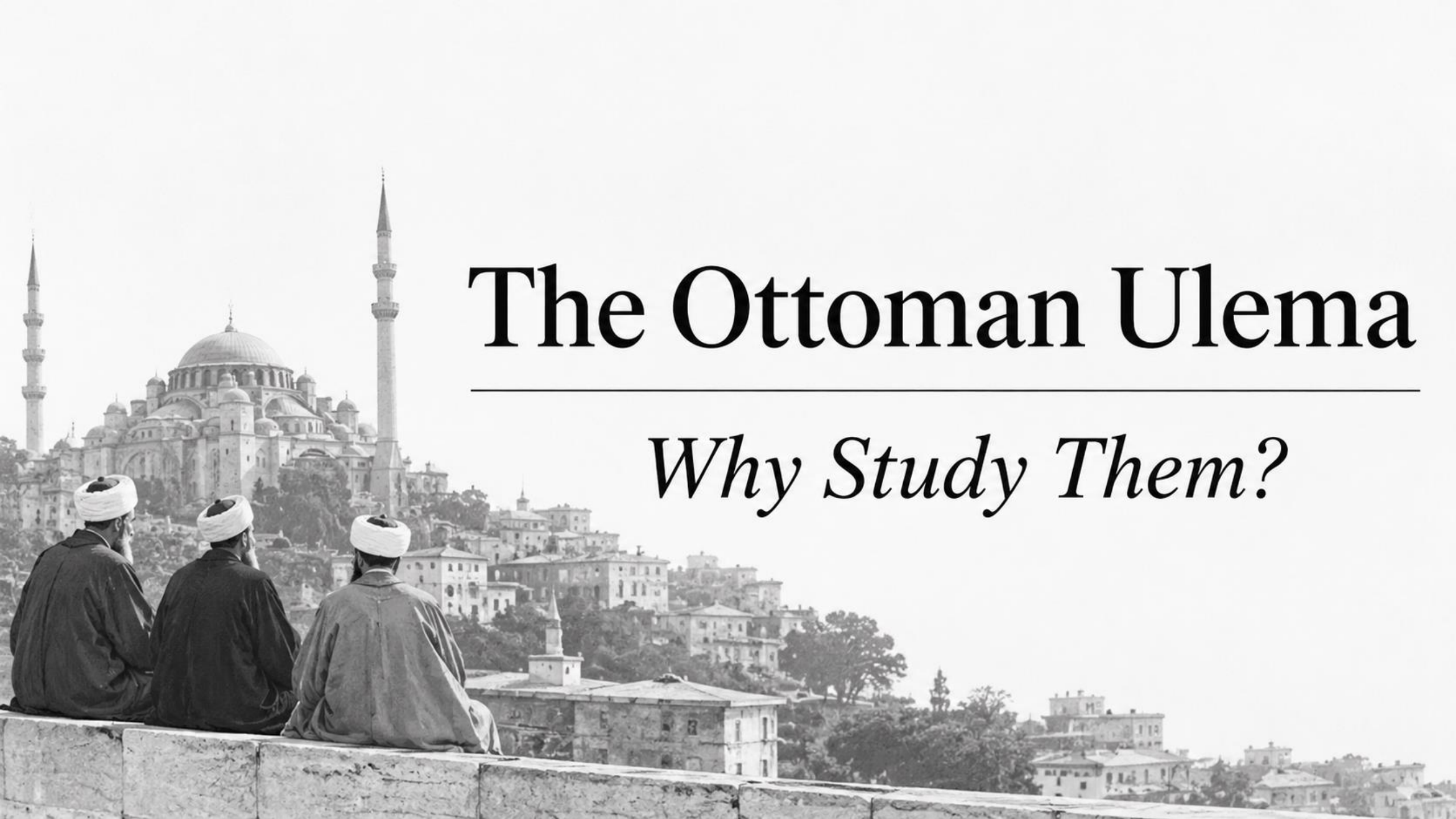


The Ottoman Ulema

Why Study Them?



The Ottoman Ulema: Guardians of Islam in an age of Transformation

Who are the Ottoman ulema?

- The Ottoman state comprised of a large landmass that included three continents. This permitted the possibility of an eclectic group of religious scholar who had various roles with the Ottoman domains.
- There were a host of ways in which one could become an alim. There was the prestigious madressa systems that then employed ulema. There were people who belonged to ulema families, there where people who trained at various religious centre in religious cities, and then there were ulema who came from the outside.
- Most often it is assumed that to be considered an Ottoman alim, one must work for the state in some capacity.
- There were also complexities of ulema who were shia such as in Iraq and other parts of the domains.

The nineteenth-century crisis: Was the Ottoman Empire abandoning Islam or trying to preserve itself?

