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978-1-107-04216-2 - State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands

Frederick F. Anscombe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

This book is about me. It may sound an alarming admission but is one that most authors could make, and I promise you that the book is no autobiography. It is about me in the sense that it reflects my personal and professional curiosity about the past and present of foreign lands, especially those of southeastern Europe and western Asia. Having lived in the Balkans, Turkey, and the Arab Middle East, I have been long fascinated by the politics of these areas. Much of that fascination has derived from the strength of feeling about ideas and identities that people with whom I had contact so clearly had: nationalism was always most evident, but other emotional attachments, from godless communism to God-fearing faith, were either more sporadically or more quietly shown. My basic reasons for being in those countries, however, were professional, and I should explain a little about my career in order to make my point of view easier to understand. I am a lecturer in contemporary history at Birkbeck, University of London. My teaching is weighted toward the post-1918 – and indeed contemporary – period, but my research interests lie in the history of the Ottoman empire (c. 1301–1922). Before coming to Birkbeck, I had some interesting years as a “Turkish nationalist” and sometime “agent working with the Turkish National Intelligence Service” (MIT).

Again, an alarming (and, I assure you, utterly misleading) statement requires explanation. In 1994 I began teaching at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) in Blagoevgrad (southwestern Bulgaria). I was hired because I had a plausible claim to expertise in Ottoman history (although to that point I had been interested primarily in the modern Middle East).

On the first day of my first course on the empire, all students attended, a practically unheard-of event. One later explained privately that everyone had wanted to see the “Turkish nationalist” whom the university had recruited. Another student comment overheard that term was “I know that his father is British [which was true] but I’m sure his mother is Turkish!” (an idea that will make my Anglo-Saxon Protestant mother say, “Gosh!”, I am sure). I shrugged off such slightly surreal misperceptions as best I could, but I had a harder time keeping calm the following year, when I was named in Greek and Bulgarian newspapers as working with MIT to establish an independent greater Macedonia under Turkish domination. This (false!) report resulted only from my interest in Ottoman history (in the eyes of officials as well as students, a subject that could only interest Turkish nationalists) and the fact that I once traveled from Istanbul to Blagoevgrad via Greece. (For more on this episode, see Chapter 9.) Even if my two interests, that of the professional historian and that of the curious observer of the contemporary, were not closely linked in my own view, experience showed that there was no clear line separating them in other people’s minds. Those interests shape this book, and I hope that my accounting of past and present and of the linkages between them will appeal to people who are similarly intrigued by both current events and the historical roots of the contemporary Balkans and Middle East.

Given the serious subject of the book, it may seem peculiar to pause for a joke, but perhaps I can sneak one in here. “A physicist, an engineer, and an economist are marooned on a desert island. A crate of canned food washes up. The physicist says, ‘Great! I can calculate the force needed to open each can!’ The engineer says, ‘And I can make the tools to apply the force!’ The economist says, ‘Assume a can opener.’”

No, I didn’t think it very funny, either – but my father loved it. When I gave up studying economics at university, he regaled me with it. He was a statistician, and in his view a discipline whose basic theorems tended to begin with unrealistic assumptions (“Assume a perfectly competitive market” being a good example) was truly a dismal science that I should not feel bad about dropping.¹ One of the reasons for writing this book is my sense that, despite recent changes in Ottoman, Balkan, and Middle Eastern history, basic assumptions of those fields survive with too

¹ One of his better-known contributions to statistics, incidentally, was “Anscombe’s Quartet,” which was a data set that could be graphed in four markedly different ways, depending upon the assumptions underpinning analysis of the data. F. J. Anscombe, “Graphs in Statistical Analysis,” *American Statistician* 27 (1973), 17–21.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

little questioning. “Assume the nation,” in particular, seems ineradicable, despite its roots in the same Department of Wishful Thinking that also produces perfectly competitive markets and can openers.

