

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catharina Raudvere. *The Book and the Roses: Sufi Women, Visibility and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2003. 247 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86064-942-4.

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## Intersection between Piety and Politics

The “book and the roses” are the central features of the logo of a fascinating female group in contemporary Istanbul, the Gonenli Mehmed Efendi Ilim ve Hizmet Vakfi, or the Sire Mehmed of Gonen Foundation for Learning and Charity (“Sire Mehmed of Gonen” is my attempt to render the antique formulation of the name). The book in question is the Qur’an; the roses symbolize spirituality.

The Gonen Foundation (as I will now call it) is, in one sense, a modern example of a very old Islamic phenomenon, the Sufi order. Sufi orders appeared about a thousand years ago, and were for many centuries a central part of Muslim religious life, as well as playing important roles in politics and economics. They were especially important in Ottoman Turkey, and for this reason were one of the main targets of the secularizing and modernizing project that produced the contemporary Turkish republic. Sufi orders have been illegal in Turkey since 1925, as has almost anything to do with Sufism. Despite this, they have survived. Some continued underground, emerging only in recent years, as Turkey became more liberal, and as the law of 1925 ceased to be enforced. Some continued more openly, by dropping well-established forms and focusing instead on substance. For many years, for example, Mehmed of Gonen dressed in a business suit rather than in the (illegal) robes of a Sufi shaykh. Though an employee of the Turkish state, he spread much the same teachings as a Sufi shaykh would have spread, in much the same way. He was never described as a *vali* (saint), but some of the hairs from his beard have been preserved and are periodically vener-

ated to this day. The Gonen Foundation, then, is in part a Sufi order dressed in modern clothes. *The Book and the Roses* is thus of importance to those interested in Sufism in general and also to those interested in the relationship between religion and state in modern Turkey.

The Gonen Foundation is, in another sense, an Islamic example of a very modern phenomenon. Mehmed of Gonen, the only man connected with the Gonen Foundation, is connected with it somewhat loosely: he died in 1991, and the Foundation that bears his name was established in 1995. Otherwise, the Gonen Foundation is entirely female, making no other concession to masculinity. Such a group might be controversial anywhere in the Muslim world, and might be expected to be even more controversial in the Istanbul neighborhood where it operates, the deeply religious and conservative Fatih district. It manages, however, to position itself very “skillfully” to avoid most controversy. “Skillfully” is a word that Raudvere has a tendency to overuse, but on this point its use is entirely justified. One of the ways in which the few Islamists who object to the Gonen Foundation show their disapproval of it is by keeping their street clothes on when visiting its premises, implying that these premises are public space, where religious women should keep themselves covered. Generally, however, the Gonen Foundation has managed to define its premises as private space, as space which religious women are fully entitled to inhabit without restriction. This is something of an achievement given that the space in question includes a pastry-shop (“The Sisters’ Pastry-shop”), the sales area of which has become a variety of cafe. By re-

defining space, the Gonen Foundation has significantly broadened the worlds of many devout women in the Fatih district. The *Book and the Roses*, then, is of importance to all those interested in questions relating to private and public space and to gender in the Muslim world.

The Gonen Foundation is also an NGO, funding its charitable and educational activities through charity sales and donations, and also through businesses such as the pastry-shop. It also organizes trips, both social trips for women who might well not otherwise be able to enjoy a river boat trip in the summer, and pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia for women who might not otherwise be able to go there, and certainly would not be able to go on their own (that is, without a male chaperone, rather than in a group of women). The social and political impact of such NGOs is an important topic in its own right.

The Gonen Foundation is still more than this. As Raudevere insists, it lies at the intersection between piety and politics, despite the protestations of the members of the Foundation that it is not in any way political. That its annual anniversary celebrations used to be attended by Prime Minister Erdogan, then the somewhat radical Islamist mayor of Istanbul, surely suggests that there was something political about it. Much of the NGO aspect of the Foundation's activities is typical of grass-roots Islamist groups. Whether it likes it or not, the Gonen Foundation is a notable structure in the section of Turkish society which (as Raudevere puts it) regards itself as an Islamic diaspora, a minority exiled from the wider Muslim umma in the secular wasteland of the Kemalist state. This is a political position. An admission that the Gonen Foundation is a political organization, however, would imperil both its hard-won status as guardian and provider of private space, and also might risk the hostile attentions of the Turkish state. This dual political and devotional nature is one of the most interesting aspects of the Gonen Foundation since, as Raudevere correctly points out, "studies of groups with an Islamist orientation seldom emphasize personal belief as a driving force,

whereas studies of Sufism tend to avoid the political aspects of dervish activism" (p. 134).

Raudevere's book examines all these aspects of the Gonen Foundation and more. It is arranged into three main sections. The first deals with the political and social changes in Turkey which made it possible for a group such as the Gonen Foundation to emerge, the second deals with the Foundation itself, and the third focuses on the central ritual of the sixty or so women in the inner circle, Sufi *zikir*. The second of these three sections is the most useful, dealing with most of the points raised so far in this review. The third section is more or less self-contained, and will be of interest to those concerned with Sufi *zikir*. The first section is somewhat less satisfactory, mixing its ostensible subject matter with a review of the literature, reflections on Raudevere's fieldwork, and some data on the Gonen Foundation itself. A more systematic presentation of recent social and political change in Turkey would have been welcomed by this reader.

Raudevere demonstrates a firm grasp on all the questions she deals with in this wide-ranging book: contemporary Turkey, the Gonen Foundation itself during the period 1993-98, gender issues, Islam, and ritual studies. I would question her definition of *ijtihad* on page 94; that is all. She is evidently writing for a non-expert readership, explaining matters Islamic at some length for the benefit of those not familiar with Islam. This will make the book accessible to more general audiences, so long as they like Raudevere's somewhat discursive style, but has the disadvantage of making the book somewhat frustrating for the more informed reader. The book will, however, be welcomed by all those searching for material on genuinely Islamic feminism, and is suitable for upper-level undergraduate courses (especially those not focusing on the Middle East), as well as for graduate students and researchers. The absence of an index is a drawback, but the book is a valuable addition to our knowledge of a neglected but important area of religious, Middle East, and gender studies.

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