CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CLERICS’ BETRAYAL?
ISLAMISTS, ‘ULAMA’ AND THE POLITY

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INTRODUCTION

In 1927, the French writer Julien Benda, author of La Trahison des Clercs (The betrayal of the intellectuals), decried the moral erosion of the intellectuals of his day for abandoning the ideal of universal justice in favor of narrow, egoistic politics. They replaced their elevated spiritual kingdom with an earthly kingdom, thus betraying their social cause, he argued. In contrast, Benda’s Marxist colleagues, the Italian writer Antonio Gramsci and the French writer Paul Nizan, endorsed the political involvement of the intellectual, although they attacked those “watchdog” intellectuals who positioned themselves as loyal defenders of the bourgeois regime.

The critical writings of Benda, Gramsci and Nizan were part of a broader European debate over the image of the secular intellectual—a debate in which faith had a marginal status in a society often portrayed as post-religious, driven by a Promethean quest to subject the universe to human control. The code words “betrayal” and “watchdogs” favored by these Western writers were relevant as well to the anti-‘ulama’ Islamist polemic, although in a quite different context. While Benda castigated the link between the intellectual and politics, Islamists criticized the ‘alim’s confinement to the mosque and the madrasa; and while Gramsci and Nizan denounced the intellectual’s defense of the bourgeois state, Islamists attacked the ‘alim’s defense of the secular and tyrannical state.

Retrospectively, Sunni ‘ulama’—a loose category that included theologians, jurists, preachers and teachers—took pride in their title as “the heirs of the prophets,” yet they never claimed political power in the context of running the affairs of state, much less heading it. On the contrary, they systematically legitimized the prevailing political order and even helped entrench this concept in the Muslim collective memory. Classical and medieval ‘ulama’ scholars posited the political ideal of a contractual agreement by which the ruler is appointed by the
community as the embodiment of the will of Allah and the Prophet, and in return the ruler demonstrates justice and religious devotion. This exchange constitutes the basis of the obligation of obedience and loyalty. Such a contractual theory was developed under the rule of the Umayyad dynasty and served its purposes well. It preached the depoliticization of the public arena as a guarantee of stability in the face of challenges by the Shi’a and other sects that denied the legitimacy of the Sunni caliphs.¹

Even when this political ideal was tarnished through dynastic succession and later through the breakdown of Muslim political unity in the tenth century, the dominant trend in Islamic thought remained sanctification of the existing order. In a choice between two evils—political tyranny or social anarchy—as measured in Hobbesian terms, political tyranny won out. Even the loss of the political supremacy of the Arabs to the Turks—namely to the Seljuqs, Mamluks and Ottomans—did not result in any significant change in the quietist approach of the ‘ulama’. Part of the explanation stems from the entrenchment of the ‘ulama’ as a governmental bureaucracy, while another part has to do with the sustained respect for Islam demonstrated by the Turkish military elite, along with their success in defending and expanding the borders of Islam.

Focusing on the real rather than the ideal state, the dominant scholastic tradition in Islam—identified with the urban religious elite—proved to be a “discursive tradition,” as defined by the anthropologist Talal Asad.² It moved forward and backward in time and showed flexibility. One example was its accepting attitude toward canonical legislation introduced by the ruler, which provided an ad hoc response to problems not discussed in the shari‘a religious law. Another, even more pronounced example was orthodoxy’s incorporation of Sufism, with its cult of saints. The recognition of Sufism as an authentic mass movement and as an expression of the psychological needs of the people led the orthodox establishment to integrate it, thereby preventing the development of radical pantheistic trends. Moreover, Islam benefited by this embrace, for Sufism helped energize religious life and spread it to distant regions in Asia and Africa.