- European imperial expansion and the military weakness of the Ottoman state.
- The intellectual and political challenges of European modernity.
- The Tanzimat reforms and their implications for Islamic law.
- The tension between administrative reform and the preservation of the Islamic character of the state.



Problems with the standard narrative

- The theory of modernization emerged in the 1950s as a way of consolidating US interests in the region. This presented the nation-states that emerged as a natural progress of the Muslim world in keeping up with the west and secularizing.
- Rather than stressing however that this was a violent imposition by the colonial powers, the narrative suggested nation agency over a colonizing Ottoman Empire.
- It suggested that secularization was a century long process.
- For the progressivist camp it is seen as a natural consequence of the secularization for the Muslim camp it is seen as a failure and so nothing can be learnt.
- The ulema and Muslim intelligentsia take most of the blame as they are seen as responsible for all of the ummahs ills. Historians such as Rodric Davidson have suggested that the Late Ottoman ulema were inherently opposed to innovation, while Niyazi Berkes has claimed that their marginalisation by the Turkish Republic was both necessary and deserved.
- Also historians are trying to problematize the idea of a homogeneous ulema.



A Networked Group

- I argue of making the case of examining the ulema within a framework of plurality with Sunni normativity.
- Ulema members belonged to various state institutions.
- They were part of Sufi tarikats - Naqshabandiyya, Qadriyya and so on.
- The emergence of the reformist Salafi movement.
- Modern technology changed a host of things for the ulema, from pedagogy, to codification, to manuscript access, to Quran printing as well as translation, which impacted the oral tradition.
- Print also created a visibility in the eyes of the researcher – text became a reflection of visibility.

Challenges from Turkish academia

- As early as 1987, David Kushner had already begun to challenge the dominant narrative surrounding the decline of the Ottoman ulema. He has noted that, contrary to conventional accounts, members of the ulema continued to occupy significant roles within the state apparatus after the Tanzimat reforms, serving in councils, educational institutions, the judiciary and various branches of civil administration. While Kushner had initially suggested that this oversight in scholarship may have stemmed from the discipline's other pressing concerns, he has later acknowledged that ideological biases – particularly those rooted in modernisation theory – have played a decisive role in marginalising the ulema from historical inquiry.
- Historians such as Abdulhamit Kırmızı, Zeynep Altunbaş, Halil Ibrahim, Mehmet Beşikçi and Erhan Bektaş have all challenged the wide held assumptions.
- And Benjamin Fortna has cautioned, however, it is important to resist the assumption that religion functioned merely as an instrumental tool in the hands of state authorities

Jan Peter Hartung

Muslim communities are equally '*communication communities*', emphasising that religious authority is not simply transmitted through fixed hierarchies or inherited positions, but continually constructed, negotiated and re-defined through discourse.

Jan-Peter Hartung, 'Who Speaks of What Caliphate? The Indian Khilāfat Movement and Its Aftermath', in *Demystifying the Caliphate: Advocates, Opponents and Implications for Europe*, ed. Madawi Al Rasheed, Carool Kerstin and Metin Shterin (Hurst, Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 81–85.

Meta-Institution

- This brings me to my final point: the ulema in the Ottoman Empire should be understood as a meta-institution, as highlighted above. A meta-institution is an entity that regulates and influences other institutions within a broader structure. While the ulema were traditionally associated with legal adjudication, issuing *fetva*s and organising education through the *şeyhü'l-islam*'s office, their influence extended far beyond these functions. They were not merely confined to these roles; rather, they served as an overarching and dominant force within the Ottoman state and society, acting as integrators of both institutional and social spheres. Through the framework of their various roles, relations and institutions, it is clear that the ulema formed a complex and institutionally networked group. However, it is their personal relationships, societal status and functional roles that set them apart from any other group in the empire. No other institution mirrored the ulema's profound integration with the fabric of Ottoman governance and culture.



Did the Collapse of the Ottoman Empire Prove the Failure of the Ulema?

- A historiographical problem:
- Does the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire provide sufficient grounds for judging the intellectual and institutional performance of the ulema?
- Five considerations:
- Retrospective judgement: Avoid interpreting the entire nineteenth century through the eventual outcome of 1922.
- Historical responsibility: Distinguish the responsibilities of the ulema from those of the wider Ottoman political and administrative establishment.
- Intellectual distinction: Do not confuse the collapse of a political state with the failure of Islamic intellectual traditions.
- Historical agency: Examine the ulema's actual participation in constitutionalism, reform and political debate.
- Historical continuity: Recognise that the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire did not bring an end to Islamic scholarly and intellectual life.
- Central question
- Can the political collapse of an empire be taken as proof of the intellectual failure of its religious scholars?

