

I.B. TAURIS

# Contemporary Rationalist Islam in Turkey

*The Religious Opposition to Sunni Revival*

Gokhan Bacik



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## INTRODUCTION

Back in the nineteenth century, a vivid school of religious thought emerged, its ambitious goal the revival of Islamic thought with the renowned voices of the likes of Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), and Hasan al-Attar (d. 1835). This tradition in the making was later continued by scholars like Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Taha Hussain (d. 1973), and Muhammad Taha (d. 1985), who might be called the second-generation intellectuals. Today, prominent names such as Ebrahim Moosa, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, and Amina Wadud continue the same intellectual mission. Meanwhile, a parallel scholarship is observed also in the individual voices in/from Iran, like those of Mohsen Kadivar, Abdolkarim Sorush, and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari.<sup>1</sup>

The nineteenth-century Ottoman scholarly climate was no different: Istanbul was an intellectual hub of rich discussions of Islam, in which leading reformists played significant roles. For example, al-Afghani was received by the Sultan.<sup>2</sup> He influenced the Young Turks, who were also enthusiastic about Islamic revivalism. Ali Pasha (d. 1871), a dominant figure of nineteenth-century Ottoman reformism, wanted al-Afghani to shape Ottoman education, as well as to stir up the ulema.<sup>3</sup> Hasan al-Attar, the grand imam of al-Azhar known for reformist views, lived in Ottoman Egypt and continued his studies in other Ottomans cities, like Istanbul and Damascus.<sup>4</sup> There were many other people, namely Ahmed Hilmi (d. 1914), Said Halim Pasha (d. 1921), Ferit Kam (d. 1944), Musa Kazım (d. 1920), and İsmail Fenni (d. 1946), whose works influenced the late Ottoman- and the early Republican-period discussions of Islam. In fact, the general reformist spirit of the Ottoman intellectuals in the nineteenth century always included a search for a better interpretation of Islam. Reading Ottoman thinkers such as Ziya Pasha (d. 1880), Ali Suavi (d. 1878), and many others, one always notices a critical engagement with Islam. This had its roots in the belief among Ottoman intellectuals that how Islam is being interpreted in their times generates serious problems.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, Turkey today appears to be an intellectual vacuum to anyone in search of ongoing discussions on Islam in the tradition of the people I named earlier as the second- and the present-generation scholars. There is almost no systematic reference to Turkish scholarship in the global literature on reformist Islam. References to scholarly thought are rare, or the odd citations of their works are bent to assist readings of Turkey through political and social movements, not

through religious theoretical constructs. Consequently, unlike in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we do not detect invocations of the leading Turkish names of Islamic thought in the global debate on Islam, particularly after the 1950s. The global literature on reformist Islam is now silent on the Turkish stage. This is a serious deficit, given this country's historical and current impact in the Muslim world.

The main purpose of this book is to demonstrate that despite appearances, a critical intellectual scholarship on Islam does exist in Turkey. I study it under the rubric "contemporary Islamic rationalists," or "the rationalists" for short. This scholarship challenges the Islamic tradition, and provides an alternative methodology for interpreting Islam in regard of the law, theology, and history. The rationalists accept that the interpretation and the practice of Islam in line with the Islamic tradition generates problems that can be healed only in a fresh religious paradigm.<sup>6</sup> To this end, the rationalists propose a new interpretation of Islam based on the primacy and supremacy of reason in any approach to Islamic texts, including Quran and the works of foregone scholars. This results in a radical critique of Sunnism, the mainstream religious paradigm in Turkey. In this book, I study the output of nine prominent rationalist names to illustrate the scope and the depth of critical Islamic thought in there:

Hüseyin Atay  
Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (d. 2016)\*  
Ömer Özsoy  
M. Hayri Kırbaşoğlu  
İlhami Güler  
İhsan R. Eliaçık  
Mustafa Öztürk  
İsrafil Balcı  
Mehmet Azimli

The rationalists engage with the global discussions of Islam by incorporating their arguments as well as developing them in their context. On this account, they are the Turkish representatives of the critical thought on Islam represented by the second- and third-generation scholars like Fazlur Rahman, Taha Hussain, and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im.

The absence of interested attention to the rationalists is due first to the fact that most of their writing is in Turkish. Their works amount to some 200 volumes and many articles, but almost all are published in Turkish only. Another reason is that studies of Islam in the Turkish context usually focus on major cases, like the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and the Gülen movement, the political and social impacts of which are more decisive. However, it is impossible to detect critical Islamic thought by studying such cases, for they follow the typical Sunni

\* Since two rationalists have the same surname, Yaşar Nuri Öztürk will be quoted as Yaşar Nuri throughout the book.

paradigm. Worse, those groups' pragmatic and political engagement with Islam, which never offers an intellectual critique of the Sunni tradition, is brought to the global public with hackneyed nominals like "revivalism" and "reformism."<sup>7</sup> Finally, the global scholarship on Turkey is comparatively less interested in intellectual approaches than it was in the late Ottoman period. Unlike the discourse of the late Ottoman period, intellectual discussions today either occupy less space in Turkish studies or are analyzed as the secondary elements of the political dynamic.

