



Turkish toil brings new form of faith

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In the Turkish city of Kayseri, Saffert Arsalan proudly shows off his furniture-making factory.

In little over a decade, Mr Arsalan's business has grown from a small enterprise to a multi-million pound international operation, exporting products to the United States, Germany and Israel.

It's an enormous success story for a man whose own father had been a carpet weaver, eking out a living in a traditional artisan economy.

Yet Mr Arsalan is not alone.

His native city is full of prospering entrepreneurs like him who are turning this former merchant trading town into a booming manufacturing hub.

Pro-business

Kayseri is one of a handful of cities industrialising at an astonishing rate in Anatolia, Turkey's central province and the country's Islamic heartland.

Unlike the big urban centres of Ankara and Istanbul, the population is made up of devout, conservative Muslims. Restaurants rarely serve alcohol, unmarried men and women don't mix on the streets, and there is little in the way of nightlife.

Yet the new entrepreneurialism sweeping across the province is providing an unlikely catalyst for a remarkable religious transformation.

A new form of Turkish Islam is emerging here, one which is pro-business and pro-free market, and it's being called Islamic Calvinism.

Working hard

One of the first to use this description was the former mayor of Kayseri, Sukru Karatepe.

A softly-spoken man who taught sociology before entering politics, Karatepe noticed striking similarities between the changes in Kayseri and the famous thesis of the German economist Max Weber, who argued that the strong work ethic of the Protestant movement gave birth to modern capitalism.

"I had read Weber, who'd written about how Calvinists work hard, save money and then reinvest it into business," he says.

"To me, it seemed very similar to what was happening in Kayseri.

"People in Kayseri also don't spend money unnecessarily. They work hard, they pride themselves on saving money. Then they invest it and make more money.

"In fact, in Kayseri, working hard is a form of worship. For them, religion is all about the here and now, not the next life. Making money is a sign of God's approval, and this is also similar to what Weber said about the Calvinists."

Modern Islam

It is a view echoed by Gerald Knaus, director of the think-tank European Stability Initiative, which recently published a report on the Islamic Calvinist phenomenon in Anatolia.

"Those doing business in Kayseri themselves argue that Islam encourages them to be entrepreneurial," he says.

"They quote passages from the Quran and from the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad which read like a business manual. They tell me, it's important to create factories, to create jobs - it's what our religion tells us to do."

The label of Islamic Calvinism, however, has caused a furore in the Turkish press.

Critics say it's a Western conspiracy to Christianise Islam, but others have passionately argued in its favour, holding it up as a model for how Islam and modernity can co-exist.

One of its most prominent defenders has been Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Gul, himself a native of Kayseri and the son of an entrepreneur.

He sees no contradiction in the term and argues that Turkey can provide a lasting template for a new kind of modern Islam.

"The most important thing to ask," he says, "is what kind of modernism do we want? Are you living in this world, or are you dreaming?"

"The people in Kayseri are not dreaming - they are realistic, and that's the kind of Islam we need.

"They go to the mosque, they lead pious lives, but at the same time they are very active economically.

"This is what modernism means to me, and this is why this new Turkey will ultimately be an asset to the European Union."

You can hear more about this story on Radio 3's Night Waves as it begins a week-long series, The Return of Faith (2130 GMT from Monday 13 March to Friday 17

March 2006). The latest editions are also available at the [Night Waves website](#)