

# Historical Social Research Historische Sozialforschung

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doi: 10.12759/hsr.44.2019.3.127-149.

Published in:

*Historical Social Research* 44 (2019) 3

Cite as:

Dalacoura, Katerina. 2019. "Islamic Civilization" as an Aspect of Secularization in  
Turkish Islamic Thought  
*Historical Social Research* 44 (3): 127-149. doi: 10.12759/hsr.44.2019.3.127-149.

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# "Islamic Civilization" as an Aspect of Secularization in Turkish Islamic Thought

*Katerina Dalacoura*\*

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**Abstract:** »*Islamische Zivilisation' als Moment der Säkularisierung im Türkisch-Islamischen Denken*«. The idea of an "Islamic civilization" emerged in the very late period of the Ottoman Empire in the context of complex and multi-dimensional modernization and secularization processes. Enunciated by the Young Ottomans in the 1870s and gaining prominence in the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II, Islamic civilization was conceived, at least in part, as a counterpoint to European and other civilizations. Although both its proponents and opponents assume that the religion of Islam lies at its heart, the paper will show that the idea of an Islamic civilization is a secular idea or, more precisely, one that bears the imprint of secularization. Using the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, among others, the argument will draw on a conception of religion as a reified category which entails that, as such, religion is conducive to secularization. It will build on and extend on this conception of religion by proposing that Islamic civilization, also a reified concept, is a further step in the direction of secularization. The paper will show this by analyzing Turkish Islamic thought, focusing particularly on Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, an Islamic thinker of the early Republican era, and the more recent figure of Ahmet Davutoğlu. The material presented here will challenge the conventional understanding of "religion" and "secularity" by highlighting that the boundaries between the two are constantly shifting and evolving.

**Keywords:** Islamic civilization, Islamic religion, secularity, Turkey, Kısakürek, Davutoğlu, Muslim politics.

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## 1. Introduction

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Proponents and opponents of the idea of an "Islamic civilization" assume that the religion of Islam lies at its heart. However, as this paper will argue through

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an examination of Turkish Islamic<sup>1</sup> political thought, Islamic civilization is a secular idea or, more precisely, an idea that bears the heavy imprint of a process of secularization.

The idea of an Islamic civilization emerged in the very late period of the Ottoman Empire in the context of complex and multi-dimensional modernization and secularization processes. Enunciated by the Young Ottomans in the 1870s and subsequently promoted during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) for political purposes, Islamic civilization was conceived, at least in part, as a counter-point to European and other civilizations. We cannot project the notions of secularity and secularization back onto Turkish political and social thought during the period from the 1870s to the 1920s (Dressler 2015), but it is plausible to maintain that, following the creation of the Republic in 1923, the parameters “religious versus secular” were firmly established, at least in the minds of its Young Turk elites (broadly defined here to include the Kemalist establishment) which remained at the Republic’s helm until the middle of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> Within this stark binary, Islamic civilization was seen as a counter-point to the West. Ironically, however, the very notion of an Islamic civilization constituted a further step towards secularization (defined below), not a return to or reassertion of the centrality of Islam. The paper will show this in some detail by analyzing two of the most important strands of Islamic “civilizational” thought in Turkey, centering around (but not exclusively limited to) Necip Fazıl Kısakürek in the earlier Republican period and Ahmet Davutoğlu more recently.<sup>3</sup>

To distinguish between Islamic civilization and Islam as a religion, the paper will draw on the work of Charles Taylor and Jose Casanova and use a broad definition of “the secular” as referring to the excision of religious references, associations, and influences from aspects of public life. Secularity involves aspects of public life which are not defined by religious logics, even though they may be populated by people who are religious and live their (private) lives on the basis of religious values, or proclaim these values, and even their political relevance, publicly (Taylor 2007). I understand secularization to be an outcome of structural and institutional differentiation of state institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using 'Islamic' rather than 'Islamist' (which refers to a political ideology) to describe the thinkers which the paper focuses on because their concerns are not necessarily confined to politics.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I follow Zürcher's periodization (Zürcher 1993, 4).

<sup>3</sup> Within the parameters of Republican intellectual history, Kısakürek and Davutoğlu were leading figures in Islamic strands of thought which focused on Islamic civilization and placed the religion of Islam at its heart. Islamic/Islamist intellectuals in Turkey can be divided into three “generations” (Bulaç 2004): Kısakürek and Davutoğlu constitute, respectively, central figures in the first and third generations, whereas the second generation, which includes İsmet Özel and Ali Bulaç, rejects “Islamist civilization” in ways which I outline later in the paper.

which has also occurred, albeit with specific characteristics, in the Middle East and in particular within the Ottoman and Turkish republican context (Casanova 1994; Zubaida 2005; Krämer 2015).<sup>4</sup> Secularization is also the outcome of ideational changes, principally the reification or objectification of Islam in the modern period (Hodgson 1974, vol. 3), as will be discussed below.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, in ways that I will expound on below, I see secularization as being closely linked to the empowerment of human agency and therefore anthropocentrism, voluntarism, and the capacity for social engineering.

The paper draws on secondary sources from religious studies, intellectual history, and sociology and also uses primary materials, mainly texts on Islamic civilization by the relevant Turkish Islamic thinkers. Its objective is to contribute to debates on “Islamic civilization” as well as to the conceptual discussions around religion and secularity<sup>6</sup>; it will, hopefully, also be of interest to those working on Islamism in Turkey and Turkish politics more widely. The paper first describes the emergence, in modernity, of “religion” and “civilization” (in the particularist sense) as reified concepts and then homes in on the late Ottoman and republican Turkish case to outline the history of the idea of “Islamic civilization” in this specific setting. What follows is an analysis of how Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Ahmet Davutoğlu conceptualize Islamic civilization with a view to demonstrating its secular characteristics. The conclusion summarizes the argument and explores some of its implications.

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## 2. Religion as a Reified Category of Thought

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This section will outline the process by which “religion” emerged as a reified category of thought in the modern period using a range of authors, but mainly relying on the intellectual contribution of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In his major

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor and Casanova focus mostly on Western societies in their respective analyses (2007 and 1994), but there are sufficient commonalities between the Western experience and Muslim-majority settings to warrant using their interpretations of the key terms here. See Katerina Dalacoura (forthcoming 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Hodgson introduces the terms “Islamdom” and “Islamicate” to describe the totality of life (including non-religious aspects thereof) of societies where “Muslims and their faith are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant” (Hodgson 1974, Vol. 1, 57–58). In a critique of Hodgson’s more nuanced approach towards the relationship between the religious and the secular, Aziz Al-Azmeh laments that histories of Muslims are imputed with an “internal coherence” and that even Hodgson is not exempt from this tendency (Al-Azmeh 2007, 55).

<sup>6</sup> Note that I do not treat ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ as being in opposition (Mandair and Dressler 2011, 3), and the manner by which religion and secularity co-constitute one another and the effects of this on how religion and secularity are defined and experienced in the particular Turkish context are not the primary focus of this paper. Rather, the paper investigates where the boundaries between the two are drawn. I will return to this point and clarify it further in the conclusion.

work, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1978), published originally in 1962, Smith argues that the word “religion” did not exist as we understand it today until the modern period (Smith 1978, 18-9). The concept of “religion” emerged in the West (ibid., 32). Smith traces the process by which “religion” rises in the post-17th century Western world, referring “increasingly to the system of ideas, in which men of faith were involved” (ibid., 38). He links this process to the Reformation and the Enlightenment but focuses on the 19th century as the point by which it is clear that religion – Christianity in the case of the West – is perceived as having “an essence” which can and must be discovered (ibid., 47).

Smith argues that the concept of “religion” was superimposed by the West on other societies<sup>7</sup> (ibid., 18-9). Thinking of religion as a systematic entity allows the emergence of “religions” in the plural, from the 17th to the 18th centuries (ibid., 43). Smith argues that the idea of religion was projected back in history, in the West and elsewhere (ibid., 55). Just as “Christianity,” there emerged “Hinduism,” “Buddhism,” “Confucianism,” and so on. As Western influence spread throughout the world, societies searched for “a counterpart term and concept for ‘religion’” (ibid., 59). Modernity conferred names on major living religious traditions where previously they had not existed (ibid., 60).

Smith maintains that the idea of “religion” is an essentialist idea, which is one more reason it cannot be true to the historical record. An instance of this “essentialization” is to think that the true religion can be found in how it emerged in its original form, with everything that follows being an aberration; but this is not so (ibid., 148). He notes that “essences do not have a history. Essences do not change. Yet it is an observable and important fact that what have been called the religions do, in history, change” (ibid., 143-4). There is no historical evidence for believing that “all instances of ‘Hinduism’, for example, of ‘Taoism’ or ‘Buddhism’ must have something in common” (ibid., 149).

The shift away from “man’s personal sense of the holy” to religion as “the system of beliefs and practices” is, according to Smith, an aspect of secularization (ibid., 38-9, 43). Religious reification is an aspect of secularization in the sense that it implies the decline of religious belief; Smith calls it a “mundane” process (ibid., 118).<sup>8</sup> He argues that there is a correlation between the rise of

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<sup>7</sup> Smith’s idea of a “superimposition” of the West on others, and more generally the idea of “diffusion” of ideas from the West to the non-West within modernity, is controversial and currently widely debated within the boundaries of post-colonial theory (see, for instance, Hobson 2012); but does not constitute a core concern of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Smith argues that Muslims have tried to say what Islam actually is but they cannot agree. He writes that Islam was “not something that God gave to men, as is now widely imagined, but rather something that God asked them to give to Him – a quite different matter” (Smith 1978, 126). For Smith, “the essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is the degree to which Muslims, instead of giving their allegiance to God, have been giving it to something called Islam” (Smith 1978, 126).

the concept “religion” and the decline in the practice of religion (ibid., 19). He writes: “The notion that religion is a nice thing to have, even that it is useful, has arisen, as it could arise only, in a secular and desperate society.” (ibid., 127). In the context of his own faith, he criticizes those who believe in “practicing Christianity” instead of “practicing love” (ibid., 127). In place of “religion” Smith posits the idea of the “cumulative tradition” (ibid., 154-70). At the heart of this is personal faith (Chapter 7). In a radical move, he calls for the disappearance of the term “religion,” which he says would be better for the faithful and for scholars (ibid., 195).

Smith describes Islam as a partial exception among religions in that it was conceived as a unity since its emergence, more than other religions were. He attributes this to the fact that Islam came into being in a world where Jewish and Christian self-consciousness had already been established and religious communities were beginning to be organized as independent entities (ibid., 86). Even though Islam is a partial exception, however, the process of reification of the Islamic religion, which entailed a systematization of the Islamic faith and its doctrines, has evolved, coming to full fruition since the end of the 19th century. Smith emphasizes that this was in reaction to the influence of and pressures from Europe and the West (ibid., 109). According to Smith, in the Koran, Islam is “the designation of a decisive personal act” (ibid., 110), the word “God” appears 2,697 times and the word “Islam” eight times. In the early centuries, leaders of Muslim religious thought read this as an act of personal devotion, a call to have faith in God, not religion in a reified sense (ibid., 110-1).<sup>9</sup> It is only since the latter part of the 19th century that “there has demonstrably been a sudden and almost complete shift among vocal Muslims to a use of the term Islam to name a religion” (ibid., 115). “The explicit notion that life should be or can be ordered according to a system, even an ideal one, and that it is the business of Islam to provide such as a system, seems to be a modern idea (and perhaps a rather questionable one)” (ibid., 117).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Smith's detailed study of the term “Islam” in Koran commentaries (1975) supports Wilfred Cantwell Smith's conclusions. She summarises her thesis in this way: “I believe I have shown that while Islam originally meant at once the personal relationship between man and God and the community of those acknowledging this relationship, it often has come to be used as one or the other, with a greater emphasis on the objectified systematization of religious beliefs and practices” (Smith 1975, 230). In the modern period, Islam denotes “something distinct from personal submission” (ibid., 230).