A distinguishing feature of contemporary Islamic rationalism is its break with Sunnism. Basically, the rationalists see Sunnism as either an outdated or a mistaken paradigm that cannot provide a correct interpretation of Islam. Therefore, methodologically, the critique of Sunnism is an inseparable element of their works, since they develop their alternative paradigm principally by engaging critically with Sunnism: they challenge it on all possible grounds, from theology to Islamic history. These challenges can be summarized under seven headings:

1. Historically, the relationship between Sunnism and the state has put religion into the service of politics. Sunnism is not successful at defining its distance and relationship with the political power. The state-oriented characteristic of Sunnism transformed Islam into a kind of right-wing paradigm where individualism and opposition are sacrificed to communalism and stability.
2. Sunnism has marginalized rationalist scholars and survived as an anti-rationalist paradigm. It has stayed primarily a text-based reasoning.
3. Sunnism has failed to develop a moral paradigm because it has reduced Islam into a religion of law, and of the rituals of worship.
4. The Sunni methods of interpreting the major Islamic texts (Quran and the traditions) are not updated, thus they no longer provide efficient solutions for today's issues. Besides, they generate anachronic and damaging religious opinions and judgments.
5. Several fundamental Sunni arguments and opinions, including those on the basic theological topics such as the nature of Quran, are wrong.
6. The Sunni narrative of early Islamic history has deficits and methodological limits that make it anachronic, and therefore useless for contemporary Muslims. More, Sunni history is itself a major source of problems, and deepens political and social divisions among Muslims.
7. Sunnism has failed to differentiate the universal elements and the contextual/temporary elements of Islam, which results in a puzzling concept of shari'a as a set of fixed and universal laws. Such an understanding of shari'a is wrong, and a major cause of stagnancy in the Islamic world.

As I noted earlier, the alternative Islamic paradigm that we encounter in the works of the rationalists is drawn mainly from their critique of Sunnism, which can also be summarized under seven headings:

1. Criticizing the historical power relations between Sunnism and the state, the rationalists propose the turning upside down of the relationship between

them. Accordingly, Islam requires Muslims to be interested in politics through moral norms. Thus, it is a religious obligation upon Muslims to be critical of corrupt and authoritarian rulers. Unlike the amicable relationship between Islam and state on the Sunni model, the rationalists propose that Islam become a theory of opposition.

2. Challenging and even disapproving the legacy of traditionalist scholars, the rationalists propose a new interpretation that reconnects Islam with prior and contemporary rationalists, such as the Mu'tazila, as well as present-day Muslim and Western philosophers. As rationalists, they promote Islamic reasoning as the superior of the Islamic texts.
3. Denouncing Sunnism for transforming Islam into a religion of *fiqh*/law, Islam is redefined first as a religion of morality in contemporary Islamic rationalism. The rationalists define "moral act" as the highest religious deed. They propose a moralistic piety where formal worships are given only secondary status.
4. Unsatisfied by traditional Sunni methods of interpreting Quran and the traditions, the rationalists introduce alternative methods, such as historicism, hermeneutics, and the social sciences.
5. The rationalists' opinions on the various substantial theological and legal issues are different. Thus, a radical departure from Sunni theology and law is observed, such as the defense of the Mu'tazili thesis of the "created Quran."
6. The rationalists are revisionists of early Islamic history. Accordingly, they explain early Islamic history, including the life of Muhammad, in terms of natural and historical causation. The method requires rejecting miracles, exceptionalism, and other Sunni methods, such as approaching the Islamic past as a Golden Age. They challenge pragmatically the narration of early Islamic history according to Sunni theological and political arguments.
7. Defining Shari'a as a historical and contextual/temporary example derived from Arab practices, the rationalists argue that its content, including the penal rules as well as the rules of worships, can be changed in other contexts. In contemporary Islamic rationalism, Islam is not equal to shari'a, and therefore the latter is subject to change in a different context.

A significant point about the rationalists is that though they develop their alternative religious interpretation through a critical engagement with Sunnism, their objective is not to correct it. For them, *Sunnism is no longer a viable framework in Islamic reasoning*. In fact, by undertaking an ambitious agenda of critical scholarship on Sunnism, the rationalists challenge the equation between Islam and Sunnism in Turkey. For the rationalists, a new paradigm is only possible by going beyond Sunnism. They entertain opinions on theology and law that are seen by Sunnism as tantamount to heresy. However, breaking with Sunnism is never a rejection of the Islamic tradition. The rationalists often remind that reviving Islamic civilization requires going back to the origins. But they take an approach other than Sunnism when engaging with the Muslim scholars of yore. For the rationalists, Sunnism does not take many of those scholars into consideration, so it cannot represent the

whole Islamic tradition.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the rationalists do not abide by Sunni judgments or priorities while engaging with the tradition. They incorporate many scholars' opinions into their works, for example, those of Zaydi and Mu'tazili, who are normally excluded by Sunnis. On this account, contemporary Islamic rationalism is also a quest for an alternative engagement with Islamic tradition.

### *The Political Context: The Islamic Movement in Turkey*

The rationalists have developed their opinions in response to the interpretation and practice of Islam in Turkey, which is determined predominantly by Sunnism. And particularly, the rise of Sunni Islamic actors and Turkey's going through complex problems (such as authoritarianism and corruption of the political executive of the last two decades) is a significant element in this context.<sup>9</sup> On this account, contemporary Islamic rationalism is a theory of religious opposition to the Sunni revival in Turkey, a country where Islam is traditionally a theory of political legitimacy. However, paradoxically, the failure of Islamic actors has helped contemporary Islamic rationalism. Their failure, and particularly the concomitant growing reaction to Islamic politics, has naturally increased the social reception of the rationalists by a larger number of people. Particularly young people, frustrated by Islamist authoritarian policies, are drawn away from the traditional Sunni understanding toward alternative religious interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

