Vakıf (pl. evkaf) has always held a position of central importance in Islam; together with the laws on inheritance and the statut personnel, the subject forms the main corpus of the shārī‘a, the Muslim sacred law. Because of its continually evolving legal doctrine, and the tangible material benefits it has provided the Islamic community, unlike other matters of the shārī‘a vakıf has been of practical significance to the lives of most Muslims. This is apparent from the fact that the revenue from vakıf landed endowments was accountable for the support of every form of religious, educational, and charitable institution in Islam; in fine, vakıf was responsible for making the Islamic world much the way it was. The decline of this institution in the nineteenth century led to the general material impoverishment of Islam that is witnessed today. In order to have an understanding of Islam and an awareness of the kind of oikoumene this religion has shaped and created, it is essential to have a knowledge of religious foundations and the effect they had on Islamic society.

In spite of the central rôle played by religious foundations throughout Islamic history, as a field of study the subject is a vast canvas that has barely been touched. Little research has been done in the field thus far, notwithstanding the fact that the Ottoman archives in İstanbul contain a wealth of documents in Arabic and Ottoman for all periods of Ottoman history. Most of the studies which have been done are monographs that concentrate on specific aspects of religious foundations; apart from the work of Hüseyin Hâtemî, no comprehensive history of vakıf as a legal institution has been done.

What has been lacking in the field of Islamic studies until now is an introductory survey that presents an overview of the subject from the beginning of Islam to the twentieth century. The present study provides such an overview with reference to the area and era of its main development and use — the Ottoman empire; the development of evkaf is discussed in a topical fashion, with attention being given to the most significant changes in its juridical evolution during the major historical periods of Islam.

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