<sup>10</sup> Talal Asad has criticized Smith for “clinging to an essentialism” even while asserting that he is arguing against essentialist definitions of religion (Asad 2001, 205). Asad disagrees with Smith's view that “faith,” unlike “religion,” cannot be reified because “it is here [by Smith] conceived of as an inner state and not as a relationship created through, maintained by, and expressed in practice” (ibid., 208.) Asad argues that Smith has a “missionary standpoint” in arguing that religious tradition is not about practice but something mental (ibid., 216); that Smith's position about the existence or lack of faith “fits comfortably with the modern liberal separation between the public spaces and the private (ibid., 214); and that Smith still

Alongside Smith, a number of other thinkers have outlined the many ways in which modernity has reified Islam. An early exponent and critic of this reification - the rendering of Islam as a “distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life” (Asad 1986, 1) – from an anthropological perspective was, of course, Talal Asad (1986). Abdulkader Tayob’s treatise on modern Islamic discourse highlights “the impact of modernity on Islam,” an impact obscured by cultural explanations (Tayob 2009, 6). Last but not least, Marshall Hodgson interprets the modern period, and specifically the 20th century, as having led to Islam being reconceived and referred to by Muslims increasingly as a “system.” As Hodgson explains: “Rather than as a personal posture of faith or as loyalty to a historical community, it now was thought of as a complete pattern of ideal life, subsisting in itself apart from the community which might embody it” (Hodgson 1974, Vol. 3, 389). Islam became a “blueprint for a social order which could be set off against capitalism or communism as rival social systems” (ibid., 389).

The emergence of religion as a reified category is linked to secularization in two ways. Firstly, it leads to secularization in the sense of the decline of (true) belief and faith, as Smith and Hodgson maintain. Secondly, reification is an aspect, and a cause, of secularization in that it entails separating the believer from belief, in that belief – the worldview, ethical values, or guidelines that a religion enjoins – can be “outlined” by the believer, thought about, adopted (or rejected), and its content shaped, changed, and ultimately controlled. The link between reification, subjectification, and essentialism is highlighted by Armando Salvatore: he argues that “the intellectual practice of essentializing should be assessed as typical of a modern self-understanding. Essentialism is a tool for exerting control that develops in parallel to both a process of ‘subjectification’ and of emergence of ‘reifying’ attitudes” (Salvatore 1997, 70). It is also expressed by Charles Taylor’s metaphor of a “buffered self” (Taylor 2007).

According to Taylor there emerged, among important elites in Latin Christendom, a buffered identity or self, by which he means the establishment of a boundary between inside (thought) and outside (nature, the physical) which “comes about through the replacement of a cosmos of spirits and forces by a

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hankers (without realizing it) after a universal definition of religion (ibid., 215). Asad further maintains that “we have to abandon the idea of religion as always and essentially the same, and as dependent on faith that is independent of practical traditions because and to the extent that it is transcendental” (ibid., 220). To put it simply, Asad argues that Smith does not understand the specificity of Muslim faith or how Muslims experience their faith; furthermore, that Smith’s interpretation of Islam is a Western/Christian/imperialist imposition. However, I find that Asad does not bring empirical evidence to bear in support of his position. He paints a dense picture of Muslim faith but, in the entire paper, he uses only one example to back up his view: of how “non-modernized Muslims” hold that the Quran cannot be translated or interpreted but recited and listened to because its meaning cannot be conveyed by other means (ibid., 217). This is not sufficient to counteract Smith’s detailed empirical study.

mechanistic universe” and gives us “a sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves” (ibid., 62, 146, 300). In earlier societies, there had been an inability to imagine the self outside a particular context, whereas now the abstract question of emigrating or changing religion became possible (ibid., 149). Faith became “an option among others” and this, in the West at least, led to unbelief – rather than belief – becoming the default position (ibid., 12).

Smith and Taylor complement and reinforce one another in their approaches to the relationship between religion and secularity. Smith depicts the emergence of religion as a reified category. Taylor criticizes what he calls “subtraction stories,” meaning the tendency to “trace the decline or compartmentalization of religion without seriously considering the transformations this entails – not just in religion but in everything else as well” (Warner, VanAntwerpen and Calhoun 2010, 5, 8-9; Taylor 2007, 25). Smith, writing forty-odd years before Taylor, in a way responds to the latter’s view that “conditions of secularity have come to shape both contemporary belief and ‘unbelief’ alike” (Taylor 2007, 12). Both Taylor and Smith hold the view that the religious and the secular are not opposites but are co-constituted.<sup>11</sup>

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### 3. Civilization

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“Religion” and “civilization” are comparable as reified ideas in the sense that they are both relatively recent, modern creations. As Aziz Al-Azmeh writes: “The mental and social conditions for speaking about civilization in a manner recognizable in the year 2000 were not available before the middle of the eighteenth century” (Al-Azmeh 2001, 1903).

The idea of civilization subsequently spread and acquired, in the 19th century, a two-fold meaning: civilization as a universal process (Elias 1994) and, on the other hand, civilization as a particular identity. Bruce Mazlish, among others, has traced the origins of “civilization” in late 18th century France (Mazlish 2005, 5-8) although its roots can be found in the early modern period, in Europe’s encounter with the “primitives” of the New World and the “Turkish Threat”: Mazlish describes civilization as a “colonial ideology” by the manner in which it emerged. He also characterizes it as a “European ideology” in the sense of “a racial interpretation of civilization in favour of Europe” (ibid., 70).

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<sup>11</sup> Mandair and Dressler (2011, 4-5) distinguish between three strands of thought on the relationship between “religion and the secular”: the liberal strand exemplified by Charles Taylor; the “postmodernist” strand; and the Foucauldian strand centring on Talal Asad. My argument in this paper falls within the first strand. As is evident in Taylor’s statement quoted in the text just above, he takes conditions of secularity as shaping belief and unbelief; indeed, this constitutes one of the major contributions by Taylor to the study of secularity.