However, more attention grabbing is how the rationalists correlate the failure of Islamic actors and the interpretation of Islam. Accordingly, Islamic actors like the JDP and the Gülen movement repeated the same mistakes that the Sunni paradigm has repeated over the ages.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, ironically, the failure of Islamic actors is due to their successful practice of Islam according to Sunnism.<sup>12</sup> What happened in the last two decades, a period which one may dub as the "Islamic movement in Turkey," is yet another episode in the history of Sunnism. So, on many accounts, from the relationship between state and religion<sup>13</sup> to the economic mentality of Islamic actors,<sup>14</sup> Islamic politics in Turkey is a repetition of historical Sunni patterns. Actors like R. Tayyip Erdoğan, Necmettin Erbakan, Fethullah Gülen, and Ahmet Davutoğlu are therefore public faces of Sunnism.<sup>15</sup> In a prelude to one of his books, Güler informed his readers that the book was written as a protest against the JDP and the Gülen movement, for they created their Sunni tutelage, which had ironically promised to destroy the previous Kemalist-military tutelage.<sup>16</sup> For Güler, even the fight between the Gülen movement and the JDP, which started in 2013 and concluded in the brutal purge of the Gülenists after the failed 2016 coup by declaring them terrorists, is a typical case where we observe the historical Sunni patterns.<sup>17</sup> Yaşar Nuri lays equal blame at the feet of the JDP and the Gülen movement for transforming Turkey into a field of oppression where freedom and justice are under systematic assault.<sup>18</sup> Kırbaçoğlu criticizes the JDP and the Gülen movement—which he presents as group loyal to traditional Sunnism—for their pathological secularization that manifests itself as corruption, billionaire Islamists, and their intricate relationships through banks and big financial conglomerates.<sup>19</sup>

As such examples show, the substantial critique of Islamic actors is to carry on with Sunnism, which for the rationalists is outdated as well as mistaken on many counts. In view of this, Öztürk summarizes the Turkish case as “Sunnī fundamentalism” recognizable for three typical characteristics: agreeing only to a limited and pragmatic reformism in politics; rejecting any substantial change in Islamic thought; and never being genuinely interested in the social purposes of Islam, such as social equality and justice.<sup>20</sup>

The rationalists’ critique, through Sunnism, of the Islamic movement in Turkey provides a completely new perspective. Usually, Islam in the Turkish case is studied as an antagonism of Islam *versus* secularism. Or more recently, Islamic authoritarianism *versus* democracy has emerged as a second popular antagonism. Logically, those studies could only provide insights into Islam from external perspectives of the secularization or democratization theories. Besides, approaching Islam as a monolithic phenomenon, they deal primarily with how Islamic actors respond to external or contextual situations. However, studying Islam from an external perspective does not yield knowledge of the inner determinants that realize Islam as we observe it in Turkey, independently of the political fight between Islamists and seculars. Islam in the Turkish context, as elsewhere, derives its characteristics and practices from how Muslims interpret theology, law, and history. That is, the religious critique of Sunnism provides us with insight that we would not get from secular or liberal approaches into how the Turkish Islamic actors’ policies in the various fields are linked to their interpretations of Islam.

### *What Is Contemporary Islamic Rationalism?*

I do not prefer “reformism” as a suitable characterization of what happens in this book’s study of nine scholars. “Reformism” is used open-endedly to identify any kind of Islamic interpretation that sounds liberal, progressive, or critical. In practice, it is not clear what exactly is meant by “reformism.” Besides, the generosity of Western Islamic scholarship in using synonyms for it, such as “enlightenment” and “liberalism,” worsens the case.<sup>21</sup> Many scholars, including several rationalists I study in this book, also reject “reformism” as a suitable representation of their works.<sup>22</sup> Finally, given this word’s negative connotations among Muslims, and its controversial social baggage, it is best to do without it.

“Rationalism” is the better fitting label for the scope and methodology of the works of the nine scholars. Besides, a coherent and technically accurate definition of rationalism is doable, given that there already is an established perspective explaining the trajectory of Islamic intellectual history in terms of the polarization of traditionalism and rationalism. The scholars I analyze in this book also often refer to this taxonomy when explaining their case in the Turkish context.<sup>23</sup>

Islamic thought is historically classified as two grand categories into which the relationship of reason and texts, that is, Quran and tradition, is distilled.<sup>24</sup> The taxonomy, which traces back to the time of the companions, imagined them into two groups: *ahl ra’y*, who favor independent reasoning, and *ahl hadith*, who prefer

adherence to the text. While the companions like Umar, Aisha, and Ibn Abbas are categorized as *ahl ra'y*, companions like Salamah ibn al-Akwa', and Abdullah ibn Umar are categorized as *ahl hadith*.<sup>25</sup> Later, the difference evolved into the traditionists-jurisprudents, who proposed that the law be inferred from traditions, and from what the earlier companions reported, and rationalistic jurisprudents, who used reasoning-based methods along with traditions.<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, in the eighth century, the isolation of the differences between the Kufa School and the Hijaz School, a major early differentiation in Islamic legal tradition, was a typical ramification of the same debate: The Kufa School was the symbol of *ahl ra'y*, and the latter was composed of traditionists.<sup>27</sup>

