Book Reviews

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Religious freedom has been integral to the Human Rights agenda at least since its inclusion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. However, it is only with the resurgence of religion into the public sphere in the mid-seventies that the notion of religious freedom has been separated out from the human rights agenda. In the United States, this led to the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998, which put religious freedom on the agenda of Turkish–U.S. relations through mandatory annual reporting. The foci of these reports include accounts of problems experienced by Turkey’s Alevis, by conscientious objectors to universal military service, and to the realization of rights for Turkey’s minority Greek Orthodox, Jewish and Armenian populations. Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey by Jeremy Walton is not concerned with this international context. Rather, this book focuses squarely on Turkish Muslim civil society actors and how they reclaim a public sphere for their interpretation of Islam in contestation and counter to other public expressions of Turkish Islamic tradition.

These other forms of Muslim civil society are introduced in Chapter One as consisting of four varieties that each intend to create a certain type of Turkish Muslim citizen. First, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DIB) and its statist bureaucratic project of Islam wishes for a passive Muslim citizen. Second is the “mass Islam” that is displayed at rallies by right-wing Islamists whose aim is to generate a “Muslim crowd.” Third is the partisan form of Islam crafted by Turkey’s AK party, which aims to reproduce a Muslim political activist; and lastly, there is the Islam as represented by fashion magazines, which aims to reproduce a form of Muslim consumer. In these four ways, according to Walton, Muslim civil society constitutes a public mediation of Islam that intends to cultivate a subject infused with liberal governmentality that rejects
the DİB’s statist Islam and its monopoly on interpretation of Islamic practice. Muslim civil society aims to develop a public presentation of Islam that is independent from, and in opposition to, the state. Walton’s book thus joins the plethora of studies on civil society activism that have become fashionable after the end of the Cold War and that exemplify the neoliberal revolution and the accompanying transformation of the role of the state and the concomitant creation of liberal governmentality. His timely intervention thus sheds light on two current themes in the social sciences – “the newfound ideal” of religious freedom (p. xix) and civil society activism that comes with it.

Walton’s research was undertaken mostly in Istanbul among twenty civil society organizations from the Alevi, and from within the Sunni community (the Nur and the Gülen Movement) between 2005 and 2007 with ongoing updates and visits thereafter. The comparative perspective on these different groups is insightful as Walton is able to show that neoliberalism and its emphasis on a specific type of public behavior has influenced all three communities, and they all have developed modes of actions in time and space that demonstrate a “civil society effect,” as conceiving of their projects as independent from the state (p. 4) – “as a domain of primordial, non-political belonging and identity” (p. 4). Employing a Focauldian perspective that highlights how liberal governmentality has supplanted state power, Walton argues that religious freedom, from this perspective, is also an aspect of liberal governmentality (p. 5). This core theme of the book is extremely important in Turkey given, as Walton notes, that there has been no privatisation of the public control of religion – the DİB remains untouched by neoliberal adjustment.

Walton’s study demonstrates that all three communities he observed were trying to carve out a space of religious activism that was independent from the state. All three communities thus developed a number of activities to promote their specific interpretation of Islam through conferences, publications, religious classes, museums, active practice of religion outside the state-space in counter-public spaces, delivering of health and education services, and setting up of religious radio and television broadcasting. Chapter Two focuses on Walton’s visits to the headquarters of key associations and intends to illustrate that their existence highlights their counter-public nature (p. 79). Chapter Three details a visit to a museum that commemorates an Alevi saint, and to a mosque that expresses the statist character of Islam. By calling attention to practices and services provided by other Muslim groups – the organization of Risale classes by groups associated with the Nur community, the organization of conferences organized by the Gülen Movement, and health and religious services provided at the Mother Zöhre Complex – Walton contends that there are other expressions of Islam in the public sphere that are independent from,