The connection between “civilization” and empire is the hallmark of Brett Bowden’s work. Bowden points out that civilization “has an inherent, value-laden or normative quality” (2009, 13). The word “civilization” – and the similar but distinct word “culture” – is used differently in various European languages (*ibid.*, 24-40), but, according to Bowden, the concept, with its claim to universal values, inherently contains the idea of imperialist domination by the West, up to the present day through Western promotion of human rights, democracy, and humanitarianism (*ibid.*, esp. 95).

Civilization in the universal sense has an intricate and complex relationship with civilization in the particularist sense (civilizations in the plural). The two do not need to be seen as being in a conflict with one another but can be complementary. Toynbee articulated this latter approach by seeing the particular civilizations as “historical exemplifications of the abstract idea of civilization” (Toynbee quoted in Bowden 2009, 40; see also Yurdusev 2003; Arnason 2003, 1). However, civilization in its particularist sense more often than not developed into an aspect of the anti-Enlightenment, romantic culturalism of the 19th century and one which, in its association with identity, resurfaces at various periods of global history with what Al-Azmeh calls a “global rhythm” (Al-Azmeh 2012, 503, 505). The emergence of humanism and the Reformation gave birth to new conceptions of history which made the idea of rise and fall of human societies possible and, in the 18th century, brought to the fore the idea of cultural differences between Europe and societies such as the Ottomans, the Persians, the Chinese, and the American tribes (Al-Azmeh, 2001, 1904). Civilization in its universal sense, on the other hand, was linked to the ideas of progress and amelioration (mirror images of the idea of decadence), but towards the end of the 19th century, “civilization” became increasingly associated with particularism and nationalism (*ibid.*, 1905) and was defined as “higher-order culture” (Al-Azmeh 2012, 506). There emerged, in anthropology, in the first half of the 20th century, “the ‘culturalized’ notions of human collectivities, of self-enclosure, of continuity” (Al-Azmeh 2001, 1907), which contributed to bringing forth the idea of a changeless West counter-posed to an eternal East (*ibid.*, 1907-8).

In what ways is the concept of “civilization” linked to secularization? Al-Azmeh writes, with reference to civilization in the universal sense, that when it emerged in the 18th century it was “a notion that registered a break in the history of ideas, by freeing philosophy from theology and using a notion of human perfectability unrelated to theodicy” (Al-Azmeh 2012, 508). Particularist meanings of civilization are similarly informed by the notion that civilization is about human achievement: consequently, civilization can be described as an “anthropocentric” idea, in the basic sense of being human-centered, treating the human being as the primary holder of moral standing.

I argue here that this anthropocentrism (or “human-centeredness”) – which Taylor associates with deism, humanism, and the Enlightenment (Taylor 2007,

221-70)<sup>12</sup> – is linked to the emergence of civilization as a reified concept in multiple ways. Civilization as a reified concept entails it having “essential characteristics” which can be identified and “listed.” Civilization therefore becomes an “object” gazed at by the “subject,” the human being or (to introduce another key term) the human agent. Identifying and listing these characteristics allows for debating what they are, evaluating, and ultimately using them as guidelines to shape social and even political reality. Reification, ultimately, empowers the human subject and expands the space wherein the human being dominates; rendering the idea of “social engineering” a possibility. The reification and essentialization of Islamic civilization, in a way, makes it a tool for exerting control (Salvatore 1997, 70). The process further pushes “the divine” to the margins and in so doing increases the excision of the sacred from aspects of public life: it is in this way that the emergence of civilization reinforces and deepens processes of secularization. It is interesting to note that civilization emerges as a reified concept in a similar process to the emergence of religion: as I argued in Section 2, the focus on “religion” as something separate from the believer (its objectification) is an aspect of secularization and leads both to the marginalization of the sacred in public life and even the decline of belief. The emergence of “civilization” takes this a step further.

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#### 4. “Islamic Civilization” in Late Ottoman and Republican Islamic Thought

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*Sivilizasyon* started being used in late Ottoman society in the 1830s, roughly contemporaneously with Europe, to denote both material and immaterial aspects of improvement (Baykara 1990, 5). *Medeniyet* enters the Ottoman dictionaries and lexicon very soon afterwards – in the 1840s and 1850s – to refer to a bundle of meanings: developing morals, teaching proper manners, education, removing from a state of savagery, making use of the fruits of science and technology, and urbanity (ibid., 8-9). *Medeniyet*, which the Ottomans coined from the Arabic word for city, *madina*, eventually replaces *sivilizasyon* and also the indigenous term *umran*, used by Ibn Khaldun for “civilized urban life and culture” (Reinhart 2007, 272; see also Wigen 2015, 441-2) and *medeniyet* is practically interchangeable in common Turkish usage with *uygarlık*, which is etymologically Turkish.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> On the issue of moral autonomy in the modern period, but from a different perspective from Taylor’s, cf. Schneewind, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> The use of *uygarlık* is lamented by a conservative intellectual such as Cemil Meriç who argues that it constitutes a break from the historical achievements of Islamic society represented by the word *umran* (Meriç 1996, 81-86).

Towards the end of the 19th century, however, the idea of an Islamic civilization became distinguished from the universalist meaning of civilization because of the latter's association with Europe, seen increasingly in its imperialist guise (Aydın 2007).<sup>14</sup> Islamic civilization was linked to the notions of pan-Islamism (Landau 1994) and "the Muslim world" (Aydın 2017), both of which also pointed to beyond the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. It also rested on the emergence of an Islamic "public space" which was made possible by technological advances, especially print, and the ability to travel (Khalid 2005). The idea of Islamic civilization and unity was projected back to the period before the 19th century even though no such unity along geopolitical or civilizational lines had in fact existed (Aydın 2017, 15; see generally 14-36).<sup>15</sup>

The group of intellectuals who were later placed under the generic label of "Young Ottomans," and were active in the 1860s and 1870s, introduced and first elaborated on the ideas of pan-Islamism and the Muslim world (Mardin 1962, 59-60). They must be seen within the context of Ottoman intellectual history – and they were concerned with ensuring the empire's survival, which they believed pan-Islamism would help bolster – but their thought was also an aspect of Islamic modernism which was emerging in that period in Arab and other Muslim societies (*ibid.*, 81).

Among the Young Ottomans, Namık Kemal addressed the question of civilization and Islam most directly. Kemal's modernist interpretation of Islam and his engagement with the idea of the Muslim world within the context of his universalist perspective make him a fascinating thinker for the purposes of comparing Islam as religion and civilization, and interrogating the meaning(s) of secularization. Kemal believed that Islam was not in conflict with universal principles. However, particularly in the latter period of his intellectual career, Kemal became more focused on the idea of the Muslim or Islamic world. He expounded on the idea of "Muslim unity" (*ittihad-ı İslam*) (Kemal 1997a, 85-89), which he conceived as a way "to stop Western encroachments in Muslim lands, but not to end the adoption of Western institutions and ideas" (Duran 2001, 146-47). Kemal treated "civilization" (*medeniyet*) as having universal benefits and relevance (Kemal 1997b, 210-4). He distinguished between the benefits of Western civilization, which Muslims could endorse, and European political domination, which Muslim nations should collectively resist (Berkes 1998, 215). He believed that Islam was compatible with progress (Kemal 1988), with modern civilization, defined as "industry, technology, economy,

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<sup>14</sup> This process had its own internal fractures, however. In Makdisi's analysis (2002), the Ottoman state in the 19th century "orientalized" its own Arab subjects by identifying its own civilization with a universal, modern civilization.

<sup>15</sup> Aydın connects the imagining of Muslim global political unity directly to the peak of European hegemony in the late 19th century (Aydın 2017, 3). Interestingly, he claims that "the idea of the Muslim world is inseparable from the claim that Muslims constitute a race" (*ibid.*, 5).

the press and education” and with rational liberal political principles (Berkes 1998, 204, 216, 222). In effect, because his conception of civilization was universalist, he argued for Muslim unity as a political objective, not for Islamic civilization as a distinct category with essential characteristics.

There is a fundamental difference between Kemal’s views on Islamic unity and civilization and their conceptualization during the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909): The latter became the champion of Islamic unity, but his influence attenuated the universalist elements which had underpinned it in the thought of the Young Ottomans. Abdülhamid established links with Jamaladdin Afghani who was one of the first Islamic thinkers to talk of Islamic civilization (Yenigün 2017, 203-6). In Abdülhamid’s era, Islamic thought became permeated, to a considerable extent, by what came later to be called “social engineering” (Findley 2010, 185), the belief that human beings could shape the social environment. “Social engineering” entailed an anthropocentric (voluntarist) perspective, which would only become conceivable during the modern period. The belief that human beings could shape their environment – even though they may be doing so along “religious” precepts – was, as I argued above, an aspect of a secularizing process.

The Young Turks, an umbrella term for a range of intellectuals and political leaders, emerged from the late 19th century and rose to power in reaction to Abdülhamid’s policies and ideas, dominating social discourse and political power in Turkey in various guises until the middle of the 20th century. A gradual shift from views wherein Islam and nationalism were symbiotic rather than antagonistic (Dressler 2013, 89-95) towards secular nationalism, which entailed a reconsideration of the relationship between modernity and Islam, can be observed in the thinking of the Young Turks. They also moved towards a secularist position; this became evident after the establishment of the Republic when the Kemalist elite (part and parcel of the broader Young Turk movement) sought to divorce religion from politics as a matter of policy, guided by secularism as an ideology. From the Kemalist perspective, Islamic civilization became something against which the Turkish nation defined itself and their worldview became defined by the binaries “modern versus traditional” and “secular versus Islamic.”<sup>16</sup>

These binaries of Young Turk/Kemalist thought found their mirror image in, and increasingly came to define, Islamic thought in the first part of the 20th century. Islamic thinkers of the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1918), such as Filibeli Ahmet Hilmi and Mehmet Akif Ersoy, saw Islamic civilization

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<sup>16</sup> The figure of Ziya Gökalp constitutes a connecting point between the Abdülhamid and (later) Young Turk eras. It is claimed that Gökalp had a “quintessentially secular” understanding of culture and civilization as a conceptual frame for modernity (Davison 1998, 120). This view is criticised by Dressler who argues that seeing Gökalp’s thought through a secularist-Islamist binary is anachronistic (Dressler 2015, 511).

as the “real” and “virtuous” civilization, based on justice and right, as opposed to Western civilization which was based on power and interest (Duran 2001, 92-4). For them, “the idea of Islamic civilization was supported by the conviction that civilization and religion were indeed the same thing” (ibid., 92-4). The idea of Islamic civilization being tantamount to the Islamic religion runs through Islamic intellectual history in Turkey from the early part of the 20th century until today.

There has not been complete unanimity on this conceptualization of Islamic civilization, however, among all Islamic thinkers in Turkey’s Republican period. One strand of Islamic thought, associated with the so-called second generation of Islamist intellectuals who came into their own in the 1980s – mainly centered on Ali Bulaç and İsmet Özel – was sceptical towards the idea of Islamic civilization broadly and its relationship to Islam as a religion more particularly. The main reason for this was that they saw Islamic civilization as being implicitly linked to “perfectability” and human endeavor. As a result, they joined a long line of Islamist intellectuals side-lining real existing Muslim societies in favor of an idealized past of the early time of Islam (Kara 2005).

Both Ali Bulaç and İsmet Özel disapprove of the glorification of the Ottoman past as an instance of Islamic civilization (Toprak 1993, 246-49) and seek a return to the Koran and the sunna (Yavuz 2003, 118) as well as looking to the early period of Islam as the blueprint of the ideal society and the only truly Islamic society that ever existed (Toprak 1987, 252-3, 14). In this, they have a lot in common with Arab and South Asian Islamists. Ali Bulaç (1951-) sees the term “civilization” as Western and foreign to an Islamic perspective (Meeker 1994, 200). İsmet Özel (1944-) criticizes civilization for being a recent term and associated with modernity, which he condemns.<sup>17</sup> For Özel, none of the historical Muslim states – including the Ottoman one – was a true Islamic society (Meeker 1991, 214-5). He distinguishes sharply between attempts to construct a Muslim society, on the one hand, and to set up a new civilization, on the other. For Özel, “the concept of civilisation implies man-made institutions and hence structures which breed idol worship” (Toprak 1987, 14).

Bulaç, Özel, and other more recent thinkers, such as Bedri Gencer (2014), claim that civilization in its universalist sense is a Western and, concomitantly, a secular idea. However, these thinkers, particularly Özel, also come close to saying that Islamic civilization too is a secular notion, or at least that it has strong secular elements, because it constitutes the sum total of human achievement. It follows that Muslims must try to construct, not a civilization which would be “tantamount to striving for a secular goal,” but an Islamic society. Özel associates civilization with “assigning the supreme value to human reason in the arrangement of life” (Yenigün 2017, 213; quoting Özel 1978, 110).

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with the author, Istanbul, 30 March 2016.

Gencer, too, states unequivocally that “civilization” is a secular concept.<sup>18</sup> Their views differ sharply from those of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Ahmet Davutoğlu – two Islamic thinkers who have been pivotal in promoting the idea of an Islamic civilization, albeit in very different periods in Turkish Islamic intellectual history.

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## 5. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek

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Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-83) was one of the most important public Islamic intellectuals of early republican Turkey – for some, the most outstanding. He was active from the 1940s until his death and is venerated in many Islamist circles in Turkey to this day (Singer 2013). The context of Kısakürek’s thought was formed by the Kemalist paradigm which rested on the binaries outlined in the above section and had become intellectually dominant following the establishment of the Republic; he, as well as other Islamist thinkers of the period, must be understood as conversing with or reacting to this dominant paradigm.

According to Duran’s extensive study of Kısakürek and his period, Islamist discourse sees Islamic civilization as “epistemologically and ontologically different from the West” and also “postulates a civilizational essence, which unifies the experiences of different local cultures and geographies” (Duran 2001, 32). Kısakürek saw the world as divided between East and West and believed that Turkey should not imitate the latter, as Kemalism had proposed, but turn to the former (Guida 2012, 117). The East for Kısakürek meant Islam (ibid., 239) though sometimes it appeared also to include some Asian societies and, in one interpretation, “Muslims embody the mission of representing both East and West in their civilization” (Duran and Aydın 2014, 489). He argued that Sufi mysticism is the foundation of Islam and in harmony with the sharia (Islamic law), and contrasted all this with Western materialism (Kısakürek 1982). For Kısakürek, Turkish nationalism was important, but he saw it as being in the service of Islam (Duran 2001, 11; cf. Aydın 2006, 452). His worldview, which was infused by anti-Semitism, was also defined by the fault-line between Muslims and non-Muslims and saw the whole world as divided between the two (Kısakürek 1968, 33). He contrasted sharply the moral values of Islam with those of the West and argued that “civilization” rested on the values of the former, not the latter (Kısakürek 1995). Within this framework, he linked being Turkish to Islam and saw Turkey as a central power in the Islamic world (Guida 2012, 119).

Kısakürek tended to refer to Islam as religion and as civilization interchangeably. Kısakürek’s poetry (similarly to the poetries of Sezai Karakoç and Mehmet Akif Ersoy) described the Prophet Muhammad as the founder of an

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with the author, Istanbul, 12 December 2015.

Islamic civilization and its leader. This was a novel development, as the Prophet had been described until the 20th century as a primarily religious figure (Koçak 2016). Kısakürek and other major Islamic thinkers of his generation, such as Nurettin Topçu (1909-1975) and Sezai Karakoç (1933- ), were pillars of a new “civilizational intellectual movement” in republican Turkey. They believed that Islam had its own “civilization” with the Ottoman past being its essence. They historicized Islam or “Ottomanized” it. In the words of Yavuz, civilization meant that “the principles, ideals, and precepts of Islam are abridgements of a lived experience” (Yavuz 2003, 114-5). For Islamic intellectuals, Islamic civilization and tradition do not comprise only the Koran, the sunna, and the practices of the four rightly-guided caliphs but also “the intellectual heritage and historical experiences of Muslims all over the world” (Duran 2001, 31-32). For Kısakürek, the Ottoman Empire was “the realization of the true civilization” (ibid., 221) and in this respect he particularly lauded Abdülhamid’s reign (ibid., 228-30).

Kısakürek propounded the idea of Büyük Doğu (Great East); he expounded more extensively on this idea in his *İdeolocya Örgüsü (The Network of Ideology)* (Kısakürek 1968) and also in the magazine he published under that name (1943-1978). His construction of Büyük Doğu “envisioned the spiritual, social, economic and political unity of different Islamic nation-states against the West as the last stage of the unification of the Islamic world” (Duran 2001, 330). Kısakürek used Büyük Doğu in some ways interchangeably with Islamic civilization, though Büyük Doğu was as much a future project as an existing entity.

Büyük Doğu was to be, however, a secular endeavor: its essential characteristics having been outlined by Kısakürek, a concerted attempt should follow by human agents to put them into practice and construct the ideal society. This “creation of a new entity of civilization and identity” entailed therefore an element of social engineering (ibid., 239). Kısakürek has been described as an “architect” or “designer” (*tasarımcı*) of civilization; and his work on Büyük Doğu (Kısakürek 1968) outlining his ideas is named as a “manifesto” (Düzenli 2008). The idea of Büyük Doğu referred to the cause of retrieving what was lost in the attempts to blindly imitate the West (Kısakürek 1968). It was elitist, aiming to recreate the individual and society from the top down and saw non-elite elements as culturally and intellectually inadequate (Duran 2001, 243). Kısakürek envisioned a totalistic and forceful Islamic revolution (Duran 2001, 256). He envisioned “selective appropriation of the good aspects of the West” (ibid., 322). His “emphasis on human domination over nature as something Islamic was indeed very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment” (ibid., 323), even though his political philosophy was, in its fascistic and intolerant ele-

ments,<sup>19</sup> vehemently opposed to other aspects of the Enlightenment and specifically the political values promoted in its name.