Though they both employ reasoning, the main difference between *ahl ra'y* and *ahl hadith* is the status of reason. The text is subject to reason for the former, whereas, for the latter, the basis of religion is the text to be followed.<sup>28</sup> This taxonomy is significant to the extent that the whole history of Islamic thought tends to be imagined as a competition of rationalists and traditionalists.<sup>29</sup> While scholars like al-Ghazali (d. 1111), al-Shafi'i (d. 820), al-Ash'ari (d. 936), and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) belong to the latter trajectory, scholars like Abu Hanifa (d. 767), al-Maturidi (d. 944), and al-Shatibi (d. 1388) belong to the former. However, the definition of traditionalism and rationalism is always contextual and comparative. Not all traditionalists are traditionalist in the same way. Similarly, what is meant by "rationalist" changes from age to age. For example, al-Ghazali, who deserves to be hailed as the champion of the use of reason, is nonetheless a traditionalist, given his legacy—the role he played, particularly vis-à-vis Aristotelian Muslim scholars. Therefore, the historical polarization of traditionalists and rationalists would usually present al-Ghazali as a traditionalist, and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) as a rationalist. But al-Ghazali was quite closed to rationalism if compared with the traditional Ash'arism before him.<sup>30</sup> Again, while the Ash'ari school is famous for reasoning, it is regarded as traditionalists in comparison to with the Mu'tazila and the Maturidi.<sup>31</sup>

The nine Turkish scholars, given that they recognize the primacy and supremacy of reason over text, are definitely on the rationalist track. However, living in modern times, the definition of their rationalism is naturally different from the classical rationalists like the Mu'tazila, who lived before modernity. Contemporary Islamic rationalists were trained in modern institutions, so they are in intellectual interaction with classical and modern Western thought, such as that of Immanuel Kant, John Searle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and William Dilthey. This is a typical feature of contemporary Islamic rationalism, since the first-generation reformists like Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), who were inspired by Western scholars like Bernard Russell and Henry Bergson.<sup>32</sup> Like Iqbal, others such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan were also given to engaging with Western rationalism.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the pre-moderns such as al-Ghazali or the Mu'tazila, contemporary Islamic rationalists thus study Islam on the intellectual stretcher of a modern methodology. Logically, the usual warning that the use of rationalism in the Islamic context requires caution, given that rationalism emerged in the Western context during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is not a matter of direct concern for



contemporary Islamic rationalists.<sup>34</sup> Rationalism in contemporary Islamic thought should be distinguished from classical Islamic rationalism.<sup>35</sup>

In this regard, the difference between *reasoning* and *rationalism* is a critical subject in the distinguishing of contemporary Islamic rationalism from the classical Islamic rationalism. Reasoning is the using of the human capacity to think in various ways: Typically, those ways are to compare, to deduce, to induce, to accept, or to reject, and to conclude. Logically, reasoning is a natural human cognitive activity, necessarily practiced also by traditionalists, no matter how anti-rationalist they are. Reasoning is not rationalism. An eloquent statement on this equation came down to us from al-Maturidi in *Kitab al-Tawhid*, where he wrote that denying reason is also an act of reasoning.<sup>36</sup> For example, we encounter typical examples of successful reasoning in al-Ghazali. However, he was not promoting rationalism knowingly. In *Al-Qistas Al-Mustaqim*, al-Ghazali proposed that an analogy should be constructed as it is explained in Quran. And he rejected the appeal to reason (*qiyas*) and opinion (*ra'y*) as the “rules of the devil,” and insisted that these faculties be exercised according to “the rule of God (*qistas al-mustaqim*).”<sup>37</sup> Although in saying this, al-Ghazali degrades human reasoning to a subordinate role, the sequence in which he speaks is nonetheless a sequence of reasoning.<sup>38</sup> In fact, al-Ghazali was generally distrustful not only of the human faculty of reasoning, but also of the human feelings that erupt as sensations. As he wrote in his autobiography, he had searched for an infallible body of knowledge, but ultimately found that he “could no longer trust sense-perception.”<sup>39</sup> Having culled reason and sensation from the field of meritorious quest for knowledge, al-Ghazali then advanced the concept “inner knowledge,” which did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshaled argument, but by a light that God cast into his breast.<sup>40</sup> For him, those who reach for inner knowledge—that is, the mystics—can quickly achieve the intellectual progress that al-Ghazali himself only accomplished over a long time.<sup>41</sup> For al-Ghazali, the mystics’ ability to acquire knowledge is beyond doubt, since it depends on and is bestowed by God’s grace.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, given such crucial conclusions, al-Ghazali’s legacy consolidated traditionalism against rationalism in Islam.<sup>43</sup> Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, for example, likened his legacy to a deep wound inside reason, which is still bleeding.<sup>44</sup>

A more radical brand of reasoning against rationalism is observed in al-Shafi‘i, who confined reasoning into the boundaries of the texts, that is, Quran and the traditions.<sup>45</sup> His method was to replace theology with legal theory, since there is no need for the former when “Islamic” is equated with text-oriented effort.<sup>46</sup> Thus, for al-Shafi‘i, reasoning is by nature a deficiency, for it repeatedly displays that it has failed to acquire the quality answers that are already available in the text.<sup>47</sup> Even if reason notices what appears to be a contradiction, for example in a tradition, then that contradiction should be assigned to various facts, such as that an incomplete transmission distorted a truth.<sup>48</sup> For al-Shafi‘i, the texts are perfect; thus, it is required to follow them. Containing all solutions, the texts do not leave any need to go beyond them. In traditionalism as we read in al-Shafi‘i, to reason is therefore to follow *al-salaf al-salih*, the righteous predecessors, whose territory abhors deviation.

In stark contrast, rationalism recognizes human reason as being capable of articulating solutions beyond the texts' capacity. Accordingly, human reason understands what is meant in the text. But that understanding could well contradict how foregone readings had understood the same text. That phenomenon confers the license to deviate from tradition. In the Islamic tradition, the Mu'tazila is usually recognized as the typical rationalist school.<sup>49</sup> For the Mu'tazila, it is possible to develop a successful rational method to understand nature, and even to know good and evil solely through human reason.<sup>50</sup> Though they are vehement to a lesser degree, the rationalist track in Islamic thought has other prominent proponents, such as Abu Hanifa and al-Maturidi.

