

A Populist Reformation: The Early Modern Transformation of Islam in the Ottoman Empire

Baki Tezcan

This paper defines the early modern era as a period during which an increasing monetarization of economies connected through widening global trade networks coupled with urbanization strengthened social actors engaged in commerce and finance to such a degree that they were able to force ruling classes, the inheritors of feudal political power based on the right of conquest, to open their ranks to producers of commercial and financial capital. This partial break of the barriers between the privileged and the commoners carried the potential of rising social tensions for socio-economic inequalities became much more visible as they were now reflected in political status. It was then that religious movements of Reformation took hold of Christian and Muslim societies as reformers in both targeted socio-religious symbols of privilege, be they living Church leaders or Sufi sheikhs, or dead saints, all of whom were supposed to be closer to God than the rest of the society. The promise of a more egalitarian access to God moved Christians and Muslims alike as increasingly larger numbers of them came to live in social systems where political privilege was no longer acquired just by birth but could be gained by economic activities.

While such a narrative might sound familiar to historians of Europe, its course elsewhere is not deemed plausible: world history recognizes only one Reformation. This paper will present the “other” Reformation, connecting the early modern socio-economic developments and their political repercussions in the Ottoman Empire with the rise of the Kadızadelis, a Muslim revivalist movement of the seventeenth century named after Kadızade Mehmed (d. 1635), who carried the Sunni-egalitarian message of Birgivi Mehmed (d. 1573) to the Muslim masses of Istanbul and beyond. The paper will also connect the Kadızadelis with the authoritarian political agendas of Murad IV (r. 1623-40) and the Köprülü grand viziers, emphasizing the populist politics of the Muslim Reformation.