

Ottoman Empire

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The Debatability of Islam in Late-Ottoman Serials and Censorship

The Hamidian cheap illustrated press was a highly productive arena for debate on Ottoman identities, including discussions of Muslim inflections of daily life, and of patriotic duties and responsibilities. By the end of the century, this debate involved not only hundreds of new professional journalists, but also readers who responded critically to editorials, articles, and advertisements. In addition, the several branches of the Hamidian bureaucracy which participated in censorship – Ministries of Education, Interior, and Police, and other inspection and judiciary offices competed against each other to promote or delimit client publications and journalists.

Once pan-Islamic ideology and Muslim identity became part of official ideology in the Hamidian era, then Islam became debatable, and was debated widely and by far more participants in a public forum than ever before. Journalists, readers, and censors have left a far-reaching record of newly expanded public debate on a variety of topics. A close study reveals subtler and unexpected readings of Islam by newly literate participants in the serial press, as well as alignments of political influence revealed by conflict among and with Hamidian censors over Islam in particular. For example, letters to the editor and conflicting editorials show different, wider perspectives over what, precisely, writers and readers thought was loyal and patriotic to the Ottoman state and sultan. Increasingly in the 1890s and 1900s, loyalty and patriotism, as well as public propriety, were inflected with discussions of Islam, and in many ways which do not always fit into our current notions about how Islam and modernity were debated.

The cheap illustrated press brings forth findings by others (Davison, B. Lewis, McCarthy, Mardin, van Zürcher, to name a few) that Islam came to bear a greater weight as a component of ethnic identity from the 1890s onwards. In this sense, being Muslim acquired much more significance as a public marker of identity towards the middle and end of the Hamidian era, as reforms and rhetoric carried out in the name of a modern Islamic monarchy began to bear fruit among the growing adult literate population. For example, in the cheap illustrated press, Muslims began to play the part of moral and patriotic exemplars, (see illustra-

tion) often contrasted with local or foreign Christians, who were increasingly presented as the miscreants in cautionary tales about immorality, criminality, lack of Ottoman patriotism, or just plain weird and freakish behaviours. For example, multiple births to Muslim mothers were reported as *bereket-i tenasül* (abundance or blessing of reproduction), a title with a decidedly positive air, as when the wife of Ismail ibn Sha‘ban gave birth to triplets, two boys and one girl, all in fine health and ‘among the living’. Births to minority Ottoman women often carried a far different inflection, as with the report of a deformed baby on the island of Patras, with the deformities described in painful detail, or when the editors of a ladies’ weekly gazette reported with horror the murder of a child on the island of Rhodes. In Istanbul, the largely Christian minority and European neighbourhood of Galata was the site of shocking child-related events as well, as described in an article entitled ‘Birth in the Streets’. This short item described a woman who was walking in the streets of Galata when she felt her first labour pains and took refuge in a tavern, where she gave birth. Female breaches of propriety were not limited to family matters, though, as proven by the long-running career of a gypsy pickpocket operating at ferry stops.

Clearly being Muslim in the Hamidian era came to hold a number of new or altered valences of identity, especially in attempting to keep separate the distinct *millets* which social Darwinist notions threatened to blur into a few scientifically flattened categories of human being. There are also some indicators in the



cheap illustrated press that lay and non-elite members of society were beginning to re-evaluate Islamic models of male and female piety for the rapidly changing social and economic conditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This has led me to explore the possibility that this increase in journalistic attention to Muslim identity in the public sphere was accompanied by a spiritual reappraisal of Islam, especially among the non-elite sectors of society represented by the readership (and ‘listenership’) of the illustrated gazettes. I was unable to come up with definitive conclusions on this point, and so continue to re-read print and archival sources with these questions in mind. Suggestions and feedback would be most welcome. ◆

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Note:

- My findings are drawn mainly from archival records, and from publications of loyalists and the loyal opposition of the Hamidian era from 1876-1908/9, with limited reference to Young Turk publications. A fuller discussion of foreign/local and Muslim/non-Muslim identities can be found in my essay, ‘Mirrors Out, Mirrors In: Domestication and rejection of the foreign in late-Ottoman women’s magazines (1875-1908)’ in the forthcoming volume from SUNY Press, edited by D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*.