek," in *İslamcılık*, ed. Yasin Aktay (İletişim: İstanbul, 2004), 139.

years, he recounts, he lived a somewhat dissolute and pitiful life akin to “a bug under a flowerpot.”¹¹

In 1934, however, Kısakürek embarked on a new path after meeting the Naqshbandi spiritual leader Abdülhakim Arvasi (Üçışık) in Istanbul. He quickly became a member of that leader's circle of conservative, Turkish Islamists and devotees of his lectures (*sohbet/suhba*). Kısakürek describes his encounter with his spiritual master as follows. One day, on a ferry from the European to the Asian side of the city, Kısakürek was approached by a nice-looking man, with friendly but unusual manners, who invited him to Islam. When Kısakürek asked the man for the address of a spiritual guide, the man was pleased and answered with a smile:

-Ağa mosque in Beyoğlu... On Fridays he gives sermons there.

-His name?

-His Excellency Abdülhakim Efendi.

-What kind of person is he?

-You'll see ... What you'll be listening to there are words delivered to the people, the masses ... You have to enter into those words and reach the hidden meaning.¹²

Here the term “hidden meaning” must be understood not only in the usual sense of the mystical and philosophical meaning accessible only by the initiate, but also as meaning those things that could be said without the danger of being overheard by officials. Usually, Turkish Sufi masters kept their position as imams and *khatibs* (preachers) in small mosques with a low profile, but at the same time they held more intimate lessons and sessions of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) in private houses or in their own homes near to the mosque.

After a few weeks, Kısakürek went to the Ağa mosque with the famous Turkish painter Abidin Dino and was strongly impressed by Shaykh Abdülhakim Arvasi. Born in the South-eastern reaches of Turkey,

11 Kısakürek, *O ve Ben*, 82.

12 *O ve Ben*, 81.

Abdülhakim Arvasi was a *halife* (a 'representative') of the *Khalidiyya* branch of the Naqshbandi mystical order originally headquartered in Başkale, also in the South-east. During the First World War, the Russian advance and Armenian guerrilla warfare had forced him to flee, initially to Mosul, Iraq. The British occupation of Iraq, in turn, forced him to move, first to Adana, then to Eskişehir, and eventually, to Istanbul, where he arrived in 1919. Until the closure of all Sufi *tekkes* (lodges) and *zaviyes* (cells) in 1925, he presided over the affairs of his religious confraternity in the *Kaşgari Dergâhı* in the Eyüp district of Istanbul. Later he became an imam but, after being implicated in the repression following the Menemen plot in August 1930, he was sent into exile to Izmir. He died in Ankara in 1943.

After listening for the first time to a speech by Abdülhakim Arvasi in the mosque, Kısakürek, already strongly impressed by such a modest yet charismatic figure, was invited to the master's house next to the closed lodge. A few weeks later, again with Dino, he visited the master. They remained with him in the forecourt of his house (that is, without being admitted to the intimacy of the house or the lodge) for about three to five hours. Kısakürek could not remember the topics addressed during their long conversation, and he described himself as being under the effects of chloroform.¹³

After that meeting, Kısakürek became a devout disciple of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* and of Abdülhakim Arvasi in particular, describing his new Sufi muse as "my saviour, my harbinger, my guide, my shaykh, my light, my soul, my lord, my whole life."¹⁴ Later in life he translated from Ottoman and published two works of the shaykh. The first of these was *al-Riyâḍât al-Şūfiyya (Tasavvuf Bahçeleri* in 1974, a copy of which had been gifted to him after their second meeting. The second was *Rabıta-i Şerif*, published in 1983. He wrote another book in 1974 on the *silsila*, the shaykh's mystical chain of transmitters that connects him back to the Prophet,¹⁵ and an autobiography that discusses his relations with the shaykh, published in the same year.¹⁶

13 *O ve Ben*, 93.

14 NF. Kısakürek, *Başbuğ Velilerden 33: Altun Silsile* (İstanbul, 1993), 336.

15 Kısakürek, *Başbuğ Velilerden 33*.

16 *O ve Ben*.

Probably under the shaykh's influence, he established the journal *Büyük Doğu* (Great East). This journal made Kısakürek the dominant conservative voice in the country throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The first issue of the journal, dated 17 September 1943, enjoyed enormous success. As a political and literary review, it enjoyed a long albeit discontinuous run of some 35 years, ending in June 1978. During that time the journal was published weekly, monthly, and sometimes even daily. On some occasions, its religious content incurred the wrath of government ministries and the courts, and Kısakürek was forced to suspend operations in order to avoid censorship and, of course, imprisonment. In the first such instance, *Büyük Doğu* was ordered to close in May 1944 for publishing the following saying by the Prophet Muhammad: "Do not follow those who do not follow God."¹⁷ Moreover, between 1947 and his death in 1983, Kısakürek would find himself in prison eight times for religious and political crimes against the secular regime.

The second of our Islamist intellectuals, Nurettin Topçu, also felt the necessity to bind himself to a spiritual guide after a long stay in France where, between 1928 and 1934, he had completed high school, obtained a degree in philosophy and finally, a doctorate at Sorbonne University. Topçu was already in search of a spiritual guide, but was unsatisfied with the passivity of the official religious authorities, of which he was very critical. Probably in 1943, a shopkeeper friend introduced him to an important Naqshbandi master, Abdülaziz Bekkine. At their first meeting, Bekkine received him into his private house and held a long conversation with him throughout the night. With his charisma, Bekkine influenced not only Topçu, but an entire generation of well-educated, like-minded conservative students who eventually became bureaucrats and prominent politicians. As Topçu recalled, "My master took me from the pit of doubt and guided me to the heights of faith. [...] I found in him what I have not found in Europe."¹⁸

His devotion towards Bekkine appears perfectly in harmony with his

17 *Büyük Doğu*, 30, 1944.

18 Quoted by Ahmet N. Yüksel, "Mektep İnsan Nurettin Topçu," *Hareket*, 10, 1976, 74.

commitment towards mysticism, which he had encountered for the first time in France through the Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel and the scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon. Indeed, in the last pages of his PhD thesis, Topçu states that a return to the spirit of early Sufism – which goes from the Prophet Muhammad to Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj – will help the sons of Anatolia end their material and moral crisis.¹⁹ Topçu eventually distanced himself from the confraternity because he did not recognize the authority of Bekkine's successor, Mehmet Zahid Kotku. Topçu believed that Kotku was brought from Bursa to Istanbul by the circle of the entrepreneur (and later, politician) Necmettin Erbakan, but was not the successor chosen by Bekkine.²⁰ Kotku would become extremely influential among the Islamist intellectuals and politicians who emerged after the 1980s, and he actively encouraged the believers' involvement in the economic and intellectual domains as well as in religious practices. The *İskender Paşa Dergâhi* – the lodge created around the mosque of Istanbul where Kotku was assigned – constructed a web of economic activities, believed by his followers to be a religious duty. Kotku even promoted the establishment of an engine factory in 1956 as a stimulus for the Turkish (Muslim) economy. The factory was headed by Erbakan who, because of Kotku's enthusiastic support, became within a few years the most important representative of the Islamist political movement. An engine factory in Konya – the heart of Sufism and of conservative Anatolia – probably seemed outrageous to Topçu, who strenuously condemned modernity and any attachment to material interests:

You remember there is a shaykh *efendi* [a religious authority, Kotku being probably intended here] who opens factories; he even gives religious names to chimneys. This perversion, these bewilderments are opposed to the Islamic cause.²¹

19 Nurettin Ahmet, *Conformisme et Révolte*, 126. Here Topçu accepted Massignon's opinion that Islamic spirituality after al-Ḥallāj never recovered and entered a period of protracted and unrelieved decline. Later, the Turkish author altered this opinion to harmonize it with his nationalistic ideas and included late, great *Turkish* mystics such as Rūmī and Yunus Emre.

20 Interview with İsmail Kara (Istanbul, 7 June 2011).

21 'Nurettin Topçu'nun "“Vaizlar Semineri” ndeki Konuşması," *Hece*, 10, 2006, 426.

Nevertheless, Topçu remained a devotee of Bekkine for the rest of his life and many around him believed that he kept following his master's order: "You've just wasted your time. Never mind that; what you should do now is to train ten students per year to know Islam and its practices."²²

In common with Kısakürek, Topçu was also involved in the publication of a journal. His journal *Hareket* ('Action') also acted as a focal point for a circle of young conservative students and also provided an environment for training them. *Hareket* had published its first issue in February 1939 as a conservative journal. After 1943, it became the first Islamist review to be published after *Sebil'ür-Reşad*, one of the main journals in the Second Constitutional period that had been banned in the crackdown on Islamist activities and religious movements in 1925. *Hareket* would come under the same ban after just seven months because of an article by Topçu which had criticised the one-party system, but was allowed to resume publishing in 1942, only to be shut down again the following year. Despite the rise of the multiparty system, matters did not improve much for *Hareket*, as it was forced to cease publishing again in 1953. Then, from 1966 until 1974 it was mostly left undisturbed. Topçu was not sentenced to jail yet he was discriminated against in the academic world, which remained opposed to conservative ideas until the 1980s. He never held a safe tenure although he was able to deliver papers at conferences all around the country throughout his life.

Before their proper 'conversion' to practising Islam, both Topçu and Kısakürek had been influenced by the ideology of Turkish Conservatism, led by the intellectual Mustafa Şekip Tunç. The latter was the Turkish writer who promoted the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson in Turkey. In the words of Kolakowski, Bergson was "clearly *the* philosopher, the intellectual spokesman *par excellence* of the era" in the eyes of Europe's educated public in the first decades of the twentieth century.²³ Bergson aimed at liberating French intellectual life from the scientism, materialism, and positivism of the ideology of the *Lumières*. The context of Turkey's Republicanism, with its aggressive promotion of secular values

22 Mustafa Kutlu, "Suya Hasret," *Hece*, 10, 2006, 11.

23 Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (St. Augustines: South Bend, 2001), 1.

under a strong control by the State of public and intellectual life, showed itself to be very receptive to Bergson's criticism and reaction against State-imposed secularism. The main ideas of this French philosopher were certainly shared by Turkish conservative authors in the early years of the Republic. In the former Ottoman Empire, World War I had marked the beginning of the end of the perception of the West as a rational civilization. The pro-modernist and pro-Western Ottoman intellectuals, in fact, were troubled by the dystopian potential of modern Western civilization and its imperialist motivations. After taking the West as a civilizing model for almost half a century, Ottoman intellectuals began to express their loss of faith in the West after that war. A widespread sense of anguish among intellectuals was coupled with heated debates about the future of the Empire which, as an ally of the Central Powers, had been defeated and occupied. "Bergsonian philosophy was the harbinger of a near and bright future in the spirits of young university students who were walking through Beyazıt Square full of foreign soldiers dressed in strange uniforms."²⁴ Tunç remembered that rationality was insufficient in explaining his past and his nation's identity, which was shaped by thousands of feelings, dreams and memories. Furthermore:

completely afar from my spirit, I remained hanged to thought [*mefkûre*] just from one point like a hanging chandelier. During the tensest moments of my condition, the infection of the World War affected us and the most treacherous weapons surrounded our lives. These events demolished the dam between simple rationality and my ego as well as transformed me in a single power while my soul's entire past assaulted my mind.²⁵

Bergsonism, then, found fertile ground and offered Turkish conservative intellectuals a kind of alternative to Western modernization, which

24 Fındıkoğlu quoted in Nazım İrem, "Turkish Conservative Modernism: Birth of a Nationalist Quest for Cultural Renewal," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 34, 2002, 94.

25 Mustafa Şekip, *Bergson ve "Manevî Kudret" e Dair Birkaç Konferans* (Muallim Ahmet Halit Kitaphanesi: İstanbul, 1934), 6.

they could take without losing their 'Oriental' spirituality. Soon, however, Bergsonism clashed with Ziya Gökalp's positivist sociology and his mechanical theories as well as with Unionist – and consequently Kemalist – positivist political theory and its civilizing project.²⁶ Turkish Bergsonians shared the anti-clerical attitude of the Republicans (Topçu also deprecated the official religious apparatus approach) and were not politically different from the Republicans who were committed to the formal Kemalist principles. What drew them away from the mainstream politics of the day, however, was their challenge to the rationalist foundations of the humanist secularism adopted by the positivist Republican factions who dominated the single party:

Bergsonians tried to provide a new interpretation of the Turkish Revolution and the emerging republican project of modernity by establishing a new communication between the two worlds – the spiritual aspects of the West and the mystic essence of national culture.²⁷

The influence of conservative writers is evident in Topçu's literary works (mainly *Taşra* and *Reha*) as well as on Kısakürek, who recognized Tunç and Peyami Safa (another leading conservative intellectual) as those who taught him 'metaphysical anxiety' (*metafizik kaygı*).²⁸

However, particularly after their 'conversions,' Bergson represented a source of legitimacy and a kind of intellectual Trojan horse rather than an authentic source of inspiration. Indeed, Bergson's understanding of God as 'not absolute' and 'not omnipotent' has as much difficulty finding acceptance in traditional Christianity, as it is does in mainstream Islam.²⁹ Yet, despite their critique of the West and their attempt to create a modern Turkish-Islamic identity, both Topçu and Kısakürek were unable to free themselves from French cultural influence.

26 İrem, "Turkish Conservative Modernism," 92-3.

27 Nazım İrem, "Undercurrents of European Modernity and the Foundations of Modern Turkish Conservatism: Bergsonism in Retrospect," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40, 2004, 91.

28 *O ve Ben*, 107.

29 Olivia Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Chicago, 2010), 354.

Kısakürek and Topçu's 'travels' toward the centre of European culture helped them to extend the horizons of their knowledge, and more importantly, this provided them with the necessary legitimacy among Turkish secular elites and conservative intellectuals. When they came back, the 'classic' *ilmiye* (the class of the '*ulama*') was completely delegitimized because, to secular eyes, they represented the backward, despotic and bigoted religious class while, to conservative eyes, they were completely subdued to state power and had become mere bureaucrats. Public and mass education also imposed an image of the public intellectual who should be competent in *modern* (read *Western*) sciences.

The two shaykhs, Arvasi and Bekkine, encountered by our Islamist intellectuals had thoroughly realized that they did not possess the same social legitimacy that they enjoyed in the past. They duly relied on the young, conservative intellectuals as 'activist proxies' of their agenda. Abdülaziz Bekkine, for instance, had noted that his long beard, typical of religious scholars, was unwelcome in secular circles and consequently an impediment to reaching all classes of Turkish society.³⁰ Bekkine was not capable of renouncing his beard, but continued his policy of re-Islamization through 'modern proxies' such as Topçu. This is also the reason why Bekkine spent so much effort on proselytizing to students of the prestigious Istanbul Technical University through the private circles which would become known as Bekkine's 'invisible university' (*Görünmeyen Üniversite*).³¹ The students of engineering at the Istanbul Technical University became at the same time the prototypes of modernity and the best representatives of Islam in a secular society.

Methodology and Struggle

Despite the difficulties that Kısakürek and Topçu faced, they avoided clandestine activities and violence whenever possible: "Our path of emergence is legal," Kısakürek said at a conference, "relying on the law we should not fear anything, and we should make ourselves visible in the