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## 6. Ahmet Davutoğlu

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Ahmet Davutoğlu was a key Islamic intellectual in Turkey in the 2000s and 2010s (and, until his resignation in 2016, the main architect of the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party which has been in power since 2002) and a pioneering figure in the more recent movement towards “civilizational” thinking in that country. If Kısakürek is the key figure of the first generation of Islamic intellectuals in Turkey, Davutoğlu is central to the third.<sup>20</sup> The second generation, as I argued above, consisting of thinkers such as Ali Bulaç and İsmet Özel, moved away from the idea of an Islamic civilization in favor of the idealization of the early period of Islam. Davutoğlu defines civilization in its general sense as composed of psychological, sociological, political, and economic elements resting on a particular set of values (Davutoğlu 2001, 22-3).

Debate has been ongoing on whether Davutoğlu can be characterized as an “Islamist” or not (Özkan 2014, Balcı 2015). For some, Islam constitutes the core of his thinking, and he is firmly embedded within the lineage of Islamist thought in Turkey and the Islamic world more broadly. For others, his “civilizational” outlook is more complex, and Islam constitutes only one of its strands (Balcı 2015, Yurdusev 2003). My argument differs from both views.

It is the case that Davutoğlu claims Islam to be at the core of Islamic civilization. In *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*, published in 1994, Davutoğlu challenged Fukuyama’s concept of the “end of history” by asserting that the end of the Cold War brought civilizational crisis rather than triumph for the West (Davutoğlu 1994a, 7), which suffers from consumerism and immorality (ibid., 10-27). The central reason for the crisis of Western civilization, according to Davutoğlu, is its “anthropocentric epistemology,” which posits a “universally valid methodology” purporting to explain “all unknowns related to nature, man and society” (ibid., 13-6); it must, therefore, be contrasted to Islamic epistemologies (ibid., 16).

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<sup>19</sup> Kısakürek’s envisioning of the ideal society as excluding Jews and *dönme* (crypto-Jews), and his propagation of top-down authoritarian methods to achieve this social purity, place him firmly within the parameters of fascism and totalitarianism, as Duran argues (2001, 256).

<sup>20</sup> Exploring the multiple influences of the first generation of Islamic thinkers on the third, and comparing their views on the subject of civilization, are beyond the confines of this paper. A point of note, however, is that the intellectual context in which Davutoğlu was writing was not uniformly dominated by the Kemalist paradigm, as it had been for Kısakürek.



Davutoğlu posited that “the conflict and irreconcilability between Islamic and Western civilizations originates from the reality of being based on alternative Weltanschauung rather than merely from historical and political reasons” (ibid., 64). The Islamic paradigm is holistic and offers an “alternative form of humanism”; it assumes “harmony among the sources of knowledge which is consistent with the supreme principle of Unity (*Tawhid*)” (ibid., 66, 68). The humanistic element of “Islamic normativism” rests on the idea that a human being has the capacity to act ethically (ibid., 73-4). Davutoğlu argues that “Islamic theocentric humanism – as opposed to nature-centered Western humanism – could be evaluated within this justification, grounded on the responsibility of man which at the same time assumes a relative free will and sovereignty on earth” (Davutoğlu 1994b, 106).<sup>21</sup>

Davutoğlu would maintain that moving away from what he calls “anthropocentric methodology” entails a rejection of a secular worldview; he describes Islam as a secularization-resistant religion and says this is “key to understanding Islamic civilisation and its response to the process of secularisation” (Davutoğlu 2000, 176). However, his own vision of Islamic civilization is anthropocentric – in the sense suggested by Charles Taylor and outlined above in Section 3 – in that it is to be established through human efforts and specifically Turkish leadership.

Davutoğlu proposes to develop a new civilizational axis. It would be based on a reformulation of Islamic law and a “centripetal economic center together with its market mechanism” (Davutoğlu 1994a, 84-95). He argues that

a civilizational vivacity [provided by the Muslim world] will not only provide a solution for the Muslim world; rather it will provide an alternative for entire [sic] humanity. (ibid., 117)

Instead of a Huntington-style clash, Davutoğlu sees in recent times the signs of synthesizing a new civilization which will spread in the world (Davutoğlu 2001, 563). Davutoğlu argues that some civilizations, the Islamic civilization among them, resist Western hegemony and dominance, and the universalization of Western norms; he argues that changing a civilization’s self-perception/self-understanding (*ben-idraki*) enables it to resist domination. Islamic civilization should not react against modernism but focus on rebuilding self-perception/self-understanding based on the Koran (Davutoğlu 1997). He

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that, despite the claims by Davutoğlu that Islamic values are at the heart of Islamic civilization, he offers no concrete suggestions of institutional mechanisms by which these values will shape the social order of this civilization. For example, there is no description of what form *tawhid* will assume in practice. The conclusion I draw from this is that, for Davutoğlu, Islamic values will be realized in Islamic civilization by virtue of its being populated and presumably also led by ‘good Muslims,’ that is people who ascribe to the values of Islam.

argues that the culture of the Islamic civilization is a space for trans-civilizational influences and interactions (Davutoğlu 2001, 215).

Davutoğlu places Turkey at the center of civilizational rejuvenation or axis. The Turks travelled through “basins” since the 11th century and, with the Ottoman Empire, created a new “basin” based on inter-civilizational interaction (Davutoğlu 1999, 49). Davutoğlu’s work entitled *Strategic Depth* (2001) further develops his ideas about the role of Turkey in the world and touches on Islamic civilization indirectly. The theme of the book is, of course, a secular theme in that it deals with the foreign policy of a nation-state; the author refers to Turkey and “the Islamic world” as distinct entities and makes the point that Turkey can choose whether to associate itself with it (Davutoğlu 2001, 46). Turkey had been the center of a civilization which had instituted an authentic political class until the Tanzimat (1839-1876), at which point the rules of the “opposing” civilization were adopted (ibid., 81). The secularist Kemalist elite attempted to move Turkey into Western civilization even though the latter constantly rejects it (ibid., 82-3). Now Turkey must face a choice of either creating – through an activist foreign policy – a dynamic civilizational axis or losing its “personality” by being a peripheral element of a civilization created by others (ibid., 92-3). Turkey can make a contribution to global civilization by attempting a new civilizational opening, thereby cancelling the trap of her “geo-civilizational” or geo-cultural exclusion (*jeokültürel dışlanma*) (ibid., 137). Country-bridges like Turkey, which contain many civilizational heritages, are an important source for a new civilizational opening (ibid., 563).

