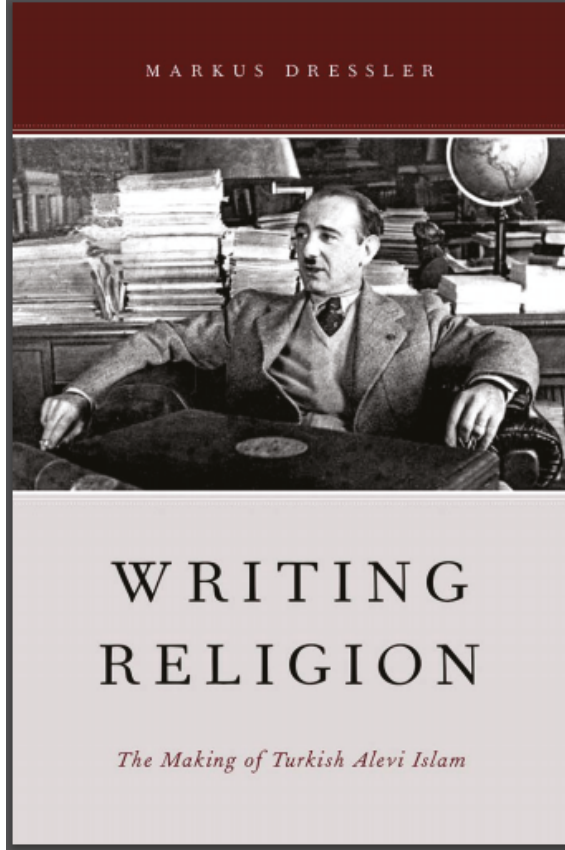

Tanıtınlar

Book Reviews / Buchvorstellung

Markus Dressler (2013). *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, xviii + 323 pages,

Hiroki WAKAMATSU*



The author was an assistant professor of the Department of Religious Studies at Bayreuth University in Germany when the book was published in 2013. Now he is an associate professor at Leipzig University. He firstly encountered Alevism when he was a M. A. course student on “Religions in Contemporary Turkey” in the winter semester 1994/1995. Since then, he has concentrated on the Alevism in Turkey from

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the point of view of Religious Studies. He has published three monographs and a lot of articles concerning Alevism in Turkey. This book is the one of his most representative works.

Firstly the author demonstrates specific analytic terms like “Kızılbaş”, “Alevi”, “Bektaşî”, “Ghulat”, “heterodox”, “Crypto-Christians” to sort out complicated concepts of syncretic minority groups named “Kızılbaş” that have been consisted of a part of populations in Anatolia during the Ottoman period. He mentions that the relation between “Kızılbaş” groups and Islam was seen as rather equivocal nevertheless these groups were in 19 century Ottoman censuses counted as “Muslims”. At the same time he argues that the primary motivation for reconceptualization of the Kızılbaş as Alevi was definitely political. Therefore, the author’s major aim in this book is to analyze, contextualize and explain the history of the modern knowledge on the Alevis (p. 8). He concentrates on the investigation when, why, and how the terms like Alevi or Alevilik acquire the particular sets of meaning that they carry today. This book attempts to a critical analysis of making the modern concept of Alevism.

Although this kind of studies dealing with sensitive religious concepts has encountered a lot of analytical problems, the author successfully shows the process of the formation of modern understanding of “Alevism/Alevilik” with regard to crucially influence Alevi religiography. He mentions that “the term religiography refers ... to the practice of writing religion, that is, the production of data of religion... The application of such a modernist religiographic framework to Kızılbaş-Alevism had enormous implications on the academic and popular discourses established on it since the early 20th century, and also impacted on indigenous knowledge formation of Alevism.” (p. 9).

Then, most effective concern of this book is to be dealt with both popular and academic sources concerning Alevism which have been published in Turkey and abroad since 19th century. At the end of Ottoman period, the Western/Orientalist discovered the Alevi/Kızılbaş. They had a lot of discussions concerning “who they are”. The author is able to overview the situation dealing with these sources. At the same time, he demonstrates the diversity of Alevi/Kızılbaş concept in the nation building process which tries to integrate them into the Turkish nation-state in the context of the conceptual and theoretical contestations.

