



Interpretation of Ahmet Ağaoğlu's Perspectives on Religion and Society from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Early Turkish Republic Period

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Son Döneminden Erken Türkiye Cumhuriyet Dönemine Doğru Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Din ve Toplum Bakış Açılarının Yorumlanması

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Abstract

Ahmet Ağaoğlu, who lived during the late Ottoman period and the early years of the Turkish Republic, was a prominent thinker recognized for his reformist, modernist, and secular approaches to social, religious, and political issues within the Turkish-Islamic world. Raised in a traditional Shia environment, Ağaoğlu viewed religion as a matter of personal conscience and a tool for social cohesion, interpreting its role in fostering societal integration. This article analyzes Ağaoğlu's views on religion and society from a sociological perspective. The study examines his perspective on religion's social function, the necessity for reform in Islam, and women's rights while emphasizing the connection between these ideas and the social structure of his time. The research employs indirect observation methods that include documentation and textual analysis. By exploring Ağaoğlu's works and other contemporary written sources, the study contextualizes his ideas within their societal framework. Ağaoğlu's emphasis on reinterpreting religion as both an individual and a socially cohesive force is highlighted; he viewed religion not as an obstacle to modernization but as a means of promoting individual and societal development. This article aims to contribute to the literature on Turkish-Islamic modernization by providing a detailed discussion of Ağaoğlu's ideas within the context of sociology.

Keywords: Sociology of Religion, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Religion, Society, Reform.

Öz

Osmanlı'nın son döneminde Cumhuriyet'in ilk yıllarında yaşayan Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Türk-İslam dünyasının sosyal, dini ve siyasal meselelerine dair reformist, modernist ve laik yaklaşımlarıyla dikkat çeken önemli bir düşündürdür. Geleneksel Şii çevrede yetişen Ağaoğlu, dini vicdana ait bir değer ve toplumsal bütünlüşme aracılığı açısından ele almış; dinin toplumsal bütünlüşme sürecindeki fonksiyonunu yorumlamıştır. Bu makale, Türk düşünce dünyasının önemli isimlerinden biri olan Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun din ve topluma dair görüşlerini sosyolojik bir perspektifle analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, Ağaoğlu'nun dinin toplumsal işlevi, İslam'daki reform gerekliliği ve kadın haklarına dair görüşlerini inceleyerek, bu fikirlerin dönemin toplumsal yapısıyla bağlantısını ortaya koymayı hedeflemektedir. Bu çalışmada, dokümantasyon ve metin tahlili içeren dolaylı gözlem yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Bu yöntemle, Ağaoğlu'nun eserleri ve dönemin diğer yazılı kaynakları incelenmiş, düşüncelerinin toplumsal bağlamı analiz edilmiştir. Ağaoğlu'nun dinin bireysel vicdan ve toplumsal bütünlüşme açısından yeniden yorumlanması gerektiği görüşü vurgulanmıştır. Din, modernleşmenin bir engeli değil, bireylerin toplumsal ve kültürel gelişimini destekleyen bir mekanizma olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, Ağaoğlu'nun fikirlerinin sosyoloji disiplini bağlamında derinlemesine tartışılmasını sağlayarak Türk-İslam modernleşme literatürüne katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Sosyolojisi, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Din, Toplum, Reform.

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Introduction

Ahmet Ağaoğlu, a prominent figure in Turkish intellectual history, was born in 1869 in the city of Shusha (Karabakh) in Azerbaijan into a family with strong intellectual roots and traditional Shia values.¹ His childhood was shaped by a deeply religious environment and the influence of the ulema class period.² He described this environment as follows: “...*Amid the smoke of hookahs and incessant debates on revelations, discussions would continue for hours about issues such as ‘Does the Imam know the unseen?’, ‘Is the Imam’s knowledge eternal?’, or ‘Did the Prophet ascend to heaven with his spirit or his’ body?’*”³ This depiction highlights the internal dynamics of the traditional religious environment that significantly influenced his intellectual development.

