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In *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*, Ahmet Kuru not only laments violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment in Muslim countries, but also consistently refers to “the West” as the torchbearer for civilisation that must be emulated. When explaining the “gap” between the West and Muslim nations, his main contention suggests that the problems of the Muslim world are linked to the “ulema-state alliance” developed in the eleventh century. For Kuru, this alliance prevented the emergence of an independent intelligentsia and marginalised the bourgeoisie in the Islamicate, while the separation of the clergy and state in Western Europe resulted in its development by empowering the two classes.

In advancing this argument, the book consists of two main sections after the introduction: *Present* and *History*. In Part I, *Present*, Kuru scrutinises the contemporary problems faced by Muslims in three chapters. These are structured around violence, authoritarianism, and socio-economic underdevelopment, respectively. All three chapters follow similar patterns. In the introduction, Kuru provides statistics ostensibly demonstrating that Muslim countries disproportionately suffer from the civilisational vices being discussed. He proceeds to explore the reasons for this. First, he discusses the “anti-colonial approach”, which, he argues, holds Western colonialism responsible for them. He claims that, although the “anti-colonial approach” raises some valid points, the focus on Western colonialism is not sufficient to explain the violence, authoritarianism, and socio-economic underdevelopment found within the Muslim world. It exaggerates the role of colonialism while downplaying local conditions such as ideas, states, local actors, and pre-colonial history where stagnation had already been instantiated.

Secondly, Kuru analyses the role of Islam. He initially evaluates essentialist views linking Islam to the problems Muslim nations currently face. Kuru’s general objection to essentialist readings is due to the multitude and variety of interpretations of religion and culture. Essentialist readings of “religion” ignore human agency and the complexity of interpretation. For Kuru, it is more helpful to review the role of actors. As the most influential actor, Kuru excavates the role of the ulema (Islamic scholars), who, he claims, have played a significant role in exacerbating problems in the Muslim world due to their promotion of violent, anti-democratic, and regressive ideas. He views the “ulema-state alliance” as the stumbling block for progress as the ulema legitimise authoritarian rule, which contributes to violence and underdevelopment.
In Part II, *History*, Kuru provides a historical account of ulema-state relations where he also analyses other associated issues. This section consists of four chapters. Chapter 4, “Progress: Scholars and Merchants (Seventh to Eleventh Centuries)”, mainly examines the emergence of the ulema-state alliance in the eleventh century. He regards this as a pivotal stage. For, in his view, socio-economic and intellectual stagnation commence during this epoch, while the eighth and eleventh centuries had witnessed progress. Kuru considers this “a virtuous circle of intellectual and economic progress” through the achievements of merchants and scholars while contemporary Western Europe was suffering from “a vicious circle” (116). He attributes this success to the independence of ulema from the state thanks to the merchants who were powerful enough to fund them. Chapter 5, “Crisis: The Invasions (Twelfth to Fourteenth Centuries)”, and Chapter 6, “Power: Three Muslim Empires (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries)”, explain how the ulema-state alliance was consolidated, while merchants and philosophers were marginalised. He claims that this initially took place during the invasions of Crusaders, Mongols, and Timurids, and then, during the height of Safavid, Mughal, and especially Ottoman rule.

Parallel to this, Kuru presents the rise of Western Europe in oppositional terms to the events taking place in the Muslim world, arguing that the church and state separated while universities and merchant classes emerged. Chapter 7, “Collapse: Western Colonialism and Muslim Reformists (Eighteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)”, discusses the Muslim responses to “Western Dominance”. He argues that as the ulema did not want to lose its monopoly over interpreting Islam, which was their main source of legitimacy, they opposed the development of the printing press and of Qur’an translations. This, in turn, kept Ottoman society illiterate in comparison to Western Europe. On the other hand, as the ulema-state alliance was not successful in addressing Western challenges, it weakened. The state enforced Westernisation reforms whereas the ulema were gradually replaced by bureaucrats, (new Western-educated) intellectuals, and occasionally reformists. However, intellectuals and reformists could not be effective in influencing power relations within society, and the state-ulema alliance – at least its legacy – has remained intact for several reasons such as intellectual communitarianism, statism, and the elitism of reform.

As can be observed even from this summary, Kuru provides a comprehensive account of the contemporary issues found within the Muslim world in a meticulous way. Although he claims that the work is “primarily a book of political science, not history” (xvi), his engagement with the historical data is very detailed and rigorous. More significantly, he successfully utilises the data in constructing and providing evidence for his argument. While this success is partly because of the way the section exploring history is constructed both in relation
to the present and other historical periods, it is also due to the contextualisation of the discussed matters. All these aspects make the book an easy read in terms of following the line of argument. Another useful aspect of the book is that Kuru discusses alternative explanations and cites the objections to his arguments. In this sense, the book becomes a useful source to situate the discourse and debates regarding the Muslim world.