Several examples illustrate why I feel ever less comfortable with that and other standard assumptions. The first was my experience teaching Ottoman history in the Balkans, where the nationalist creeds upon which the students’ extant knowledge of history was based were utterly at variance not only with those supporting what I had been taught, but even with those absorbed by fellow students from other countries of the region. I challenged such beliefs vigorously, but from that it was a small step to questioning the assumptions of my own education. How far that questioning needed to go became clearer with my research into the turmoil besetting Ottoman Albania in the 1830s and then other “rebellions” seen elsewhere in the Balkans between 1792 and 1839.² The standard assumptions that unrest was driven by nationalism or by greedy provincial notables and closed-minded religious conservatives resisting the state’s efforts to modernize and westernize became untenable. In most cases the violence seemed to be instigated by the state, and those who fought back had reasons for doing so that I – and other people – could understand. The harshness and apparent lack of concern for legal niceties shown by the imperial regime would have aroused opposition in practically any population subjected to arbitrary and oppressive rule. That opposition among Muslims was couched in the language of Islam, still in Western opinion an “uncivilized” religion, could not obscure the importance of justice as the regulator of state-society relations. The assumption that religion is inherently backward, violent, or merely a cloaking device for greed is as objectionable as the glorification of the nation, and is as commonly found in each of the fields of history addressed in this book.

My purpose is to work out the implications of questioning such assumptions in Ottoman, Balkan, and Middle Eastern history, arguing that an alternate view of late Ottoman history not only leads to fresh perspective on the empire but also makes clearer the flaws in assumptions framing our understanding of political shifts seen in post-Ottoman countries. Accounts of political history in each of these fields tend to be influenced by the views of the regimes governing the various countries, and especially regimes founded in the post-Ottoman period that have single-mindedly pushed the “assume the nation” approach. I do not start

² Frederick Anscombe, “Islam and the Age of Ottoman Reform,” *P&P* 208 (Aug. 2010), 159–89, and “The Balkan Revolutionary Age,” *JMH* 84 (2012), 572–606.

with the same assumptions that the regimes in question do (e.g., that an Ottomanist must be a Turkish nationalist) and to which many historians are schooled to be sympathetic, and my conclusions therefore differ even though drawn from similar evidence.

In bare outline, the main points of my narrative are that the Ottoman state retained an Islamic political identity from its beginning to its end, that the populations under its control similarly identified themselves primarily by religious criteria in affairs transcending the purely local, and that nationalism has been essentially an artificial, post-Ottoman construction that has had from its inception fundamental weaknesses as a basis for long-term political stability. In the Balkans and Turkey postimperial regimes designed and inculcated crude nationalism as a tool for legitimating the state: it was a repackaging of popular religious senses of community that had survived the withdrawal of Ottoman rule, a reformulation designed to make supralocal identity subservient to the young state. Arab nationalism shared in this redirection of religious identity but developed in even more dire circumstances, being required not only to legitimate new regimes but also to organize opposition to the influence of Christian powers in the post-Ottoman Middle East. Where contemporary nationalist regimes have obviously failed in some significant sense, the religious identities on which nationalism was built have regained some of the importance they had had in the Ottoman period. There may be variations in this pattern across the Middle East and the Balkans, but they are differences of degree, not fundamental nature.

EASTERN QUESTIONS

It is fair to ask whether any argument addressing contemporary politics needs to dwell much upon Ottoman history. When nonhistorians in western Europe or North America ask about my specialty, their reaction to my answer depends upon how I phrase it. If I say, “The Ottoman empire,” most have no response other than “Oh.” But if I say, “The Balkans” or “The Middle East,” they often exclaim, “That must be fascinating! You must really be in demand! What do you think about what is going on today?” There is, of course, always something “going on today” in one or the other region: the drawn-out death of Yugoslavia made headlines throughout the 1990s; the attacks of 11 September 2001 shaped the international news of the following decade, to be succeeded by the tumult of the “Arab Spring”; and endlessly the Israel-Palestine problem clamors for attention by revving its engine and spinning its

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Frederick F. Anscombe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

wheels farther into the sand. Virulent nationalism seems to epitomize the Balkans, as was true of the Middle East in the recent past; Islamic activism has given the most visible signs of political dynamism in numerous countries; and across Arab lands vigorous protest has confronted creaky regimes. Every one of these phenomena has riveted audiences in the West, taking observers by surprise and arousing all too regularly reactions of dread, anger, and contempt in the wider public. Their unrelatedness to each other helps to explain why each has triggered surprise: atavistic nationalism, religious obscurantism, and the thirst for democracy and development seemingly share little. Each deserves book-length treatment as a contemporary issue on its own – so why drag a long-dead empire into the picture?