Often referred to as a “Turkist-Islamist,”⁴ “Pan-Turkist,”⁵ “liberal-nationalist,”⁶ or a Western-oriented intellectual, Ağaoğlu became engaged in intellectual struggles early in his career life,⁷ observing and working to address the challenges faced by Turkish-Islamic societies. His life can be divided into three phases, each with a prevailing idea. In his early years in Russia, he championed the unity and advancement of Muslims under Russian rule. After moving to Istanbul in 1909 with his family, he aligned himself with the journals *Sebilürreşad*⁸ and *İslam Mecmuası*,⁹ which aimed to awaken and elevate the Islamic world. His writings during this period focused on harmonizing Turkish and Islamic thought. However, after associating with the Committee of Union and Progress, he distanced himself from religious concepts, indicating a shift towards Turkism. This distancing from religious ideologies peaked during the Republic era, when he embraced Westernization, asserting that the salvation of Turkish-Islamic civilization lay in fully adopting European ideals of society.¹⁰

This study analyzes Ahmet Ağaoğlu’s perspectives on religion and society during the late Ottoman period and the Republic’s early years. Despite his importance in the intellectual landscape of the time, his solutions to the problems faced by Turkish-Islamic

¹ Yusuf Akçura, *Yeni Türk Devletinin Öncüleri (1928 Yılı Yazıları)* (Ankara: T.C Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2001), 200-201; Yusuf Akçura, *Türkçülük: Türkçülüğün Tarihi Gelişimi* (İstanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2012), 176-90; Hilmi Ziya Ülken, *Türkiye’de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi* (İstanbul: Ülken Yayınları, 1992), 408-12; Holly Shissler, *İki İmparatorluk Arasında: Ahmet Ağaoğlu ve Yeni Türkiye*, çev. Taciser Ulaş Belge (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2005).

² Samet Ağaoğlu, *Babamdan Hatıralar* (Ankara: Zerbamat Basımevi, 1940), 64.

³ Ağaoğlu, 65-66.

⁴ Shissler, *İki İmparatorluk Arasında: Ahmet Ağaoğlu ve Yeni Türkiye*, 120.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Second (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 349.

⁶ Süleyman Seyfi Ögün, *Modernleşme, Milliyetçilik ve Türkiye* (İstanbul: Bağlam Yayıncılık, 1995), 195-203.

⁷ Akçura, *Yeni Türk Devletinin Öncüleri (1928 Yılı Yazıları)*, 202.

⁸ Adem Efe, “Sebilürreşad”, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2009), 252.

⁹ Tuba Çavdar Karatepe, “İslâm Mecmuası”, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2001), 53.

¹⁰ Nuri Yüce, “Ağaoğlu, Ahmet”, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV, 1988), 465.

societies and his views on Islam have not been adequately addressed in academic literature. The only comprehensive work examining these topics is a master's thesis titled *Ahmet Ağaoğlu's Understanding of Religion and Society*.¹¹ Other studies emphasize his political views and historical biography, often showcasing his political affiliations rather than delving into his religious and social ideas in depth.¹² This study addresses this gap by holistically examining Ağaoğlu's perspectives on religion and society. It also seeks to explore his spiritual and social views within a sociological framework, illuminating how individual intellectual transformations reflect and are shaped by the societal dynamics of the period.

This study focuses on the sociological analysis of Ağaoğlu's perspectives on Islam, society, women, and the need for reform within Islam. The research employs indirect observation methods, including documentation and textual analysis. This methodological approach involves a two-step process: first, identifying and gathering sources, documents, and relics, and second, evaluating, interpreting, and analyzing the collected material.¹³ These steps have been adhered to throughout this study.

1. The Sociological Significance of Religion in Society

Social integration, which fosters cohesion and unity within a society or social group, involves individuals accepting and internalizing prevailing cultural values. This process ensures that individuals adopt societal and cultural values, allowing them to live harmoniously within their community.¹⁴ The significance of social integration arises from the understanding that society comprises norms, values, goals, and beliefs. These elements unite individuals, strengthen their connections, and reinforce social bonds of unity.¹⁵ Essentially, integration refers to the process through which individuals accept and internalize the norms and values of their community society.¹⁶

As one of the organizing principles of human life, religion is among the most fundamental phenomena facilitating social integration. Durkheim (1858-1917), a pioneer in social integration within sociology, examined how modern societies achieve cohesion through sacred values and symbols. According to Durkheim, religion serves as a cornerstone of social solidarity. When religions lose their influence or fail to fulfill their functions, it can lead to a weakening of societal morality and the dissolution of social

¹¹ Ayhan Çetin, "Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Din ve Toplum Anlayışı" (Yüksek Lisans, Isparta, Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2011).

