

A Turkish Intellectual Challenging Traditional Islam And Its Power - Human Rights and Equality in Early Ottoman Empire

Introduction

In the current discussion on reforming Islam, many critics often argue that, unlike Christianity and Judaism, the Islam did not go through an enlightenment. The religious and civil authority was always in one hand, therefore a clear division between individual believes and civil, non-religious norms was never realized. In contrary, religion was mostly part or at least a supporting element for the ruling.

Looking into the history, a more diverse picture can be found. In many regions of the Islamic world, intellectuals and religious authorities tried to interpret the Quran suitable for the time they lived in. They acknowledged, like thinkers of other religions, that the principal guidelines of the holy scripts must not be read in a text-based interpretation but in a way that takes reference to the current time the reader lives in.

One good example, in its historic context, is the life and opus of a Turkish-Balkan intellectual, forgotten in the West. This essay is trying to describe the thoughts of Bedreddin Mahmud Bin Israil, his revolutionary ideas, his deep humanity, probably comparable with one of the fathers of principle human rights values, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), his denial of Muslim superiority.

An Empire rising

The ruler had ordered the hanged man to be hung on the spot. For a day and night the naked body of Sheikh Bedreddin dangled from a tree in the market square of the Greek-Macedonian town of Serres. But already at dawn, on the second day after the execution of the highly respected scholar, so the legend goes, three of his followers dared to detach the body of their sheikh, to take it away and to bury it in a secret place.

The man who was hanging from a branch exactly 600 years ago today, Bedreddin Mahmud Bin Israil, was born around six decades earlier, probably in 1358, in Simavna, a fortified village near Adrianople, today's Edirne in Thrace, the European part of Turkey. Bedreddin's father was a kadi (judge) and fortress commander of the

town recently conquered by the Ottomans, his mother the daughter of the former Byzantine commander Simavnas, converted to Islam. At that time, the Ottoman Empire had only just begun to gain a foothold in Europe. Only four years before Bedreddin was born, the Turks had succeeded in building a permanent bridgehead on the western coast of the Dardanelles, which opened up great prospects for further conquests.

In the border regions called uç (top), all men and some women were under arms, as they were obliged, among other things, in return for tax breaks, to repel any intruders and to undertake raids in neighboring territories themselves. Bedreddin also apparently came from a family of Ghazis. In the early Ottoman period, this honorary title was allowed to be used by those men who had distinguished themselves on the fringes of the empire as fighters for the cause of God - and the expansion of the rulership.

They fought for an empire whose foundation stone had been laid a generation earlier by Osman I (1258–1326), initially as one regional prince among many. Only 25 years later, his initially rather modest territory in Anatolia had grown threefold. Orhan I (1281–1359) was ruling at the time of Bedreddin's birth. He had inherited the empire from his father - and apparently also his fortune in conquering: He had already largely ousted the Byzantines from Asia Minor and had either already cashed in or at least put in their place, conquered land on the European continent and rival Turkish principalities, so-called Beyliks tripled the Ottoman sphere of influence again.

Cultures and religions meet in Thrace

The young Bedreddin's world, which was marked by incessant border conflicts, was more multi-ethnic and multi-religious than one might expect: "On the Byzantine side, it was mainly the provincial lords who fought and alongside them the Armenians, Slavs, Franks and, increasingly, Turks," wrote linguist Mesut Keskin in an extensive study on the life and work of Bedreddin. On the Ottoman side, Christian or already Islamized Armenians and Greeks also went into battle. Marriages across denominational boundaries were not uncommon, with women generally adopting the religion of their husbands. The rulers showed how: Byzantine princes took Turkish women and Ottoman women married Greek women.

The Ottomans started out as rather insignificant regional princes, but through constant successes of conquest their empire grew to an enormous size. At the time of its greatest expansion, it stretched from the Balkans to Persia and North Africa in the south.

For Bedreddin's parents, it turned out early on that her boy was gifted with a special intelligence. In home schooling, the parents laid the foundation for his education. In addition to Arabic, Persian and the languages of the border countries, religious instruction was on the curriculum. Soon, the boy knew the Koran by heart and thus earned the honorary title Hāfiz.

At this point there was nothing to indicate that the clever boy would one day swap his sumptuous palace wardrobe for the simple robe of a dervish and allegedly sunk all his books in the Nile as a sign of his departure from the world. Instead, he said goodbye to his parents and embarked on an excellent, albeit conventional, educational career. Only years later will he return to his homeland - with his own philosophy in his luggage, forming the theoretical framework for a rebellion.

