Mustafa Sabri (1869–1954)

Life

Mustafa Sabri was born in Tokat in 1869. His father was Ahmed Efendi. Sabri began his education in his hometown, during which time he very quickly memorized the Quran. He pursued his education in Kayseri and Istanbul, where he studied under Ahmed Asim Efendi and received his certificate of proficiency (icazetname). He married the daughter of his master Asım Efendi. He passed the Ruus examination (teaching qualification exam) and became an instructor (müderris) at Fatih Mosque.

From 1898 until 1914, Mustafa Sabri attended Huzur lessons (lectures and discussion given by the ulema in the presence of the Sultan). Between 1900 and 1904, he was the librarian (hafiz-i kutub) of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r.1876–1909). After the re-establishment of the Constitution on July 1908, he entered Parliament as the representative of Tokat. He also became chief editor of Beyan-ul Hak, an intellectual journal published by the Cemiyet-i İlimiye (Religious Scholars’ Association). Although he thanked the CUP and the army in an article in the first issue of Beyan ul Hak for ending the Hamidian regime, shortly afterwards he joined the opposition to the party. Sabri became the founding member of the Ahali (People) party in 1910 and the Hüriyet ve İtilaf (Liberal Entente) party in 1911. In 1912, he participated in the foundation of another political organization, the Cemiyet-i İttihad-i İslamiye (Islamic Union Association). In January 1913, after the Bab-i Ali coup, he fled the country, going first to Egypt and then to Romania, where he made his living teaching Turkish. After the occupation of Romania by Ottoman troops during the First World War, he was arrested and sent to Turkey, where he was imprisoned in Bilecik. After the end of the war, Sabri again entered politics and joined Dar-ul Hikmet-i İslamiye (Islamic University). In 1919, he was appointed as Şeyhülislam in the cabinet of Damad Ferid Pasha. Sabri served as the acting Grand Vizier during the absence of Damad Ferid Pasha while he was attending the Paris Peace Conference, and he was nominated to the senate after the fall of Ferid Pasha’s cabinet. He became the first president of the Cemiyet-i Müderrisin (Society of Islamic Scholars), which later became the Teali-i İslam Cemiyeti (Society for the Elevation of Islam). In 1920, Mustafa Sabri was again appointed as Şeyhülislam to the second cabinet of Damad Ferid. In 1922, he fled Turkey once more to escape arrest by the nationalists when his name appeared on a list of 150 political dissidents.
Sabri first went to Romania and then to Greece, where he published an anti-Kemalist newspaper in which he violently attacked the new Turkish regime and its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). He later went to Hejaz, before settling in Egypt, where he continued his intellectual activities. Mustafa Sabri died in Egypt on 12 March 1954.

In his writings, Mustafa Sabri expounded a very conservative view of Islam. According to Sabri, the technological superiority and material welfare of the West should not impress Muslims, since these worldly achievements are of little value when compared to God’s omnipotence. Any material progress that contradicts Islamic principles, he argued, would bring harm rather than good to Muslims. Sabri unequivocally asserted that he was not against Muslims benefitting from the technological innovations of the era, but that he would prefer poverty if the condition for such benefit was to curse or abandon Islam. Sabri defended the constitutional regime in his articles published in Beyan ul Hak, and argued that a true Islamic regime could be only on a representational basis.¹

Ideas

The following passages are taken from Mustafa Sabri’s work Yeni İslam Müştehidlerinin Kymes-i İlmiyesi (The Value of the New Islamic Scholars), published in Istanbul in 1919. It was republished in Latin transcription by Sibel Dericioğlu in Bedir Yayınları, 1998.

The material progress of European civilization surpassed that of the Islamic one, therefore putting the Muslim world in a weak and disadvantaged position while undermining the confidence of Muslim thinkers about their civilization and causing great damage to their beliefs and their value system. Although an eminent scholar, Musa Carullah Bigief was unfortunately unable to remain immune to this disease that afflicted Islamic intellectuals. The existing material advancement in European civilization impressed him so much that he forgot the might and power of God. Hence, he attributed the success of the West to the rightness of their religion. Here again, we witness another unfortunate and erroneous statement by a Muslim thinker who judged his religion by the wretchedness and misery of its adherents. O ungrateful and bewildered people, because you are unable to reform the Muslim society or to improve and

¹ For Mustafa Sabri’s biography see İsmail Kara, Türkiyede İslamcılık Düşüncesi, Istanbul: Kitabevi, pp. 383–385. See also Mustafa Sabri Efendi, Hilafetin İlgasının Arka Planı, Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2007 (hereafter cited as Sabri, Hilafet)