As already noted, contemporary Islamic rationalists propose an Islamic methodology where reasoning towers above the texts. In view of this, the rationalists' case against Sunnism is a vibrant chapter in this perennial grand debate. While the rationalists are critical of traditionalists, they make many positive references to names whom they see as rationalists, starting with the early companions like Umar, who is known as *ahl ra'y*. To elaborate on this: The rationalists set themselves apart from scholars whom they define as traditionalists. In regard to traditionalists' impact, as we read in Güler, they criticize the Islamic tradition for sacrificing human reason to the text.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the rationalists particularly see the Shafi'-Sufi-Ash'ari axis, that is, the al-Shafi'i method, the Ash'ari theology, and the al-Ghazali's incorporation of Sufism into mainstream Islam, as the major paradigmatic reason for explaining the problems in the Muslim world.<sup>52</sup> However, unlike the typical critical works of contemporary Islamic literature, which usually challenge al-Ghazali first, it is al-Shafi'i who is treated as the "villain" in the works of the rationalists, for one simple reason: His methodology is regarded as the foundation of what is known as Sunnism today.<sup>53</sup> Al-Shafi'i symbolizes the apex of traditionalism for the rationalists, for it is his method that reduced the role of reasoning in the understanding the text, thereby sidelining rationalists like Abu Hanifa.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, the rationalists are sympathetic to scholars whom they define as rationalists. The Mu'tazila is given big credit. Frequent references to Mu'tazila in the works of the rationalists vividly demonstrate that the school survives, despite efforts to present it as forgotten.<sup>55</sup> Öztürk's *The Mu'tazili Interpretation of Quran* presents a detailed analysis of the school, based on the views of Abu Muslim al-Isfahani (d. 934), a leading Mu'tazili scholar. Similarly, Eliaçık presents al-Isfahani as his master.<sup>56</sup> Güler has a book where he clearly underlines that the Mu'tazili perspective could provide solutions to contemporary Muslim problems.<sup>57</sup> Addressing the Mu'tazila as the expositors of the highest level of understanding Quran, Atay argues that, had Mu'tazila not existed, the Islamic civilization of the past might have not been so brilliant.<sup>58</sup> The rationalists are in intensive dialogue also with contemporary rationalist scholars such as Abdullahi al-Na'im, Taha Hussain, Muhammad Iqbal, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 'Abd al-Jabiri, Hassan Hanafi, Muhammad Taha, Muhammad Arkoun, Nasser Abu-Zayd, and Izzat Darwaza. Unsurprisingly, Fazlur Rahman is on the list as a key person who influenced the rationalists.

However, looking closer, we detect in the works of the rationalists an ongoing negotiation of the various types of rationalism about the terms in which the

supremacy of reason over the text is to be defined. For example, we observe in the rationalists Yaşar Nuri and Atay an approach similar to *classical rationalism*, where human reason is the prime agent of knowing and explaining.<sup>59</sup> Reflecting that, reason in Yaşar Nuri and Atay is the highest authority capable even of discerning truth by itself.<sup>60</sup> Atay calls reason “the natural revelation.”<sup>61</sup> For Yaşar Nuri, reason is the first and the greatest prophet.<sup>62</sup> On this account, no other resource, not even the revelation, can be as solid as reason.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, reason’s autonomy is not only a diminution of the revelation but also of the senses: Atay writes that reason comes before the senses.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, cooperation between reason and the revelation, or other resources, is welcomed. However, reason always retains its ability to decide unilaterally.<sup>65</sup> As Yaşar Nuri writes, reason can find what is good autonomously.<sup>66</sup> Having the ability to operate autonomously with no need of external resources, reason can arbitrate religious arguments.<sup>67</sup> Atay based this on the explanation that, unlike the revelation, which is contextual, reason is the universal authority that does not need a context.<sup>68</sup> Quoting the Mu‘tazili scholar Qadi Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), Yaşar Nuri concludes that everything in religion should be tested by reason.<sup>69</sup>

However, there is another type of rationalism we detect in scholars like Öztürk, Güler, Özsoy, and Kırbaçoğlu, who are equally firm about identifying the senses, the sensitive part of the soul, as of primary importance. That positions them closer to *empiricism*.<sup>70</sup> To them, though they accept that human reason is the ultimate power in Islamic reasoning, they urge that external facts collected by senses be given due consideration. Accordingly, for them, knowledge of the external is an essential part of Islamic reasoning.<sup>71</sup> Thus reason, as Kırbaçoğlu underlines, should operate by considering concrete realities. He thus warns that the Western classical rationalism has no counterpart in the Islamic tradition. Accordingly, reason does not have an autonomous ability to discover truth. Instead, it operates only through concrete facts.<sup>72</sup> In this line of thinking, Islamic reasoning should not be conducted by reasoning alone; it should consider also the historical and the present context. Accordingly, knowledge acquired through senses affect sometimes limits, human reasoning. For example, Özsoy, Öztürk, Güler, and Kırbaçoğlu suggest interpreting the verses of Quran by considering their historical context as well as their relevance in the present context. Echoing empiricism, they believe that reasoning without reference to the social and historical contexts of the verses is a frameless and arbitrary reasoning.<sup>73</sup> In view of that, human reason does not have absolute authority to interpret the verses unilaterally, without taking account of external factors, like the meaning of the verses in their historical context.<sup>74</sup>