30 Yüksel, "Mektedir İnsan Nurettin Topçu," 74.

31 Ersin Gürdoğan, *Görünmeyen Üniversite* (İstanbul, 1991).

room left free by the law.”³² The ‘room’ left open by the law was the field of education, which provided a good opportunity to reach a large number of potential converts. Topçu and Kısakürek’s attitude toward the law seems similar to that of Arvasi, Bekkine, and more generally, to that of the wider network of Naqshbandi confraternities of the early Republican era. On 25 November 1925, as law number 677 became legislation, the National Assembly closed the last of the *tekkes* and *zaviyes*, blocked access to the tombs (*türbes*) of historical and religious personalities, abolished the employment of religious titles, and prohibited the wearing of clerical garb in public. However, religious movements endured. Some shaykhs, such as Mehmet Şemsettin Efendi, a well-known Sufi master from Bursa, even saluted the decision because, he argued, most of the *tekkes* had been misused for profit, while not serving religion. Actually, law number 677 was seen by many religious leaders as an occasion to get rid of charlatans and to dedicate themselves more directly to the needs of their followers.³³ Abdülhakim Arvasi, for example, continued his private ministry as shaykh in an officially disbanded (but never actually closed) *tekke* in the strongly religious Istanbul district of Eyüp. Other Naqshbandi shaykhs continued their educational work unabated, too. Abdülaziz Bekkine continued his activities as a local imam. Today, shaykhs also serve as professors in state universities, where they enjoy some respect by the secular academy and achieve a prestigious status in Turkish society.

Arvasi’s words to Kısakürek when they first met back in 1934 are instructive: “The government did not close the *tekkes*; they had already closed themselves. The government closed empty spaces.”³⁴ What the shaykh meant by this was that the secular crackdown on religious public space in Turkey only brought an end to the external, not the internal aspects of religion, and it certainly did not affect the links between teachers and students. As Kısakürek would later write:

32 Kısakürek, *O ve Ben*, 76.

33 Mustafa Kara, “Bir Şeyh Efendi’nin Meşrutiyet ve Cumhuriyet’e Bakışı,” *Dergâh*, 12, 134, 2001, 16.

34 *Ibid.*, 132.

[The *tariqah*] is established on the pillar of the *sohbet* (the intimate gathering with the master). It is a path to the secret light that illuminates the hearts' antennas as though with invisible radio waves. This path does not show any sympathy to the carousels, the uniforms, the appearances, and the ceremonies even in the days held as holy by the state. Consequently, it is so sublime and so delicate that it is not possible to prevent it from reaching the heart, and [what it teaches] will circulate like money from heart to heart.³⁵

Moreover, the Naqshbandi masters taught ways for their followers to live their religion despite the regime's restrictions and the cultural taboos of republican Turkish society's elites. For example, one of the eleven principles of the Naqshbandiyyah is *halvet der encümen* (solitude in the crowd), which means that the Naqshbandi believer has to be inwardly alone with God and concentrated on His reality while outwardly immersed in the transactions and relationships that sustain Muslim society. In the words of one of the *tariqah*'s masters: "Your hand engaged in work, your heart in love; your hand with profit, your heart with the Beloved."³⁶ This principle is open to many interpretations, but it militates against the pious withdrawal from the world that is characteristic of certain strands of Sufism,³⁷ and it can indicate the necessity for political and economic activity. Moreover, it brings the believer to a pragmatic approach toward secular society, keeping his faith and his heart pure, even while engaged with a secular, irreligious, or even anti-religious society. Abdülaziz Bekkine, noting how his long beard typical of religious scholars was unwelcome in secular circles said:

35 *Ibid.* Bekkine made similar remarks: "My son, those *tekkes* deserved to be closed. Among them the ones that were maintaining [*muhafaza etmek*] Islam had dramatically diminished. And so Allah closed them," quoted in Brian Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), 91.

36 İrfan Gündüz, *Gümüşhanevi Ahmed Ziyaüddin, Hayatı, Eserleri, Tarikat Anlayışı ve Halidiye Tarikatı* (İstanbul, 1984), 234.