¹² Fahri Sakal, *Ağaoğlu Ahmed Bey* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1999); Murat Yılmaz, "Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nda Liberalizm ve Milliyetçilik" (Yüksek Lisans, Ankara, Gazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 1991); Ahmet Aydın, "Türkiye'nin Tek Parti Döneminde Birey Devlet İlişkisi (1923-1945): Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Birey Düşüncesi" (Doktora, Malatya, İnönü Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2023).

¹³ Ünver Günay, *Din Sosyolojisi* (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2012), 80-81.

¹⁴ Günay, 311.

¹⁵ İbrahim Aşlamacı, "Din Hizmetleri ve Din Eğitimi Politikalarının Birlikte Yaşama Kültürüne Etkisi: Türkiye ve Pakistan Örneği Karşılaştırmalı Bir Değerlendirme", *Hz. Peygamber ve Birlikte Yaşama Hukuku* (İstanbul: DİB, 2016), 468.

¹⁶ Mustafa Tekin, *Din Sosyolojisi* (İstanbul: Rağbet, 2016), 195.

order bonds.¹⁷ Particularly during periods when norms and rules lose effectiveness, a state of anomie emerges—indicating weakened social cohesion amid rapid social change. In this context, Durkheim viewed anomie, which signifies a breakdown in the social ties between individuals and society, as inversely related to the sociological functions of religion.¹⁸

Durkheim emphasizes the importance of the sacred rather than the notion of God.¹⁹ He defines religion as “*A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.*”²⁰ According to him, religion serves four essential sociological functions: discipline, cohesion, revitalization, and comfort. Religious rituals prepare individuals for social life, strengthening collective bonds and promoting solidarity. These ceremonies reinvigorate group consciousness, preserve social heritage, and ensure its transmission to future generations. Additionally, religious beliefs offer moral support, preventing disillusionment and loss of faith. In this context, religion acts as a mechanism that enhances the psychological resilience of both individuals and society.²¹

Social integration is essential for the sustainability of any society. In societies where social integration cannot be achieved, issues such as polarization, discrimination, and violence may escalate and become normalized.²² In modern societies, while the individual’s reliance on scientific and rational methods can promote societal progress, it may also lead individuals to see themselves as superior to society. Durkheim acknowledges the positive aspects of this development but warns that when individuals lose their altruistic and cooperative instincts, social disintegration becomes inevitable. This disintegration manifests as rising rates of suicide and divorce and intensifying class conflicts—realities observable in modern society.²³

Establishment and deep-rooted religion create a fusion of societal existence with shared beliefs, norms, and behavioral patterns. In this context, religion fosters a social

¹⁷ Jonathan H. Turner, Leonard Beeghley, ve Charles H. Powers, *Sosyolojik Teorinin Oluşumu*, çev. Ümit Tatlıcan (Sentez Yayınları, 2013), 375.

¹⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, çev. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 26.

¹⁹ Durkheim, 33-39.

²⁰ Durkheim, 44.

²¹ Lewis A. Coser, *Sosyolojik Düşüncenin Ustaları & Tarihsel ve Toplumsal Bağlamlarında Fikirler* (Ankara: De ki Basım Yayım Ltd. Şti, 2010), 136.

²² Hüseyin Yılmaz, “Sosyal Bütünleşmemizin Temel Sorunları ve Bazı Çözüm Önerileri”, *C.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* XIV, sy 2 (2010): 75.