One reason to discuss the Ottoman period is the fact that other observers of today speculate about old roots of contemporary problems.³ All of the areas affected by the aforementioned turbulence of the past twenty years, as well as other unpredictable regions seemingly out of step with modernity such as the Caucasus, were formerly Ottoman territories. Such speculation usually refers to a belief that nationalism tore the empire apart, or that the Ottoman dynasty (the last rulers to combine the temporal authority of the sultanate with the religious role of caliph, leader of the Sunni Muslim community) must provide a model for Islamists, or that Turkey today is a “neo-Ottoman” regional power. Given the capacity of populations around the region to remember the past and its injustices, surely there must be Ottoman legacies still at work.

I see little, if any, specifically Ottoman political legacy in the countries of southeastern Europe and the Middle East, except to a degree in the Republic of Turkey. In ranging from the mid-eighteenth to early-twenty-first century and covering the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Arab Middle East, the interpretation of political history presented here traces patterns clarified by the unusual breadth of time frame and geographic spread, including parallels across and between regions that are too rarely recognized. Linking the histories of the late empire and the post-Ottoman states not only shows that there are practically no Ottoman roots to the politics of today, it also helps to identify causes and goals of the phenomena that have so surprised and alarmed Western observers in recent

³ See, for example, Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: Vintage, 1994) and Niall Ferguson, “The Mideast’s Next Dilemma,” *Newsweek* June 19, 2011 (<http://www.newsweek.com/2011/06/19/turkey-the-mideast-s-next-dilemma.html#>).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

decades. It is the political choices made in the early post-Ottoman period by newly independent regimes that still influence contemporary politics and problems. In order to understand why those choices were made, however, it is also necessary to recognize the nature of politics and the sources of political identity among the recently Ottoman populations over which the new regimes claimed authority. This is crucial because the transition between the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods was too abrupt in most cases to permit a smooth segue between systems; knowledge of the “exit velocity” of lands and people escaping Ottoman control, and indeed the trajectory of their flight, produces a better understanding of the direction and speed with which new regimes moved.

Interpretation follows several main themes, which are those that usually generate the interest shown by people who ask about what I teach: nationalism and religion, and their relationship to the state as the nature of political authority has evolved in the modern period. It is the practical, mundane importance of religion and nationalism, especially in influencing group identity and giving ideological legitimacy to any regime claiming to rule or represent such groups, that receives greatest attention. This is self-evident for nationalism, an ideology (that of an “imagined community” of people, bound by common language, traditions, and history or political beliefs, who aspire for an independent country governed by and for members of the nation) of obvious political application. One assumption that I see no reason to question is that nationalism is indeed just a form of politics.⁴ Religion, however, is more complex. All religions focus primarily on the relationship between the believer and God (or gods); this part of religion, including matters of basic theology and the practice of worship, is relevant to the subject of the book but is of less immediate importance. It is the social aspects of religion, which over centuries have shaped populations’ senses of morality and ethics, of what is “right” and what is “wrong,” that are of primary interest here. Religions contain much about the proper relationship between individuals and the ways in which individual and community should act, and such social power has made political authorities perennially interested in establishing strong relations with the institutions and hierarchies of religion. Religion, the frustrated Marx’s “opium of the masses,” made rule sustainable. It thus joins nationalism as

⁴ John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1–16. Breuilly sees nationalism primarily as a form of political opposition to the state, an interpretation that misses the dominant pattern in post-Ottoman lands of nationalism used by regimes to legitimate state power.

Cambridge University Press

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Frederick F. Anscombe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

an ideology that has had great influence in legitimating (and sometimes delegitimizing) state power across the region studied.