37 Hamid Algar, "Political Aspects of Naqshbandi History," in *Naqshbandis*, 152.

In order to save others from the quagmire in which they have lost themselves and keep them from committing big sins, it should be easy for us to renounce personal rewards [*sevap*],³⁸ and not hesitate in committing small sins, but only to the extent that these affect only ourselves. We need to consider the possibility of burning a little in Hell so as to possibly open the path to Paradise for others.³⁹

A consequence of this approach is that there is no need openly to attack society and the state. Indeed, our authors' key pleas are for a morality that is not oriented towards overthrowing the system and establishing an Islamic state or a Muslim government (even if Kısakürek in his *İdeolocya Örgüsü* draws the outlines of a possible Islamic state). Working to promote a specific kind of morality, in the late 1960s, Topçueven opted for a withdrawal from corrupted politics and an end to the instrumental use of Islam by politics. The *halvet der encümen* principle also offers a viable way to oppose the state, but in a way that is elusive and therefore difficult for state authorities to punish by law, in contrast to clearer and more direct threats to the system. Thus, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek had no problem in asking his followers to comply with secular law, while Nurettin Topçu affirmed the same point with a different justification:

Even the most powerful weapon requires patience in its use. In recent history, those who had believed that this holy struggle [*cihad*] must be fought with politics saw their mistake. Our struggle must be fought on the fronts of ideas and spirit, morality and faith.⁴⁰

An alternative to the *halvet der encümen* which is equally rooted in traditional Naqshbandi practice is the *sohbet*, which invites companionship rather than solitude. *Sohbets* are ritualized utterances where the master gives talks but also meets his followers and discusses matters with them.

38 Keeping the beard is considered to be a source of *sevap*.

39 Yüksel, "Mektep İnsan Nurettin Topçu," 74.

40 Nurettin Topçu, *Yarınki Türkiye* (İstanbul: Dergâh, 1997), 13.

Abdülaziz Bekkine usually held two different *sohbets*, one in the mosque's garden and another in his home: while the latter was restricted to the closer and more trusted *talebe* (students, followers), the former was open to anyone. "He was extremely generous," a follower remembers, "his door was open all day long. Some nights he was with us. The remaining nights, at whatever hour, if you see the light on in the *sohbet* room, you can knock at the door and come in."⁴¹

Sohbets provided the basic element of Naqshbandi practice and Muslim pedagogy, since they provide a structure in which one could read sacred texts, listen to the master's interpretation and debates, as well as bring followers face-to-face and create networks among them. As Brinkley Messick has noticed, the implicit sense among many Muslims is that the voiced and heard word in the transmission of knowledge is more legitimate than the scriptural, written word.⁴² At the same time, the *sohbet* is a safe way of spreading a message to large groups while avoiding the risk of being persecuted by the authorities, who need hard evidence and cannot punish gatherings in private houses or apparently spontaneous meetings. For instance, none of Abdülaziz Bekkine's Friday sermons or *sohbets* were ever recorded and this was despite Topçu's attempts, which resulted in a severe admonition.⁴³

Topçu and Kısakürek expanded the tool of the *sohbet*, but also secularized it; the journal's circles, with young *talebes* coming to participate in the realization of the periodical, formed in essence a constant *sohbet* with the two intellectuals taking on a role similar to that of a shaykh. Conferences were also becoming instruments of a wider *sohbet* network. Here the subjects of debate were not exclusively religious and they were not merely occasions just to read hadiths or sayings by old Sufi authors, but were also intended to conduct research about history (usually Ottoman), philosophy and politics. All of these were attempts to promote a certain morality and a rediscovery of the past in a proto-academic

41 Ahmet Ersöz, *Abdülaziz Bekkine Hazretleri* (İzmir, 1992), 32.

42 Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 92. Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey*, 141-54.

43 Ersöz, *Abdülaziz Bekkine Hazretleri*, vi.

form with abundant use of selected Western authors (for instance Pascal, Hugo, Blondel, Dostoevskij and Carlyle). This practice created a 'parallel religiosity'⁴⁴ alongside the official modes of religiosity as well as a proto-liberal civil society in the shadow of the State's control of the Turkish Republic of the 1960s and 1970s. This formula remains in effect today, in a fully capitalist environment, with radio, TV, the internet and mp3s, for example, where the *sohbet* system is reproduced in a wider form. Thus the most followed programmes on Islamist channels are erudite conversations of public intellectuals. Nevertheless, it should be said that today's professionalization and commercialization have transformed the *sohbet* into a 'consumer item,' compromising its earlier form in which there was some form of intimacy and interaction.⁴⁵ However, the aim of addressing the general audience has caused the more recent generations of Islamists to omit the philosophical depth that is needed for a serious elaboration of alternative worldviews.