²³ Cevat Özyurt, “Durkheim Sosyolojisinde Toplumsal Bütünleşme Aracı Olarak Din”, *Sosyal Teoride Din*, ed. Cevat Özyurt, Abdülkadir Zorlu ve İbrahim Mazman (İstanbul: Hece, 2015), 175.

environment where peace, unity, and solidarity thrive. Religion becomes the primary guarantee of social integration when properly understood and practiced.²⁴

2. Ahmet Ağaoğlu's Understanding of Religion

Religion, as one of the fundamental pillars of society, has been a central topic of discussion since the emergence of the field of sociology. Questions regarding the nature of religion, its functions within the social structure, its relationship with society, and how this relationship should be organized have been of significant interest to sociologists. From Auguste Comte (1798-1857) to Karl Marx (1818-1883), Emile Durkheim to Anthony Giddens (1938-), numerous sociologists have examined the social functions of religion and the relationship between religion and society from various perspectives. Similarly, in the history of Turkish thought and sociology, nearly all intellectuals have participated in discussions on the meaning and function of religion as a social phenomenon institution.²⁵ Among the thinkers who explored religion as a societal institution and its relationship with society was Ahmet Ağaoğlu.

According to a report prepared by British intelligence in Istanbul in 1919, Ağaoğlu was described as a “Jewish-origin Tatar” who had joined an organization called ‘Oh-rana’ during his youth. On the one hand, he faced accusations from the British regarding his involvement in the 1904 Armenian incidents; on the other, his Pan-Islamist rhetoric drew scrutiny from the Russian government. In 1909, Ağaoğlu relocated to Istanbul with his family and became an Ottoman citizen due to his contributions to Islam. He also worked as a journalist for the pro-German Zionist publication *Leune Turc*. As a prominent Committee of Union and Progress member, he received support from the Germans during World War I.²⁶ His complex and somewhat controversial political profile made him unpopular with the British.

Ağaoğlu lived during intense political and social transformations, witnessing empires' collapse and nation-states' rise. He drew from both Eastern and Western cultural heritages, receiving education in traditional institutions of Azerbaijan as well as in European-style schools. Engaged with intellectual currents such as Islamism, Ottomanism, Turkism, and Westernism, he actively participated in debates among thinkers associated with the movements of Islamism and Turkism. This intellectual background and historical context significantly influenced Ağaoğlu's thoughts on religion, society, and religious belief institutions.²⁷

²⁴ Ünver Günay, “Toplumsal Bütünleşme ve Din”, *Din Sosyolojisi El Kitabı*, ed. İhsan Çapcıoğlu ve Niyazi Akyüz (Ankara: Grafiker Yayınları, 2012), 458.

²⁵ Kemaleddin Taş, “Dinin Sosyolojik Tanımı Problemi Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme”, *Dini Araştırmalar* 6, sy 16 (2003).

²⁶ Bilal N. Şimşir, *Malta Sürgünleri* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1985), 267.

²⁷ Ali Asker, “Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Hayatı ve Düşünceleri”, *Yavuz Akpınar Armağanı*, ed. Nazım Muradov ve Yılmaz Özkaya (Ankara: Bengü, 2018), 135-48.

Ağaoğlu is mainly known for his work, *Three Civilizations*. He wrote it during his exile in Malta, and it was later serialized in the nationalist journal *Türk Yurdu*.²⁸ This work presents Ağaoğlu's understanding of religion and his assertion of the superiority of Western civilization, which aimed to serve Turkish interests' identity.²⁹ In this book, Ağaoğlu identifies three distinct civilizations: "Islamic," "Buddhist-Brahman," and "Western." He argues that the Islamic and Buddhist-Brahman civilizations are static compared to the dynamic nature of Western civilization. According to Ağaoğlu, *Three Civilizations* "was written in Malta between 1919 and 1920 and serialized in *Türk Yurdu* upon my return to the homeland. The book asserts that Western civilization has triumphed over the others of the three civilizations coexisting. Therefore, our salvation lies in fully embracing this civilization."³⁰ According to Cemil Meriç,³¹ this book, which he refers to as "the epic of the enemy civilization," portrays "Frenk Ahmet" as advocating for Western civilization as the only alternative and the way to salvation.³² Ağaoğlu observes that Western societies have gradually shifted from authoritarian regimes to more liberal systems emphasizing individual freedoms. This shift has been aided by acknowledging individual rights, commitment to the rule of law, and cultivating democratic values.