One advantage to the book's approach is that it breaks with entrenched conventions that have muddied interpretation of long-term trends, notably the pattern of writing about the modern history of the region from the perspective of the nation-state. Every post-Ottoman country exists under the principle of being a nation-state, and successive governments in each of them have consciously portrayed the Ottoman past in a self-serving, negative way, as a time of oppression or decay that was ended only with liberation (the creation of the nation-state). This message was drummed into students for decades, and, even at university level, little tolerance for overt questioning of the national version of history existed. The national view nurtured in "scientific" academic research in post-Ottoman countries clearly affected early generations of Western writers.⁵ Historical accounts since then have tended to reflect the basic assumptions shaping those early works. Where histories of post-Ottoman countries address the preindependence period, they tend to discuss specifically the nation and its territories under Ottoman rule, which inserts a twentieth-century fact into an earlier time.

Historians whose main interest is the late empire have struggled to develop their own interpretations of imperial history independent of the post-Ottoman narratives. This is not reflected in meekly accepting the negative portrayals but rather in being driven to stress elements that refute the most antagonistic views. In this task the accounts of Western European observers of the empire and subsequent historians writing on Europe's "Eastern Question" (how to manage the dissolution of the empire without causing a wider European war) have proven even harder to ignore than the various post-Ottoman national narratives.⁶ Ottomanist

⁵ The most influential "assume the nation" work on the Balkans was Leften Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1958). For "Kemalist" Turkish views of history, see Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964). As in other ways, the Arab lands present an anomaly, in that George Antonius set the pattern with *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938) despite serving in an antinationalist colonial administration, but as countries gained independence from Anglo-French rule, the history that their regimes sponsored echoed the Antonius line.

⁶ See, for example, M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774–1923: A Study in International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1966) and David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914–1922* (London: Deutsch, 1989), neither of which shows any comprehension of Ottoman affairs that would add a third dimension to the cardboard-cutout figure of the lazy, incompetent, venal, brutal Turk.

Cambridge University Press

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Frederick F. Anscombe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

histories of the long nineteenth century (c. 1789–c. 1918) frequently seem most interested in highlighting the ways in which the empire was just as modern and advanced as the rest of Europe was.⁷ They have stressed the rationalization of imperial government, in both structure and practical administration, which created a modern state matching the European model. The imperial regime instituted full equality for all citizens, and neither religious communities nor ethnic groups were subjected to oppressive or unfair treatment. Enveloping this narrative is the assumption that modernity entailed secularism for the Ottomans as much as for the rest of Europe. Insofar as religion gets attention, it is limited largely to its institutions and the Muslim *‘ulama* (men learned in religious matters); Jewish and Christian religious figures receive even less attention than the wider non-Muslim populations. That institutions and religious authorities either fell under state control or, at the least, did not grow in line with the expanding institutions of administration has been taken as evidence that Ottoman state and society were secularizing, just as in Europe. And again as in Europe, nationalism grew in line with secularization. This picture thus melds with the Turkish nation-state narrative stressing the roots of westward-looking, secular republicanism in the empire.

Entrenched Turkish-Ottoman, Balkan, and Middle Eastern historiographic traditions have produced a grand narrative of political development in Ottoman and post-Ottoman lands over the last 250 years. Stripped to its essentials, it stresses a succession of themes that lead logically to a rosy view of the eve of the present as a progressive era, moving Europe’s “near abroad” along a path of development reminiscent of the West’s own. Each tradition tells a story of political westernization, a strengthening and rationalizing of the state, and the fostering of bonds between state and people; liberalism’s battle against reactionary conservatism; the liberation of subject peoples who finally won control over their own destinies in independent nation-states; the struggle to overcome the unnatural, unjust restrictions of new borders and the economic and social backwardness inherited from the empire; and the political, social, and economic maturation of the nation in the second half of the twentieth century. Such themes’ familiarity to Western audiences creates empathy by suggesting that peoples of the Balkans, Middle East, and

⁷ Donald Quataert, “Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes towards the Notion of ‘Decline’” *History Compass* 1 (2003) ME 038, 1–9.

