
Reviewed by Mustafa Gurbuz

Why do Muslims – once world leaders in art, science, and military power – suffer from inferiority in the modern era? What caused them to be left behind? Not surprisingly, many books were produced on such a vast topic: some point out colonialism’s bitter legacy as the main driver; others perceive Islam as essentially incompatible with modern sciences. Ahmet T. Kuru rejects both theses. The civilizational decline of the Muslim world, he argues, began centuries before the colonialization era. If Islam is the problem, how can we explain the rich ideas and innovations by early Islamic thinkers from the 7th to the 11th centuries?

For Kuru, the answer to the decline lies beneath two social forces: independent scholars and powerful merchants, who supported innovative ideas while taking financial risks. Kuru argues that early Muslim scholars, the ulema, treated close engagement with political authorities as “corrupting” and a barricade to their independent thinking; therefore, they avoided state funding and worked privately, mostly in commerce. Such distancing from state authorities in early Islamic history put Muslim scholars at risk, especially when the state elite perceived them as a threat to their rule. Kuru notes that the four main Sunni schools of jurisprudence were founded by independent scholars who refused to work as state servants, and as a consequence, were imprisoned by the rulers who claimed to be “leaders of the ummah” or “caliphs.” Yet, the tension had a positive outcome with the evolution of checks and balances: Islamic scholars gained popular respect for their independent thinking, and Muslim publics turned to these scholars in matters of faith. Thus, the state elite could not unite both secular and religious realms under their control. As independent scholarship gained traction with financial support by the merchant class, Muslim societies enjoyed freedom of thought and progress in the arts and sciences.

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The author contends that two developments in the 11th century were detrimental to the early collaboration of scholars and merchants. First, the military class took over the economy by appropriating land revenues, and therefore began to weaken merchants. Second, an “ulema-state alliance” was born. In the Seljuk Empire, in particular, the state-sponsored Nizamiyah madrasas consolidated Sunni orthodoxy against the “threats” of “dangerous” thoughts, and Muslim scholars increasingly became state servants. The Crusaders and the Mongol invasions exacerbated the trend: The state was seen as a protector of religion, and Islam was used to legitimize the ruling regime.

Associating national security threats with threats to religion, the ulema-state alliance defined class relations in subsequent Muslim empires, including the Mamluks, Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals. Kuru notes that such an alliance between the religious class and the state was also an outcome of the Persian influence: The Sasanian thought of twin brotherhood – religion and kingdom. This tight interconnection was attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (p. 113). Such invention (bid’ah) in religion was not perceived as a major problem by the ulema, whereas those scholars who flirted with Greek philosophical thoughts were increasingly under attack. Kuru meticulously engages with the literature over Ghazali whose legacy as an influential religious scholar is controversial. The author asks why Ghazali’s criticisms of Muslim philosophers gained prominence over his liberal ideas, such as believing in the eternal salvation of Byzantine Christians by God’s mercy. One of the factors that harmed intellectual creativity was criminalizing religious and political opponents, reflected in Ghazali’s verdicts to kill apostates, certain factions with heterodox views. According to Kuru, integration of Sufism into Sunni orthodoxy was also important to consolidate the ulema-state alliance (p. 149). The historical chapters (5, 6, and 7) lucidly trace the trajectory of the ulema-state alliance in the past millennium.

Being so rich in its discussions, one could read Kuru’s book from a secularist perspective to blame the ulema for the crisis, while another reader may perceive the militarized states as the main problem. Given that the main thesis is about the complex alliance of the two – an issue that was experienced differently in various degrees in the vast geography and time span – both perspectives may find the author’s support. Kuru’s findings show parallels between the post-11th century and the post-19th century periods when external military threats led to the securitization of religious discourse and the domination of the states’ elites over intellectuals. As the author rightly notes, modern secularist leaders in Muslim-majority nations were often former military officers who had authoritarian views regarding “control over the economy by restricting the intellectual and bourgeois classes” (p. 6). More importantly, these “secularist rulers” were ambitious to use the religious institutions for their regimes’ legitimacy, and thus, created their malleable ulema
class. Similar to their secularist counterparts, modern Islamic actors – whether trained in Madrasas’ Islamic disciplines, Sufi shaykhs, or Islamists – have shared bias toward both intellectuals and the bourgeoisie.

As a sociologist, I found Kuru more convincing when he depicts the structural breakdown that fed insecurity in Muslim societies, and therefore seeking conformity and social order. The culture of insecurity, for example, could explain how Sunni orthodoxy approached the issue of apostasy: Islamic scholars recognized the discretionary authority of political leaders in defining who posed “a threat” to social order and national security. An apostate was the modern equivalence of “terrorist” or “traitor” who joined the enemy. Although some Sunni scholars believed that such discretionary authority was helpful to separate the state’s sphere and the religious realm, the ruling elite have gathered extraordinary opportunity to exploit the religious verdicts for the regime’s interests. Under highly securitized contexts, the conditions are not conducive for ulema’s positive contributions: it may be possible to witness Islamic scholars who dare to resist the state and pay the heavy price; yet, to expect that it should be the norm across time and space is unrealistic. Moreover, the state elite’s ability to crush any opposition has dramatically increased in the post-Westphalia period. Thus, as a student of social transformations literature, I join the camp who may read this book as a major criticism of militarized state elites, rather than a major criticism of ulema. With the failure of political Islamism, I believe, it is quite possible to witness a growing number of Muslim voices for defending the separation of religion and state in order to protect Islam from the hegemonic ambitions of nation-states.

Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment is an excellent work. Rich in details with academic vigor, the book will find its place on the shelves of various disciplines. Kuru’s engaging style makes the reading a rewarding, joyful experience.