In a lecture presented in Berlin in 2007, Erik Jan Zürcher, an eminent expert on Turkish history, described the character and development of Turkish secularism as a unique case. According to Zürcher “Turkish secularism is historically very specific, because it is indebted to two great but largely separate traditions, that of the six-hundred-year-old Ottoman Empire of which the republic is the direct heir and that of the French Enlightenment in its positivist guise.”

The content of Zürcher’s lecture, which reflects the conventional approach to the study of modern Turkey, is of interest for the present discussion. But equally interesting is the context in which the lecture was delivered: a conference held in the center of Europe at the peak of an emotional public debate over the future of Turkey and the Turks as part of Europe—a political and social entity based on a Christian religious and secular heritage. The conference titled “The importance of being European: Turkey, the EU, and the Middle East” was held two years after Turkey’s official acceptance as a candidate for membership in the European Union and almost five years after the coming to power of the post-Kemalist Justice and Development Party, which has defied the Turkish state’s “sacred” principle of secularism. Whether this characterization of the new Turkish government is accurate, it is clear that the criticism of Turkish Kemalist policies and agents, especially those related to religion and to the state’s authoritarian secularism, has become a dominant theme in Turkish-related studies and public debates. This was clearly reflected in Zürcher’s talk.

The genealogy of secularism was described briefly at the conference and has been explored more extensively in many of the well-known books on the history of Turkey. The relations between secularism and the positioning of Turkey in relation to Europe are closely connected and

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1 Zürcher, “Turkish secularism,” 133–134.
2 Lewis, Emergence of Modern Turkey; Berkes, Türkiye de Çağdaşlaşma; Tuncay, T.C.nde Tek-Parti Yönetiminin Kurulması.
are the core of my paper. My central argument is that the evolitional approach—which views the Kemalists’ Turkish secularization project as an attempt to break with the religious past and move toward a Western conception of progress—is inaccurate. The established historiography has created an equation in which the Kemalist bureaucracy, leaning on positivism and anti-religious sentiments that were translated to harsh policies, is set against the ignorant masses that refused to see the light and become civilized through a process of secularization. This equation is not only inaccurate; it also precludes an understanding of Turkish secularism in its various forms and historical periods. Moreover, Turkish secularism is the product of a reform of religious laws, stemming from a perceived need to purify religious legal instruction by ridding it of popular mystical “faults” believed to be foreign to Islam. It was the purification of religious law, and not the rejection of religion, that brought about the secular age in Turkey.

Another argument that deserves attention relates to the inseparable connection between the discussion, both in Europe and in Turkey, of secularism and its various representations, on the one hand, and the nature of the relationship with Europe and “the Eastern question”, on the other. By “the Eastern question” I refer not only to the representation of the East in the late Ottoman period but also to the fear of the East in general and to feelings regarding the Turkish quest to become part of Europe. Europe itself, from its commencement as a cultural unit, was defined by its borders with the East in its Persian, Mongol, and Ottoman incarnations.

Epistemology and the Theory of Secularism in Turkey

Zürcher’s argument regarding the uniqueness of the Turkish experience of secularism is not unusual. The two basic assumptions of traditional Middle Eastern scholarship are: first, that Turkey and the Turkish people consist of a discrete cultural unit operating according to distinct laws and a unique internal logic; and, linked to the first, that there is a Turkish Islam, and that Sunni Hanafi Turkish Islam is by nature moderate and imbues its followers with conservative social family values. Therefore, dissemination of this moderate version of Islam, under controlled conditions, through state institutions (mosques, schools, cultural centres, and medical clinics) is likely to facilitate socio-political oversight and to reinforce the individual’s loyalty to the state.

This perception, which views the Turks as people with natural resistance to radical Islam, is not new and is accepted by eminent Turkish scholars,