In Bursa, which had only recently become the capital of the Ottoman Empire, he deepened his studies. From there, he moved to Konya, the former capital of the Seljuks, which was considered an Anatolian center of culture and learning, even after the fall of the dynasty.

From here he soon went via Jerusalem to Cairo to al-Azhar, founded in 988, the oldest university in the Islamic world. There, he continued and perfected his extensive studies of theology and law as well as astronomy, mathematics, logic and philosophy.

Apparently, the right people in Cairo soon noticed his comprehensive education, as the Mamluk Sultan Barquq (1339-1399), who resided there, appointed him his son's tutor.

In the crisis he turns into a dervish

The decisive change in the mid-thirties finally took place in the city on the Nile. An unspecified life crisis is said to have caused the son of the judge of Simavna, the nickname Bedreddin's, to take an unusual step: He joined the Sufi order Sheikh Al-Achlātīs (around 1320-1397), who belonged to that kind of dervishes who were not

so strict about the Islamic rules. He broke with his previous life and made this known externally through the poor man's robe of the dervishes. The books, the source of his learning for years, ended up in the river.

The distinction between scholars and mystics, not only in the Orient and not only at that time, was by far not as easy as one might think. Anyone who dealt with the essence of religion was considered a sage. But this applied to the Muslim judge who interpreted the Sharia as well as to the esoteric who tried to interpret the secret meaning of individual letters and words of the Koran in order to fathom the deeper meaning of God's word.

Unlike most Christians the Bible, believing Muslims regard the Koran as an actual literal revelation from God. Sufis, who, among other things, brooded over the deeper, hidden meaning of the suras, therefore often moved outside the norms and laws of Sunni Islam, to which the Ottomans adhered. Nevertheless, their contemporaries met these "vagabond dervishes who disregard the rules of society", according to Keskin, with appreciation and admiration - and they still do so in many regions of the Muslim world today. In the Ottoman Empire, the dervishes, who had been immigrating from the Persian region for decades, enjoyed a high reputation - especially among the common people, and especially in the confessionally and ethnically mixed border countries, but also on the coasts of Asia Minor, where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived side by side.

A major work by the poet Rumi, emerged from a meeting with Bedreddin, the "Diwan-e Schams-e Tabrizi". In it he writes: "I am neither a Christian nor a Jew, not even Parse and Muslim." Rumi also worked in Konya, where Bedreddin would later study.

A single verse from the "Divan" by the great Persian Sufi mystic Maulana Jelaleddin Rumi (1207–1273) gives an impression of how far many Sufis have left the narrow boundaries of the Orthodox religion behind them: "I am neither a Christian nor a Jew, too Parse and Muslim not. "Even today, strictly religious people in the Islamic world venerate Rumi, who showed a certain affinity for Jesus in his writings and advocated tolerance, even towards "idol worshipers", whom he invited to join him. Today, one would say: liberal religious understanding of the dervishes who wandered the coastal areas of Asia Minor made it easier for the Jews and Christians living there who suddenly came under Muslim rule to find their way around the new circumstances.

Bedreddin becomes Sheikh of the Order

In Cairo, Al-Achlātī's concern about Bedreddin's health appeared to be unfounded. On the contrary. The man from Thrace gained influence among the dervishes and after the death of the founder in 1397 even succeeded him. As sheikh of the Cairo Order, however, he only worked for six months, "because then the dervishes got into an argument with him, since everyone considered themselves more worthy of the successor to Achlati," said his grandson and biographer. The sheikh cleared the field and started the long way home north.

How far he had developed his explosive philosophy at this point and how aggressively he proclaimed it is not known. Halil merely stated that his grandfather had chosen to spread the doctrine of union with God. On the way Bedreddin visited all important cities such as Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo or Konya, gave sermons and won followers.

"If every single [being] said 'I am God', that would correspond to the truth" (Sheikh Bedreddin)

In Western Anatolia, two men became his murīds (followers) who were to remain with him to the bitter end: Börklüce Mustafa and Torlak Kemal: Börklüce Mustafa possibly came from the Aegean island of Samos, so it could have been a converted Greek. The Ottoman chronicles indicate that he was very kind to Christians. He is said to have preached that any Muslim should treat the followers of Jesus with respect. The sources say that Torlak Kemal was born a Jew, converted to Islam.