The rationalists’ entertaining modern rationalism is indeed an important case, given that it is usually argued that modern rationalism is not compatible with Islam. For example, Georges Makdisi once argued that Islam does not tolerate a Western type of enlightened rationalism.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, it is argued that the Mu‘tazila would have agreed with some of the principles of Enlightenment Rationalism.<sup>76</sup> I argue that the case of the rationalists can be explained in terms of two factors. Firstly, there is no standard rationalism in the Western example.<sup>77</sup> A Voltairean brand of rationalism is indeed not compatible with Islam, for it rejects the notion

of deity. Principally, a rationalism that rejects the idea of God is not compatible with Islam. However, in the West, there are other rationalist approaches, like the British one, in which atheism is not axiomatic. That position takes issue with the Voltairean model.<sup>78</sup>

Secondly, the rationalists, no matter whether they are on the pure rationalist or empiricist track, pronounce a coherent rationalist paradigm, thanks to their understanding of causality. They explain the relationship of God and nature, as well of God and history, as the product of the natural laws. This enables them to entertain a full-blown rationalism.<sup>79</sup> They categorically reject the supernatural, which allows them to embrace the autonomy of human reason, as well as the concept of free will.<sup>80</sup> As I shall elaborate on this point in the following chapters, the rationalists are closed to Ibn Rushd on causality, which is the opposite of the Ash'ari/Ghazalian view of natural events. Accordingly, God does not influence nature as an agent, but as a transcendental power. Thus, recognizing the concept of natural causes does not necessarily contradict the concept of God's sovereignty. There are rules and standards in nature, and they can be discovered through rational observation. We have here a belief system in which atheism is not a prerequisite of enlightenment or rationalism. There is a God, but he does not suspend or destroy the natural order. Instead, as Ibn Rushd wrote, there is a continuum of causality underlying the structure of physical reality.<sup>81</sup> Logically, the rationalists' approach to nature as well history (which is radically different from the Ash'ari occasionalism that practically repudiates causation and explains all events in nature as caused by divine agency)<sup>82</sup> allows them to embrace a rationalist paradigm.

### *Between Historicism and Universalism: Explaining and Categorizing the Rationalists*

The main selection rationale that collected the nine names discussed in this book is that they are typical and prominent, so apt cases to study in a quest of which the objective is to discern the nature of contemporary Islamic rationalism. There are a number of reasons to justify this rationale. Firstly, they are "rationalists" in the sense that they promote Islamic reasoning that is not confined to the texts. Secondly, despite their sociologically Sunni background, they are scholars who formulate their opinions outside of the parameters of Sunnism. Their scholarship represents a clean break with Sunnism. Thirdly, all the names on the list are well-known public intellectuals who dominate public discussions on the various platforms of the conventional and social media. All use YouTube, Twitter, and the newer outlets of the social media. In this regard, the rationalists can be glossed as the "visual" faces of the public debate on Islam.<sup>83</sup> Fourthly, the nine rationalists are influential scholars whose ideas are shaping Islamic thought in Turkey today. A major purpose of this book is to observe how Islam is interpreted and practiced in the present-day society; the purpose is not historical analysis. This discussion of the expressed views of nine prominent Turkish rationalists provides us with insights into the Islamic rationalism that is articulated now. Last but not least,

these rationalists are also prominent in academic studies of Islam. Their books and articles are trendsetters for many academics, particularly for the young scholars who are interested in critical scholarship on Islam.

Concerned mainly with contemporary Islamic rationalism in Turkey, this book is also an attempt to insinuate notions of theory-building into Islamic studies. Islamic rationalism in the Turkish case is an area in which theory is vague or lacking; thus, the present time is the optimal beginning point for contributing to theory-building in the academic rationalist domain. The literature on Islamic rationalism derives its arguments mainly from classical studies, with almost no reference to contemporary contributions. This book thus demonstrates that contemporary Islamic rationalism is the fertile ground on which to study critical Islamic thought in Turkey.

As we observe throughout this book, there are major common precepts among the rationalists. For example, they criticize Sunnism, decline to regard shari'a as a fixed universal framework, and promote a moralistic piety rather than the ritualistic one. In fact, all the nine rationalists arrive at almost the same conclusions on many of the subjects under scrutiny in this book. However, they employ different methods of argumentation to justify their conclusions. For example, both Atay and Özsoy no longer accept that the chopping-off of hands is a part of Islamic law, but they come to that conclusion along different argumentative routes. They employ either historicism or universalism to justify their conclusions. This has its roots in preexisting methodological debates on how to interpret Quran.

Historicism, employed by several contemporary Islamic rationalists, is the method that insists on the prime importance of the historical context in an interpretation of Quran. By "historical context," historicism refers to the period when Muhammad received the revelation in the seventh century. Referring back to the earlier discussion on the variants of rationalism, historicism is comparable to empiricism, because reasoning proceeds through knowledge acquired from the past, and from the present, about how the verses were/are relevant. In other words, the reasoning procedure is empiricist, since reasoning in historicism is subjected to the knowledge acquired from external spaces. Historicism rejects the interpretation of the verses by reason alone: taking the historical context into consideration is obligatory.

The second framework used by other contemporary Islamic rationalists is universalism, according to which human reason is assigned an absolute authority to interpret the verses according to the general principles of Quran, even when there is no need to consider any information acquired by the senses. So universalism is comparable to classical rationalism. Thus, in universalism, reasoning can incorporate knowledge acquired by the senses. However, it is not obligatory to do that, since human reason is recognized as having absolute authority in the interpreting of Quran. In their method, universalists imagine reason as a mechanical process that can work independently of any context, for it always arrives at a correct and objective conclusion.