Cambridge University Press

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Frederick F. Anscombe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Turkey are “really just like us,” going through struggles reminiscent of our own nations’. (The extent to which we remember how messy, mean, and often brutal national development in the West really was is a question I would love to address but cannot here.)

Empathy turns to dread, anger, and contempt when the atavistic irrationality of nationalism and religious politics, supposedly buried long ago in our own past, erupts in Europe’s near abroad. Little in the standard narratives prepared its adherents for the major shifts seen in the late twentieth century. In the case of the Balkans, the picture of political maturation and concentration upon socioeconomic development offered no explanation for why the region should suddenly succumb to nationalist paranoia. Manic nationalism gripped not only the soon-to-disintegrate socialist Yugoslavia but other countries such as the Warsaw Pact stalwart Bulgaria, which carried out in the 1980s a bizarre campaign of forcing Bulgarian names on its Turkish minority and thus sparked a crisis of mass emigration, and the NATO- and EU-member Greece, which has embraced since Yugoslavia’s dissolution the delusion that the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) poses a serious threat to its territorial integrity. In seeking retrospective understanding of such unexpected atavism reminiscent of an earlier era in the rest of Europe, experts on the region either have focused upon the immediate details of individual cases of nationalist tensions to identify “the trigger” for turmoil or more broadly have fallen back on some form of Balkan exceptionalism, combining something close to pride in the strength of national determination to struggle against the odds with resentment that outsiders look down on southeastern Europe as feral and barbaric. Taken to a common conclusion, this view supports the notion that “the Balkans have too much history,” or that “these people have been killing each other for centuries.” At base, of course, is the idea that national passions are something born of the long experience of Ottoman oppression.⁸

As in the Balkans, so in the Middle East and Turkey. The ultimately Islamic revolution in Iran of 1979 took most Middle East watchers by surprise, but it was far from clear then that religious politics might spread from Persian, Shi‘i Iran to Arab, Sunni countries, let alone to secular Turkey. No Middle Eastern country other than Syria identified with

⁸ Andre Gerolymatos, *The Balkan Wars: Myth, Reality, and the Eternal Conflict* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04216-2 - State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands

Frederick F. Anscombe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Iran (although Israel and Libya supplied arms) in its long, brutal war with Iraq in 1980–8. Yet Islamist opposition groups gained clear political relevance in numerous countries, from Algeria to Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and even Saudi Arabia. Perhaps most shocking was the rapid rise and then entry into government of “Islamist” parties in NATO-member Turkey. The revival of what seemed such a conservative, irrational, and frankly medieval ideology as religion represented a rejection of all the decades of progress that rationalist development efforts had promoted. Analysts again struggled to formulate explanations, with widely varying results: Islamism was a reaction against the dislocations associated with modernity, it appealed to the uneducated poor and rural migrants in cities who did not benefit from the social services provided by modernizing regimes, or it was a vehicle for protest because it was the only mode of thought that security services could not fully police. Most problematic has been the all-too-common judgment that there is something underdeveloped in Islam itself. Some commentary relies upon the notion that Islam recognizes no separation between the political and the religious, which thus explains the stubbornly unmodern and un-Western nature of politics in the Middle East. The figure who has attained the highest profile as an academic proponent of this latter view is Bernard Lewis – who, it may be noted with some irony, did more than any Westerner to promote the narrative of the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire as a story of westernization and secularization.⁹ Such a view reflects Lewis’s assumptions, not shallowness of learning or intellect, but the risk it carries becomes apparent when it is adopted by others who share his assumptions but are less learned about (or utterly ignorant of) the history of Muslim-inhabited regions.

Eventually, so many explanations of high-profile problems in the recent history of post-Ottoman lands somehow link back to what is thought to have happened in the imperial period. In order to understand the strength that both nationalism and religion have today, and therefore their perceived threat to the West and its view of how modern states and societies should comport themselves, it seems sensible to return to that bygone age when these two ideas and identities ushered modern politics into south-eastern Europe and the Middle East.

⁹ Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Phoenix, 2004), and *Modern Turkey*.