At the time of Bedreddin's return to Edirne, Sultan Bayezid I (1360-1403) ruled the empire, the great-grandson of Osman, the founder of the dynasty. He had already earned the nickname Yıldırım (lightning) through a series of campaigns that were as rapid as successful. Immediately after taking office in 1389, he had subjugated some of the newly strengthened Turkish principalities. In the Battle of Nicopolis in Bulgaria in 1396, he defeated a force of Hungarian and French crusaders that had been expressly raised against the Turkish threat. When he conquered the mighty Beylik of the Karaman in southeastern Anatolia the following year, Bayezid ruled an empire that stretched from the Danube to the Kızılırmak River (the ancient Halys), from the Hungarian to the Armenian border.

A Mongolian general wrestles the Ottomans

The old Byzantine Empire, on the other hand - for centuries the region's greatest power factor - had already shrunk to the city of Constantinople and its hinterland together with a few narrow stretches of land in Greece. It only seemed a matter of time before the Sultan would also incorporate these areas.

But then Timur arrived on the scene. On July 20, 1402 Bayezid's army was defeated by the Turkomongolian force Timur Lenk (1336-1405) in the nearly 20-hour battle near Ankara. The sultan himself was taken prisoner, in which he died the following year - possibly by his own hand. The military leader from the Far East was never interested in ruling over Anatolia. He only wanted to put an end to the constant raids and conquests of the Ottomans on the border of his vast empire. Rather, it was a matter close to the heart of the almost 70-year-old Mongolian ruler to complete his warlike work and finally take China, whose vassal he still was pro forma, despite all his conquests. So he turned again to the east and left Asia Minor to its fate.

His wars earned the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I the nickname "lightning". But the sultan lost against the Mongol ruler Timur. The Ottoman Empire almost came to an end.

There, three years later, the news of the death of the great general was heard with relief. Timur died in February 1405 on the campaign against China, incidentally, before he and his troops had even reached the borders of the Ming Dynasty. Now that the Mongolian threat had been averted for the time being, the Ottomans set about rebuilding their almost crumbled empire - albeit in a rather confused manner. Four of Bayezid's sons fought for the throne in a ten-year civil war.

Bedreddin continues to climb the corporate ladder

In Edirne, where Bedreddin had settled in the meantime, Musa Çelebi conquered power in 1410, who was captured together with his father after the battle of Ankara, but had since been released again. As a sultan in the European part of the empire, he appointed Sheikh Bedreddin as Kadiasker, the highest army judge, which roughly corresponded to the post of Minister of Justice with far-reaching powers.

Three years later, Musa was overthrown and killed by his brother Mehmet, who thereby also eliminated his last rival for the throne. The new sultan, now the sole ruler of the largely restored empire, had the majority of his brother's followers executed. But he granted Bedreddin a pension for his services to the state and his reputation and banished him to the Asian part of the empire to Iznik, the ancient Nicaea, not far from the capital Bursa. There, the Sheikh devoted himself mainly to writing down his teachings. He had written several works before, including a legal one during his time as a kadiasker, in which he emphasized the need for independent courts. But now his main philosophical work "Varidat" (Insights or Inspirations) was written, in which he put his convictions on religious and social issues on paper.

The book, which gives the impression of being made up of the Sheikh's sermons, begins with a surprise: "Know and do not doubt: Paradise, the Huri, the trees, the fruits, the rivers, the torment, the purgatory, which was written in the books and going from mouth to mouth, has a different meaning than the obvious one." According to Bedreddin, heaven and hell do not exist as they are described in the Koran. Rather, everything good and beautiful in life is paradise, everything bad and ugly is hell. In general, the statements of the scriptures should not be taken literally. The world was not created in six days - and it will not end with a judgment day. The secret sayings of the divine revelations could only be understood when people were ready for them.

An explosive social force behind Bedreddin's theses

At the same time, this means that all statements in the Koran - for orthodox believers, after all, God's word - may and should be interpreted and indeed must. Bedreddin even rejected belief in the resurrection and the afterlife, the foundations of the Islamic religion. When the soul is absorbed in union with God, the body is meaningless. The one be in all, and all be in the one, that is, in God's absoluteness. Therefore all beings are basically the same. "If each and every one of them said 'I am God', that would correspond to the truth, since all beings come from God." In the light of this theology, whether someone is a Muslim, a Jew or a Christian, becomes simply meaningless.