Davutoğlu’s conception of Islamic civilization also bears the imprint of secularization for another reason: because it is seen as tantamount to specific Muslim societies. Davutoğlu argues that Islamic civilization(s) emerged at various points through history and constituted the expression/one aspect of Islam on Earth. He argues that “Unlike Christianity, neither the Prophet of Islam nor his followers or institutions claimed a meta-historic existence. They acted in history and within the rules of history” (Davutoğlu 2000, 193). For Davutoğlu, the Ottomans provided one of the axes of Islamic civilization. He even, arguably, considered the Ottoman Empire as the culmination of Islamic civilization and the last representative of classical empires that instituted a world-order (Davutoğlu 2001, 92).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> It must be noted that the extent to which Davutoğlu’s vision was realized during his tenure as foreign minister and then prime minister is much contested. After leaving the prime ministership in May 2016, however, his ideas were certainly side-lined.

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## 7. Conclusion

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This article argues that the concept of Islamic civilization in Turkish Islamic thought bears the imprint of processes of secularization and is, in many ways, a secular idea: the religion of Islam purportedly lies at its heart, but Islamic civilization is the product of human endeavor, in the sense of being conceived of and put into effect by human agency. My analysis has shown that, in the context of the particular debate on Islamic civilization in Turkey and by extension possibly in other settings with which the Turkish context has similarities, “secularity” and “religion” cannot be seen as simple opposites. Instead, they can overlap in unexpected ways, sometimes in contrast to the claims of their proponents; and the location of the boundary between them cannot be taken for granted but, in a world of “multiple secularities,”<sup>23</sup> has to be investigated for its specific characteristics in every particular setting.

The argument was developed using a particular approach to the concept of “religion” that was adopted from the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (and others), whose thesis was that religion is a reified category and, as such, constitutes an aspect of secularization because it marginalizes belief. Religion in the modern period, as Charles Taylor has shown, is shaped by processes of secularity and secularization, which gave rise to the “buffered self,” separating the believer from the “object” of belief: this constitutes a shift towards “anthropocentrism” in that it further undermines the idea of God as the architect of the universe (Taylor 2007, 270).

“Civilization” is, similarly to “religion,” a reified concept in the way it emerges in the modern period, specifically in the 19th century. Using Aziz al-Azmeh’s historicization of the concept of “civilization,” I argued that Islamic civilization, by virtue of its reification, constitutes one step further in the direction of secularization. Civilization is not only a reified category in that its elements can be discerned, “listed,” or described; civilization involves a step further from reification in that it is, for its proponents (even if they do not always state that explicitly), the product of human endeavor. This is where the universal and particularist senses of civilization overlap in that they are both human achievements. Understood in this way, the idea of civilization constitutes an aspect of the marginalization of belief.

This article illustrates the above argument in some detail using the work of two Islamic intellectuals of the Turkish Republican period. In his many writings, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek uses Islam as both religion and civilization almost interchangeably, but I have shown that significant differences exist between the two notions. Kısakürek saw the Ottoman past as the highest expression of

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of ‘multiple secularities’ beyond the West, but not confined to the Muslim world, see Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Middell 2015.

Islamic civilization, but the historicization of the religion meant glorifying the mundane achievements of Muslims. In the view of Büyük Doğu, Kısakürek pushed the notion of human achievement towards the future: Muslims of the present day, led by Turkey and a dedicated elite, could construct a good society and a great civilization through social engineering and top-down action. This construction necessitated a process of selection of ideal practices – much like going through a shopping list – some of which could be borrowed from the West. It also entailed a series of inclusions and exclusions of different categories of people.

In Davutoğlu's thought, Islamic civilization is also expressed in concrete historical social settings and found its highest form in the Ottoman Empire. For Davutoğlu, in the current period too, Turkey can lead the reconstruction of a new civilizational synthesis which brings together elements from East and West. It will be "Islamic" at its core, informed by Islamic values – which are contrasted sharply with Western values – but will remain the object of human enterprise, specifically the achievement of foreign policy makers of a particular country. Islam is supposedly at the heart of this civilization, but there is no elucidation of how Islamic values are to be translated into action; they are merely present as markers of identity rather than sources of decisions.

It is not possible within the confines of this paper to investigate the ramifications of the conceptualization of "Islamic civilization," outlined above for society and politics in Turkey, and Muslim-majority societies elsewhere; this would constitute the subject of separate study. One thing to note, however, is that the narrative of Islamic civilization as "an abstraction linking Mecca to Java and Senegal, Istanbul to Samarkand and Delhi [...] led to amnesia about cosmopolitan Muslim empires, which could not be reduced to a simplistic civilizational model" (Aydın 2017, 9). Marshall Hodgson posits a sharp break between the pre-modern and the modern periods and argues that Muslim societies were profoundly transformed in the course of the latter, as was the West and every other part of the world. He argues that the unfolding of modernity, by bringing to life the idea of the (undifferentiated) "East," as opposed to "the West," led to the Muslims being severed from their own civilizational heritage<sup>24</sup> (Hodgson 1974, Vol. 3, 233). Ironically, though not surprisingly, the idea of Islamic civilization has cut Muslims off from their past.

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<sup>24</sup> Here, of course, Hodgson understands 'civilizational' in non-essentialist terms. However, see Al-Azmeh's critique of Hodgson's position, in note 5 above.

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