RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES TOWARDS MODERNIZATION IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

A nineteenth century pious text on steamships, factories and the telegraph

BY

RUDOLPH PETERS

Cairo

Introduction

The historiography of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century is mainly concerned with the process of modernization and change. There is an abundance of studies on the measures of reform that were introduced in the fields of warfare, education, law administration and communication, and on the men and ideas behind them. But information on the forces of opposition and their leaders and ideologies is difficult to find. This, of course, is a result of the outcome of the historical process. Since the forces of modernization have been victorious, they have determined the vision of history. And in this vision there is little room for the losers.

What we know of the oppositional forces is that their main centre was among the ulema. During the ‘‘Auspicious Events’’ (Waqā‘y-i Khayriyya) of 1826 Sultan Mahmud II had crushed the power of the main opponents to reform, the Janissaries, and thus opened the road for further innovative steps. Thereafter protests against modernization came from the ulema. Their interests were at stake. For the principal reforms affected law and education, the very fields where the ulema had a monopoly. Moreover, Mahmud II founded a Ministry of Awqāf in order to get some control over these religious foundations. This meant that the ulema’s financial independence was gradually undermined.

The ulema did not, however, react as a body. The interests of those who belonged to the official religious hierarchy, and especially to its higher echelons, were closely linked to those of the state.
Some of them even entered the ranks of the reformers. The official ulema, therefore, hardly ever voiced protest against the policy of reform. This was left to the lower clergy: preachers in small mosques, sufi sheikhs and, of course, the softas, the students of the religious schools, who sometimes came out into the streets to demonstrate against certain policies.

Although the reforms were introduced by the Ottoman sultans and their governments, it was clear to most that they were not only inspired by the West, but also were often introduced under heavy pressure of the Western powers. Thus protest against these reforms was usually coupled with an anti-Western stand. This association was strengthened, when after the Crimean War (1853-1856) the foreign impact in the Ottoman Empire became increasingly visible. Western dress—not only worn by foreigners but also by a growing number of Turks from the upper classes—, Western architecture, and modern means of transport became more prominent and began to leave their imprint on the general appearance of the major cities.

The text here translated must be seen in this context. It is one of the few known statements of religious protest against Western inspired reform and technical innovation. There must have been more of these. But printed on cheap paper and often published anonymously, many of them have been lost and the remainder is difficult to retrieve. Therefore, our text is to a certain extent unique. Moreover, its contents are original. The author has not limited himself to the ancient authorities. In this case he could not, because of the relative novelty of the problem. Therefore, he had to have recourse to his own creative intelligence. The result is an interesting example of independent reasoning.

The text whose translation is offered here, forms part of a small booklet which I found in Istanbul in December 1978. It is a lithograph, measuring 23,8 by 15,5 cm and containing 56 pages. It is divided into two sections of 32 and 24 pages respectively, each with its own pagination. In neither section are the first two pages numbered.

Page [1] of section one lists its contents: