

'Islamic Calvinists'

Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology, asserted contrary to Karl Marx, another founding father of sociology, that modern capitalism is the product of cultural changes rather than technological. In his book entitled "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1905), Weber explained the genesis of capitalism in terms of the ethical teachings of the founders of the Protestant religion, Martin Luther and (particularly) John Calvin who preached hard work and simple life as the way to salvation. According to Weber, fatalism and otherworldly teachings of Islam and Buddhism were not inductive to the development of capitalism. The swift economic development experienced in Southeast and East Asia was a big blow to Weber's theses (whose validity for Europe is very questionable as well). What has taken place in Turkey since the 1980s falsifies Weber's theses on Islam.

This is the main argument of the report entitled "Islamic Calvinists: Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia," published on September 19. The report is based on research conducted by the European Stability Initiative (www.esiweb.org), an organization based in Berlin that also has branches in Brussels and Istanbul. Main results can be summarized as follows: According to Europeans who are skeptical of Turkey's EU membership, there exist two Turkey's: The first is the one located around Istanbul, a Turkey that is Western, secular and modern. The other is the vast Anatolian interior which is religious, backward and impoverished, and Central Anatolia is the core of this "other" Turkey. Yet in recent years, Central Anatolia has been the stage of a miraculous development which has created prosperous industrial centers. The most important among them is Kayseri. Kayseri's Hacilar district, with a population of 20,000, harbors nine of Turkey's top 500 companies within its borders. The main factor behind this development is the individualistic and enterprising elements of Turkish Islam. Economic and the social development has generated an environment in which Islam and modernity easily combine. Anatolia, shaped by these values, is now struggling to join the EU. According to the authors of the report, what is taking place in Anatolia undermines the view shared by the Republican elite that economic development and modernization are only possible by moving away from religion.

There is no doubt that the report points to a very important fact about Turkey. The report also refers to the analyses of Hakan Yavuz, who in my opinion is the social scientist who provides the best explanation for the motives behind the socio-economic and political change witnessed in Turkey in general and in Anatolia in particular during the recent years. My review column on Yavuz's book, "Islamic Political Identity in Turkey" (Oxford University Press, 2003) can be found in Zaman's November 8, 2003 issue. The book has since been translated into Turkish and was published recently under the title, "Modernlesen Muslumanlar: Naksiler, Nurcular, Milli Gorus and AK Parti" (Modernizing Muslims: Nakshi Movement, Nur Movement, National Vision and Justice and Development Party, Istanbul: Kitap Yayinlari, 2005). The basic thesis of the book is: Under conditions peculiar to Turkey, Islam is not an obstacle to development but rather a facilitator of, and even an impulse for development.

The teachings of some of the branches of the Nakshbendi order and the Nur movement, which encourage the study of modern sciences and technology, hard work, frugality, public service, and investment of earnings, when combined with the opportunities provided by the globalizing economy and democratizing politics helped the emergence of the Anatolian bourgeoisie, and the so-called "Anatolian tigers." The ideological transformation of the Islamic political movement in Turkey, and the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), liberal in its political and economic views, and religious and conservative in culture, can best be explained by the preferences of this Anatolian bourgeoisie. In another column I will comment on Utah University professor Yavuz's new article entitled "Is the JDP (AKP) an Islamic Party?" (The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, 22:3, 2005).

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