However, on the two trajectories of universalism and historicism that we detect in the works of the nine rationalists, we are not observing an exclusive

<i>Empiricism</i>		<i>Classical Rationalism</i>	
Historicists	Closed to Historicism	Closed to Universalism	Universalists
Ömer Özsoy	İsrafil Balcı	İhsan Eliaçık	Hüseyin Atay
Mustafa Öztürk	Mehmed Azimli		Yaşar Nuri Öztürk
İlhami Güler	Hayri Kırbaşoğlu		

**Figure 1** The rationalists between universalism and historicism.

epistemology. Though we have cases like that of Özsoy, who is strictly loyal to historicism, there are also cases like Eliaçık, who borrows from both universalism and historicism. And there are cases like Kırbaşoğlu's, who sometimes attempts to synthesize the two tracks.<sup>84</sup> So universalism and historicism should be treated as the two contending paradigms that the rationalists recognize, not as two necessarily divergent paradigms. Seen in this way, the rationalists can be categorized in regard to their stance vis-à-vis universalism and historicism as seen in Figure 1.

The preference for historicism and universalism is attributable to the rationalists' efforts to announce their opinions on Islam in a modern framework. Though they pay enormous attention to engaging with the previous Islamic scholars, they are committed to modern methods of argumentation. As expected, their methods are criticized by traditionalists as deviating from the Islamic tradition by incorporating Western methods. In response, the rationalists argue that modern methods have universal merit, no matter what their origin.<sup>85</sup> The rationalists are motivated by the opinion that traditional Sunni methods are no longer functional in Islamic reasoning. Simply, they see Sunnism as a Medieval paradigm that fails to satisfy modern Muslims. For instance, Kırbaşoğlu finds that the traditional Sunni methodology, in the various fields such as law and hadith, is still in its Medieval forms, and is therefore incapable of being effective today.<sup>86</sup> In this vein, Güler criticizes religious education in Turkey for being based on Medieval scholastic knowledge.<sup>87</sup>

Equally problematic for them is the blatant anachronism of the practice of employing Medieval methods to interpret living concepts, and no less blatantly anachronistic when that living concept is Islam. A brilliant case to illustrate this is Güler's writing on the methodology of several greats, like al-Shafi'i, al-Ash'ari, and Ahmad bin Hanbal, when they explain the relationship between God and man. Güler says that if their arguments are analyzed through the works of scholars like Fromm, Jung, and Freud, they would be condemned as authoritarian to the point of impeding human progress.<sup>88</sup> Güler's point is to emphasize how modern and traditional perspectives differ radically and to warn that traditional Islamic interpretations are often anachronic to the point that it is not easy to avoid identifying them as impediments to progress. In fact, Güler charges that Islamic discourse has failed to transform itself into a discourse of modern social science.<sup>89</sup> Basically, for the rationalists, the interpretation of Islam with Medieval methods generates only anachronic conclusions. For example, they explain various controversial issues, such as supernatural events, and the unequal status of women before the law (which they see as problems of Sunnism) as anachronic

survivals of Medieval perceptions of Islamics.<sup>90</sup> Recalling such problems, Özsoy attributes these harmful Medievalizing (*ortaçağlaşma*) retentions in Islam to the failure to subject it to a methodological and paradigmatic update.<sup>91</sup> The same plea to update is formulized by Kırbaçoğlu as the synthesizing of the traditional and the modern.<sup>92</sup> It is in this vein that historicism and universalism come to the forefront as operational frameworks through which the rationalists fulfill their strategy of interpreting Islam by modern methods.

### *From Sunnism to Rationalism*

İ. Hakkı İzmirli (d. 1946), an Ottoman scholar who later became a leading name of the New Theology Movement (*Yeni İlm-i Kelam*) in the early Republican period, is usually regarded in the literature as a typical example of the intellectual who searches for a new interpretation of Islam. Unlike law-oriented analysts, İzmirli underlined the importance of theology in the problems of Muslims.<sup>93</sup> Atay, however, thinks İzmirli a scholar who proposed solutions that did not go beyond the limits of the existing Islamic paradigm.<sup>94</sup> Like Atay, Eliaçık considers Said Nursi (d. 1960), who proclaimed himself the reviver of Islamic thought, and as an author satisfied with the existing Islamic paradigm. Accordingly, he did not challenge the Sunni paradigm, but he presented the existing Islamic paradigm on a different perspective, but substantively unchanged.<sup>95</sup> As we observe in these two cases, the rationalists believe that an intellectual revival in Islamic thought is only possible by going beyond the boundaries of the Sunni tradition.

Contemporary Islamic rationalism does not hesitate to leave the mainstream Islamic paradigm, that is, Sunnism, while basing its arguments on the various subjects of Islam. Basically, not content to see Sunnism as an outdated or even as a mistaken paradigm, the rationalists treat it as the problem per se. To them, the problems that emerge from how Muslims interpret Islam are in fact the consequences of the Sunni paradigm. As the solution, they propose a structural break with the Sunni paradigm, not only in the interpretation of Islamic law but also in theology. Therefore, as stated earlier, while criticizing Sunnism, the rationalists do not employ what I called “an external perspective” such as secular or liberal critiques. Instead, they criticize the Sunni status quo in Turkey by employing religious arguments. However, making the case more intricate, the rationalists come from a social and educational background which is associated with Sunnism. Naturally, the emergence of a religious critique of Sunnism from scholars who paradoxically come from a Sunni background requires in-depth analysis, which brings us to the formation of the elite in Turkey.