As the example of Bekkine and Arvasi shows, the *sohbet* was also a tool for approaching young students and educating them with strong Islamic morals in order to make them into good role models in their environment. Again in the words of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek:

We have to cure our cowardice!... We have to possess all historical, social, spiritual, and public intellectual aspects of the cause... the Ideology... In other words we have to put our intellects into work... We must keep away from opposing the state or government. ... We are constructing the honeycomb cell by cell and filling it with honey... [we are] kneading a new learned and passionate generation... and transforming a new youth into a dough kneader... If God wills, we will be successful. For this reason we have to organize their spiritual and cultural focus. Journals, collections, films, theatre, conferences, and so on... In other

44 Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey*, 154.

45 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 164.

words, to establish a spiritual climate everything needed must be shaped line by line, with the calculations of an engineer and the technique of a jeweller.⁴⁶

In a sense, some aspects of the secular Turkish Republic helped in their own ways in shaping the new approach of this generation of Islamists: "While they inherited, more or less, the Islamist criticism of the Ottoman-Turkish modernization through the Islamists of the second constitutional period, they were the products of the Republic."⁴⁷ In fact, both Topçu and Kısakürek benefited from government scholarships which enabled them to study in France and they were members of the urban secular intelligentsia. Moreover, their cultural references were French (as were the Kemalists') rather than 'Oriental.' This provided them with respectability in a society in which anything of Western origin was considered in some way superior. Even a conservative author such as Kısakürek came to adopt and like the Western pedagogical style, which encourages criticising authority.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Topçu and Kısakürek represent a new generation of Islamist in the Turkish Republic. They were trained as *bilim adamı* (men of modern science) and not as *ilim adamı* (men of classical, démodé science) and, consequently, they were acquainted with European philosophy and literature. Because of their modern profile, they were more capable than their own Sufi masters, in spreading religious values and creating new conservative intellectual circles. However, it was their Sufi masters who taught them the importance of morality (*akhlak*), the pragmatic aspect of religion which, as it addresses mainly the hearts, can compromise with a secular context and a repressive state.

46 Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Dünya Bir İnkılap Bekliyor* (İstanbul: Büyük Doğu, 1999), 77-8.

47 Burhanettin Duran, "Transformation of Islamist Political Thought in Turkey from the Empire to the Early Republic," unpublished PhD thesis, Bilkent University, 2001, 203.

48 Mardin, "Kültürel Değişim ve Aydın," 221.

Moreover, this generation of Islamists will contribute towards shaping the subsequent Turkish Islamist generations. After the 1980s, socio-economic changes and the new media will impose a further opening of the public sphere. Therefore, the former networks of the *tariqas* will partially lose their primary role. Yet, the emphasis of the Turkish Islamists on instilling *akhlak* rather than directly controlling the state, as well as building a religious discourse imbedded in the scientific mentality imposed by the secular state, have constituted a decisive and long-lasting shift in Islamist discourse.

It is not a coincidence that the three most widely-known living Islamist figures of contemporary Turkey have been strongly influenced by Topçu and Kısakürek. The current Turkish President and former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began his career in politics as a member of the National Turkish Students' Union (*Millî Türk Talebe Birliği*), which for many years was inspired by Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. The former Turkish President, Abdullah Gül, might also be said to have cut his political teeth in the National Turkish Students' Union, and his admiration for Kısakürek is a matter of public record. Finally, the leader of the biggest Islamist movement, Fethullah Gülen, was influenced, in part, by the work of Topçu (particularly in the matter of education) and, in his Edirne years, he distributed Kısakürek's review.