The chapters are divided in to two parts. Part I titled “Missionaries, Nationalists, and the Kızılbaş-Alevi” tries to grasp the origin of the modern concept of Alevism within the context of the process of Turkish nation-state. In chapter 1, he deals with the primary sources written by American missionaries and other Western observers who lived and/or traveled in Anatolia since 19th century within post-Tanzimat regional and international political contexts in order to mention on the initial discovery of Kızılbaş. The chapter 2 focuses on the establishment of the theoretical and historical background that frames the subsequent chapters on the formation of Alevism in the context of Turkish nationalism. The chapter 3 is concerned with re-signification process of Kızılbaş oriented by Turkish nationalist as “Muslim Turk” under the label of “Alevi”.

Part II titled “Mehmed Fuad Köprülü (1890–1966) and the Conceptualization of Inner-Islamic Difference” focuses on the work of Mehmed Fuad Köprülü concerning Alevism in the context of the formation of Turkish academic scholarship. Through the chapters of this part, the author attempts to describe the contextualization and analyze the methodology employed by Turkish Scholarship on Alevism based on Turkish nationalism. The chapter 4 deals with Köprülü’s early historical work on the literary traditions of the Turks after the Islamization of Turkish tribes. Then the author tries to describe the evolution process of Turkish religion and Turkish Islam depended on Köprülü’s works which intend to “discover” the origin of national Turkish culture. At the same time the author analyze some kind of “religious thought” seen in Köprülü’s religiographic rationalization of “Turkish continuity” under the notion of “popular Islam”, shamanism, syncretism and heterodoxy in chapter 5. The author argues that Köprülü’s evaluation of the Kızılbaş-Alevi’s religious pedigree was more attuned to its Islamic roots, highlighting the impact of peripheral Sufi and Shiite current. At the same time the chapter 6 emphasizes that Köprülü’s contextualization of the Kızılbaş-Alevi as both Turkish and “heterodox” Islamic path-defining for scholarly as well as academic understandings of Alevism until today. This contextualization has been inherited to his direct students and later scholars like Irène Mélikoff and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak.

In conclusion, the author explains that the discursive interrogation meant institutional discrimination and assimilation into the new national public in political practice in Turkey. And at the same time, he argues that the theory of Kızılbaş-Alevi’s Turkishness and Islamic “heterodoxy” functioned as an important brick

in the formation of narratives of Turkish nation. In short, he concludes that “the modern concept of Alevism is the product of discourses of Turkish nationalism, Islam and (world) religionism. The distinctiveness of the various ocak-centered Kızılbaş-Alevi communities has largely been lost in the mill of modernist discourses and the homogenizing the machinery of the nation state” (p. 273-287).

One of the most crucial aims of the book is to demonstrate the formation process of the concept of “Alevi” within the context of nation building of the Turkish Republic. The groups labeled Alevis, Kızılbaş and Bektashis have been defined as various names under the complicated discourse. The researchers on Alevis/Alevism have tried to define these groups since Western Orientalists began to discover the “heterodox” religious groups in 19th century. The author firstly demonstrates various “Alevism(s)” included “preservers of pre-Islamic Turkish tradition”, “pre-Marxist class-fight ideology”, “Turkish Philosophy”, “secular Turkish Islam” and “part of Zoroastrian Kurdish religion” which have come out from diverse discourse on Alevism since 1980s (p. 11).

Then, the author attempts to objectify these concepts of religious affiliation in the formation of “Alevism” within the context of integration and assimilation project oriented by Turkish nationalists. His method and approach is based on religious studies describing the religiography of Alevis and Alevism. He evaluates theoretical discussions on secularism, religion and nationalism with the empirical focus on Turkey. Therefore, he examines the constructivist approach for these issues and adds critical explanations to sociological and anthropological theories which conducted by previous researchers such as Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson (p. 78-112).

He deals with Köprülü’s works to describe Alevi religiography in the formation process of “Turkish Islam” within the context of integrating the Kızılbaş groups into part of Turkish Muslim as “popular” and “heterodox” believers. However, the author doesn’t forget to compare with Ziya Gökalp as the contemporary scholar and ideologue of Turkish nationalist (p. 161-166). Moreover, the author mentions the relationship between politics and scholarship at that time (p. 166-171).

The “religiography”, the main axis of his methodology, arouses the problem of “Writing Culture” school in anthropology of 1980s. It is one of the most important capacity for anthropology to criticize itself and introspect own theories and methods.

Some anthropologists have trivialized the problems of ethnography into the problem of representation since the criticism of Orientalism began to be written in 1980s. Although the book has been written on the basis of Religious Studies, discussions expanded in all chapters are dedicated to main theme of contemporary anthropology, and indicate the direction to further studies of religion and nation building process. The book is worth reading for anthropologists, sociologists, historians and other social scientists.