The conclusions for society he drew from it were far more threatening. The Ottoman establishment, from the clergy to the military and civil servants to the sultan himself, could see this as an attack on their own rank and status. According to the Sheikh, all human beings are created equal from birth. Hence, it is contrary to

divine wisdom that some indulge in wealth while others suffer from hunger. This is about changing in accordance with God's will. In a society completely shattered and impoverished by Timur's campaign and the civil war that followed, such words were naturally heard. And apparently the Sheikh did not stop at theorizing, but sent messages and appeals to his followers in the provinces.

The uprising against the mighty begins

Only the Greek Johannes Dukas, who lived around 1450 as scribe for the Genoese Podestàs (governor) in what is now Foça near Izmir, wrote largely without taking sides about the events of 1416 the villages on the mountainous west coast of Asia Minor began to make subversive speeches. "He preached voluntary poverty to the Turks and taught that, apart from women, everything had to be common property, such as food, clothing, cattle and farm implements."

The "ordinary farmer" was Bedreddin's follower Börklüce Mustafa, who preached community of property on the Karaburun peninsula in the east of Izmir and quickly rallied a rebel army of up to 10,000 Muslims, Christians and Jews. At the same time, Torlak Kemal also gathered thousands of insurgents near the small town of Manisa, west of Izmir. The rebels propagated that Bedreddin was the expected Mahdi who would eliminate injustice in the world, and rose to the overthrow of the ruling order.

Apparently Mehmet I did not take any of this very seriously. Insubordinate regional princes who refused to submit to Ottoman rule were already taking up enough time. But after two punitive expeditions against the rebels failed, the empire struck back with all its power. The rebels had no chance against the sultan's concentrated military power. Those who did not die in battle were then slaughtered, Börklüce Mustafa first nailed to the cross, then quartered, and Torlak Kemal hung up.

Bedreddin himself had meanwhile fled Iznik and escaped across the Black Sea to the Balkans. There, the 62-year-old made one last attempt at rebellion himself, but was betrayed and handed over to the Sultan. He brought him to Serres' court. Curiously, the sheikh was not condemned because of his deviant beliefs, but expressly because of the rebellion against the ruler. For Bedreddin, who on December 18, 1420, after a short trial, was tied naked to a tree in the town's marketplace, this made no difference.

After his followers reburied the sheikh's remains several times, he was finally officially buried in Serres.

To this day, the sheikh has impact

Even if Bedreddin was buried, he was not forgotten. Centuries after the execution, his legal writings were regarded as standard works by even Orthodox judges. The sheikh's mystical teachings were suppressed, however, and the "varidat" remained banned until the 20th century. Large parts of Bedreddin's followers are likely to have joined the Alevism of Anatolia, influenced by Shiite Islam, and absorbed into it. In the Ottoman Empire this religious community, which rejects or disregards most of the commandments and prohibitions of the Koran that are binding for Sunnis, was persecuted and suppressed for centuries, against which it repeatedly tried to rebel in vain. Even today, Turkey's second largest religious group is discriminated against by the Sunni majority society. Their worship services are considered folkloric events at best, heretical gatherings at worst. In addition, Alevi people and institutions are often the target of attacks and even political persecution.

"You can still visit his grave in the western quarter of the town today," wrote the orientalist Franz Babinger, who in 1921 published the sheikh's first biography in German. And Nazim Hikmet (1902–1963), the founder of modern Turkish poetry, also reports on a momentous encounter with Bedreddin's followers in the Balkans. Years later, his childhood experience culminated in the "Epic of Sheikh Bedreddin" published in 1936, with which he breathed new life into the worship of the unusual mystic. For the Turkish left, the sheikh with the radical social plan will soon be seen as a kind of secular patron saint.

In the meantime even strictly religious authors have discovered it for themselves. Their efforts to co-opt the deviant dervish for their own Orthodox faith are not convincing, but they are in line with the efforts of the neo-Ottoman government to reinterpret aspects of Turkish history in their own sense.

Of course, this does not concern the sheikh, since there is no resurrection. In 1924, followers of Bedreddin, who had to leave their homeland as part of the population exchange between Turkey and Greece, took his bones with them and hid them for decades. Finally, in 1961, the Sheikh was buried in the mausoleum of Sultan Mahmud II (1785–1839) in Istanbul - for the last time?