

17TH-CENTURY OTTOMAN SCHOLARS OF KALAM AND THEIR INTERNAL DISPUTES

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Abstract:

This article explores the development of the science of kalam (Islamic theology) during the 17th century in the Ottoman Empire. It examines disputes among scholars on certain theological issues, the emergence of deviant groups such as pseudo-Salafis and Jabriyya, and the early signs of their influence.

Keywords: Ottoman Turks, Kalam lessons, Mehmet Kadizoda, Murad IV, Khidr (a.s.).

Introduction

The pre-Islamic Arabs had a very simple and straightforward structure from the perspective of philosophical thought. Due to these characteristics, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "We are an illiterate nation; we neither write nor calculate." The Qur'an, revealed to an illiterate people, addressed them in a clear and concise style, free from philosophical debates and discussions. However, as a result of conquests, the geography of Islam expanded, and Muslims encountered complex cultural and philosophical structures. Facing Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, they felt the need to benefit from the sciences and philosophies of their time. The efforts during this period were aimed at defining the general framework of the Islamic religion and elucidating its fundamental principles.

This initiative, which began with the Mu'tazilites, was later developed by Sunni theologians such as Ash'ari, Maturidi, Baqillani, and Nasafi, who sought solutions to both external and internal theological issues through the discipline of kalam (Islamic theology). By the time of al-Ghazali, theology began incorporating all sciences, transitioning from defending religious foundations against external challenges to addressing internal conflicts. Al-Ghazali's eclectic approach, which partially encompassed theology, Sufism, and philosophy, marked the end of the earlier era of kalam and the beginning of a new period (the era of *muta'akhhirun*). His approach gave new impetus to the study of creed (*aqida*).

During the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, a strong and consistent academic foundation was also laid in military and administrative matters. One of the most prominent theological schools of the era, the Razi School, was established. In the early period, students with a certain foundational education later specialized in the scientific centers of the Islamic world, such as Samarkand, Cairo, and Baghdad, or learned from teachers who came from these cities. Scholars like Mulla Gurani, Alauddin Tusi, Sayfuddin Karimi, Alauddin Samarqandi, and Fakhruddin Asimi were among those who received such education and training.

During the Ottoman period, the exact sciences such as physics, chemistry, and mathematics also developed. This evolution continued during the reigns of Yıldırım Bayezid, Murad II, Mehmed



the Conqueror, and subsequent rulers. In particular, Mehmed the Conqueror paid special attention to philosophical disciplines, especially theology. By his order, renowned works such as *Hashiya-i Tajrid* and *Sharh al-Mawaqif* began to be studied. Lessons in kalam were taught in the most advanced specialized madrasas.

However, disputes in kalam that began in the 14th century negatively impacted Ottoman madrasas in the 16th century. From the second half of the 16th century, the growth of academic activities started to decline. The teaching of rational sciences, such as kalam and philosophy, was also relegated. Intellectuals of this period lamented the state of madrasas. For example, Lutfi Pasha authored a book titled *Asafnama*, in which he documented the contradictory actions of scholars and teachers of the time.

One of the most important intellectuals of this era, Tashkopruzade (d. 1495/1561), was educated in madrasas. Mustafa Ali (d. 1009/1600) complained about the insufficient scientific competence of scholars in his works *Nuskhatu's-Salatin* and *Kunh al-Akhbar*. Similarly, Mustafa Efendi and Hasan Kafi Akhisari (d. 1024/1615) provided similar accounts. The famous 17th-century writer Koci Bey (d. 1051/1640) described the old and new scholars in treatises presented to Murad IV and Sultan Ibrahim.

One of the intellectuals of that time, Katib Celebi (d. 1067/1657), stated: "In the early periods, scholars who combined religious sciences with philosophical perspectives produced figures such as Molla Fenari, Khojazada, Ali Qushji, and Ibn Kemal. Now, only Sharia sciences are included in the madrasa curriculum, while philosophical disciplines are no longer taught. Some of these have even been prohibited by muftis, leading to the gradual decline of this knowledge."

Due to the lack of sufficient scholarly competence, the scholars of that era were primarily occupied with copying simple books. This can be observed in the mid-16th century when the decline in the prestige of philosophical sciences negatively affected the study of theology. Indeed, even though theology lessons had been made compulsory during the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror, they began to be viewed as dangerous due to their philosophical foundation.

Among the Islamic sciences, the discipline of kalam (Islamic theology) was ranked after courses such as Tafsir, Hadith methodology, Hadith, Usul al-Fiqh (principles of jurisprudence), Fiqh, and Balagha (rhetoric). It was not taught in specialized madrasas like the Salin-i Sernan.

The 17th century was marked by sultans such as Osman II (1618–1622), Murad IV (1623–1640), Sultan Ibrahim (1640–1648), and Mehmed IV (1648–1687), as well as strong statesmen like Köprülü Mehmed Pasha, Köprülü Ahmed Pasha, Kuyucu Murad Pasha, and Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha. During this period, the Ottomans, on one hand, sought to expand their state and, on the other, lost cities such as Tabriz, Yerevan, and Baghdad. Additionally, they faced internal revolts, including the Jelali Revolts and others.

Although young sultans like Osman II and Murad IV understood the administrative challenges and sought reforms, they encountered very disappointing results.

During this period, disagreements also began to emerge in the religious sphere. The Kadizadeler movement, which arose in the first half of the 17th century, began with Mehmed Kadizade's arrival in Istanbul. After studying at the Birgivi Madrasa, Mehmed Kadizade came to Istanbul and was appointed as a preacher (vaiz) at the Ayasofya Mosque. In his sermons and discussions, Kadizade Mehmed Efendi (d. 1045/1635) openly voiced strong criticisms of Sufi orders, basing his views on the teachings of Imam Birgivi.



In his sermons, Kadızade emphasized that Khidr (a.s.) was not alive, that maqam (spiritual states), sama (ritual dance), and Mawlid Sharif were impermissible. He argued that substances that provided pleasure, such as coffee, were as forbidden (haram) as intoxicating beverages. Furthermore, he claimed that the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) parents had died as disbelievers and stressed the necessity of abandoning all forms of bid'ah (innovation in religion). On the other hand, Abdulmajid Sivasi (d. 1049/1639), the preacher of Sultan Ahmed Mosque, held views contrary to those of Mehmed Kadızade. Sivasi asserted that Khidr (a.s.) was alive, the Prophet's (peace be upon him) parents had passed away as believers, coffee was permissible (halal), and practices such as Mawlid Sharif and sama were lawful acts of worship.

These disputes continued for a long time. After Mehmed Kadızade's death, the movement was taken over by Ustuvani Mehmed Efendi (d. 1066/1655), who came to Istanbul from Damascus. Ustuvani, after forming close ties with several court officials, began exerting pressure on Abdulmajid Sivasi. Learning of these developments, Köprülü Mehmed Pasha (d. 1072/1661) arrested Ustuvani and his supporters, subsequently exiling them to Cyprus.

The above information reveals that the early manifestations of modern-day sectarianism and pseudo-Salafism, along with other bid'ah-based groups, can be traced back to the 17th century during the Ottoman Empire.

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