Modernization in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century formed an elite polarization of reformists and conservatives.<sup>96</sup> The polarization later survived in the Republican period as the modernizing Kemalist elites and Islamic elites. Both groups had different worldviews and lifestyles.<sup>97</sup> The Kemalist elites represented the urban secular culture, the sociological foundation of Westernization. They were educated either in the West or in Turkey but in line with a Western curriculum.



Naturally, a typical Kemalist elite was a secular person with a minimal connection to Islam. The collective idea of Kemalist elites was to “enlighten people on the road to progress,” which amounted to a plan to create a Western-style society in Turkey.<sup>98</sup> On the polar opposite were the counter-elites who were loyal to the traditional values, particularly the religious ones. Variouslly called the “Anatolian elites” or “Islamic elites,” they espoused the opposite of the Kemalist worldview. After the monolithic Kemalist profile of Turkish elites in the early decades of the Republic, a deep polarization between Kemalist and Islamic elites came to the fore, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks mainly to rapid urbanization and social mobility.<sup>99</sup>

The antagonism between the two elite groups was not only about ideological commitment. A class difference also existed between them, which manifested as a resentment among Islamic elites of their inequality vis-à-vis the Kemalist elites. Particularly, young people from poor or lower-middle-class backgrounds felt themselves victimized for not being given an equal opportunity of upward social mobility. This was partially true. Historically, economic factors, mainly the derivatives of land ownership, were always a structural dynamic of elite formation. As Kemal Karpat wrote, both in the late Ottoman and in the early Republican periods, “many individuals among the intelligentsia and the civil and military bureaucracies were sons and grandsons of landowners, and their wealth derived from land provided them with the income that allowed them to attend school.”<sup>100</sup> However, since the reign of Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1908), there was also a state strategy to train elites on the basis of cultural capital, not on that of land ownership.<sup>101</sup> But, the amalgamation of economic factors with cultural capital through education was never satisfactory, particularly in Anatolian towns where it was usually the children of upper-middle-class families, that is, the rich, who found the opportunity to become part of the modernizing elites.<sup>102</sup> The Kemalist regime had, too, a sophisticated network with notables in Anatolia through whom those families’ children could manage to participate in the network of the modernizing elites.<sup>103</sup> The alliance between the Kemalist regime and the notables fared well, particularly when Kemalism was strong. The notables, as Sinan Ciddi wrote, in return for acting as the local representatives of Kemalist regime, received various benefits.<sup>104</sup> Logically, one major benefit of this alliance was the incorporation of those families’ children into the Kemalist elites.

However, when it came to the lower economic strata families, public education was the only opportunity for upward mobilization, which naturally led to a class resentment among their children. However, feeling somehow sidelined in the Kemalist elite formation, these children were the sociological base of the future counter-Islamic elites. As a matter of fact, the general recruitment strategy of the Turkish Islamic movement evolved through the supporting and the bringing of those children to upper positions in academies, bureaucracy, and society. To a great extent, the Islamic strategy was an infiltration tactic, where the goal was to create a new group and insert it into a higher stratum instead of into the existing [Kemalist] elites.<sup>105</sup> If there was not any exceptional reason to become Kemalist, the usual socialization of the lower-social-strata children turned them



out as traditionalist, and even as Islamic/Islamist types, due to the networks they developed with various Islamic movements on their given tracks. Logically, unless subjected to an ideological change, the usual things that people bring with them to the center are religion and nationalism.

Studying nine rationalists on these parameters, we find that they are all of Anatolian background, without any social or economic networks that could link them to the Kemalist elites, or to their local extensions. In terms of the key parameters like economic background, birthplace, and education, the rationalists went through a socialization course which typically does not result in upward mobility, to “modernizing elites” status. To begin with the birthplaces, the rationalists were all born in Anatolian towns, villages, and cities (Figure 2). None of them was born in Istanbul, Ankara, or İzmir, the urban cultural centers where the typical modernizing elites are born and educated. Differently, born to Anatolian villages and towns, the rationalists grew up under the heavy influence of a religious and traditional lifestyle. What Carol Delaney wrote on daily life in an Anatolian village is informative in this vein, and could also be seen as a reference point even for towns: “There is no escape, it [*Islam*] is the very context in which daily life unfolds.”<sup>106</sup> Poverty and underdevelopment should be highlighted as a second factor: the youngest of the nine, Azimli, was born in 1968, so we should imagine towns and villages in pre-1970 Turkey, where economic conditions and infrastructure were grimly below any respectable social standard. Basic infrastructural services in villages, such as water and electricity, were not even part of government agendas before 1967.<sup>107</sup> In 1964, only 250 villages, only 0.7 percent of all villages across Turkey, had electricity. In 1977, 7,462 villages had electricity, which was still only 20.6 percent of all villages. Even in 1980, only 50 percent of the villages had electricity.<sup>108</sup> As one would expect, villages and most towns had no access to the outer world via radio or television. Therefore, the social and economic setting in which the rationalists happened to be born can be summed up with several major characteristics: They were underdeveloped locations with very limited connection to the outer world, and they were closed societies where traditional values prevailed.

Öztürk, who was socialized in that Anatolian setting, provided us with a lifelike description of his case: Born into a poor family surviving in a village house with

	Western			Anatolian		
	City	Town	Village	City	Town	Village
Hüseyin Atay						•
Yaşar Nuri Öztürk					•	
Hayri Kırbaçoğlu				•		
İlhami Güler					•	
İhsan Eliaçık				•		
Ömer Özsoy					•	
Mustafa Öztürk						•
İsrafil Balcı					•	
Mehmet Azimli						•

**Figure 2** The birthplaces of the rationalists.