Unfortunately, the diligence in the collection of data does not compensate for the lack of criticality when discussing concepts, especially considering the Eurocentric meta-narratives and knowledge frameworks that are deployed within the work. Notions such as democracy, authoritarianism, under/development, progress, and religion are all cited, with little discussion regarding the normative assumptions at play. For instance, Kuru does not question what makes democracy good and authoritarianism bad intrinsically. Based on Freedom House data (32), he declares Muslim countries authoritarian and non-democratic which are discussed as problematic; however, it is not clear why we should accept the Freedom House analysis of these notions. Kuru’s idealised discussions of “the West” are not confined to the employment of such statistics and data. Throughout the book, he discernibly iterates that Muslims should “catch up” with the West. In this sense, Kuru does not grant Muslims any agency to imagine their own “development”; rather, he measures their past/present successes and failures by referring to the West. Similar instances illustrating Kuru’s Orientalism and Eurocentrism can be seen throughout.

Kuru may respond by claiming that he does not take these ideas for granted but constructs and utilises them due to the collected data samples presented. However, his selection of data samples and the construction of those samples as authoritative pieces of data are products of a power/knowledge exchange, which Kuru seems incognisant of. For instance, in Chapter 2, he states that the “chapter has documented the existence of secular constitutions in a large number of Muslim countries. These data indicate that the claim about the inherent incompatibility between Islam and the secular state has no empirical basis” (54). Yet, this type of statement raises questions that need to be addressed. For example, can “Muslim countries” directly substitute “Islam” when analysing Islam’s relationship to a secular state, especially considering “the role of human actors in interpreting religious texts” (20) as he states? Even when we accept the substitution to some extent, how can we know that these constitutions represent the views of the majority of Muslims, especially considering these countries are “authoritarian”? He should demonstrate why the existence of a “secular constitution” automatically means the welcoming of this constitution by Muslims. However, this requires a proper analysis of colonialism and post-colonial secularising regimes, especially in terms of epistemology, which is generally absent.
Furthermore, what does “secular state” mean in practice and theory in the context of Muslim countries and is this comparable to the Western context? Any answer to those questions is only through an epistemological framework which is the product of power/knowledge. However, Kuru’s Eurocentric positivism prevents him not only from recognising his Eurocentric epistemological framework, but that knowledge is not free from power. It makes Kuru assume the universality and neutrality of data, knowledge, and methods.

Similar drawbacks appear in the discussion of colonialism and the “anti-colonial approach”. When criticising the anti-colonial approach, Kuru states that it “over-emphasizes the impact of Western countries’ policies toward other parts of the world while downplaying the role of non-Western countries’ own domestic and regional dynamics. Hence, it cannot explain why Muslims have experienced interstate wars, civil wars, and terrorism by and against other Muslims, rather than simply fighting against Western colonial powers and occupiers. In the last decade or so, jihadists have killed more Muslims than non-Muslims” (19).

Although he raises an interesting point by drawing our attention to “domestic and regional dynamics”, he himself “downplays” the role of colonialism by reducing it to mere external intervention from the constitution of world order. For example, the violence by “jihadists” cannot be explained without referring to Western intervention, as Western nations are often the primary weapon providers and funders in the region. Furthermore, the policies that facilitate this are devised and legitimised by the knowledge produced at Western universities and think-tanks. Colonialism’s impact on violence cannot be reduced to violence against coloniser/occupier. For instance, violence inflicted as a result of secularism, either as persecutions by secular states or by those against it, cannot be understood without colonialism. As Kuru himself states, “Western interventions in the Middle East have not been confined to direct colonization and occupation, but have taken various forms” (16) and “(i)n the Muslim world and elsewhere, the colonialist ‘divide and rule’ policy exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions” (18). However, despite such notes, Kuru does not seem to take colonialism seriously. Its impact on epistemology is absent from his analysis, as stated. Yet, this absence is not limited to the employment of an epistemological framework. His “Islam” and “globe” are also defined by a colonial mentality. Kuru does not see any issue in confining Islam and the Muslim world mainly to MENA (while there is almost no mention of West Africa) and calling a comparison between it and Western Europe a “global” one. Indeed, considering his trivialisation of colonialism, this is not surprising.

One of his reasons for not focusing on the colonialism aspect of the rise of the West is that “this book is concerned with what made Western Europe – once a marginal corner of the world – so powerful that it could directly or indirectly colonize almost the entire rest of the world. Hence, colonialism can be only a part
of my much broader analysis” (215). This statement is indicative of his general approach, in so far as he simply refuses to see the facilitatory relationship between the rise of the West and colonialism. On pages 194–5, Kuru refers to this as an “anti-colonial approach” and his main criticism claims that, although colonialism contributed to European economic growth, “the rise of Western Europe was too multifaceted and complex to be explained with reference to colonialism alone” (195). However, neither does this “contribution by colonialism” hinder him from arguing that Europe originally became powerful and then colonized due to this rise, nor does he see any problem in explaining phenomena in the Muslim world with reference to “ulema” or in general class relations “alone”. For, according to Kuru, due to great philosophers and a strong bourgeoisie, the West became great through revolutions. Colonialism, exploitations, slavery, and genocide did not play any part in its rise. In this sense, the book can be considered as another contribution to Orientalist literature that promotes Western exceptionalism along with racism and various other forms of Eurocentrism. Hence the book can also be scrutinised through the aura of 2020 where the Covid-19 failures of the “developed” West and Black Lives Matter rendered this type of literature obsolete.