In contrast, he points out that Eastern societies have become increasingly entrenched in authoritarian and oppressive governance, which limits individual freedoms and suppresses personal initiative and entrepreneurial spirit. He argues that such repressive systems undermine individual confidence, creativity, and social dynamism.³³ Ağaoğlu strongly criticizes individuals associated with Islamic civilizations, comparing them to parasites that thrive on humanity's progress. For him, the solution involves becoming an essential part of humanity and contributing to society.³⁴

Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the subsequent reform movements, Ağaoğlu believed that Turkey had integrated into Western civilization. He supported Atatürk's reforms³⁵ and viewed the Kemalist Revolution as the Eastern equivalent of the liberal French Revolution.³⁶ One of the distinguishing features of Ağaoğlu's thought is his understanding of religion. He had a modern perspective on religion, viewing it as a function of consciousness and emotion. He believed religion plays a vital role in shaping individuals' and societies' mentalities, perspectives, feelings, and hearts. It

²⁸ Hüseyin Tuncer, "Türk Yurdu", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2012), 550.

²⁹ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet* (İstanbul: Doğu Kitabevi, 2013), 13.

³⁰ Ağaoğlu, 13.

³¹ Cemil Meriç, *Bu Ülke* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), 160.

³² Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 19-29.

³³ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, *Devlet ve Fert* (İstanbul: Sanayiinefise Matbaası, 1933), 27.

³⁴ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, *Serbest İnsanlar Ülkesinde* (İstanbul: Sanayiinefise Matbaası, 1930), 74.

³⁵ Semyon İvanoviç Aralov, *Bir Sovyet Diplomatının Türkiye Anıları* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019), 164.

³⁶ H. Ozan Özavcı, *Intellectual Origins of the Republic: Ahmet Ağaoğlu and the Genealogy of Liberalism in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 24.

is an essential element in forming and solidifying civilizations and cultures.³⁷ For Ağaoğlu, religion establishes a social bond among individuals through shared beliefs and rituals. Communal ceremonies and rites reinforce this bond, fostering emotional unity and common goals among community members. This sense of belonging allows individuals to see themselves as part of a collective.³⁸ As a foundational element of national identity, religion significantly influences language, tradition, and thought. However, this influence is not considered an independent category but a reflection or complementary aspect of nationality. In this context, religion is an organic part of nationality and a functional tool for constructing cultural identity.³⁹

Samet Ağaoğlu (1909-1982), Ağaoğlu's son, further elaborates on his father's approach to religion: *"My father saw religion as one of the factors that shape people into a nation. He did not want individuals to be deprived of this sentiment. I don't believe he arrived at the concept of God through traditional religious ideas. In the days leading up to his death, he certainly perceived his fate as a phenomenon linked not to religion but to an unavoidable event."*⁴⁰

According to Georgeon, Ağaoğlu, influenced by his Azerbaijani heritage and cultural connections to Iran, sustained a lifelong interest in Iran. Shia Islam significantly shaped his perception of religion and identity.⁴¹ Ağaoğlu's religious views embody elements of the Shia tradition. He viewed Shia Islam as a progressive belief system, contrasting it with what he saw as the "dogmatic" and "absolutist" nature of Sunni Islam. According to Ağaoğlu, Sunni Islam creates a significant separation between humanity and God, while Shia Islam bridges this divide through "three intermediaries": the Mahdi, Imams, and Mujtahids. He argued that these religious institutions diminish the distance between individuals and the divine. Ağaoğlu highly regarded Mujtahids, considering them the "finest institution" within the Shia tradition. He respected their role in interpreting the Quran from a "liberal perspective," adapting Islam to the "ever-changing conditions of life." In this way, Mujtahids played a crucial role in aligning religious doctrines with contemporary societal realities. For Ağaoğlu, religion must evolve with time and place and be shaped to fit modern circumstances.⁴²

In this context, Ağaoğlu posed questions such as, *"What is religion?"*, *"Do legal matters fall within the scope of religion?"* and *"What distinguishes Islam from other religions?"* According to him, religion is merely a system of principles that governs the relationship between humans and God. Its subject matter is confined solely to faith and worship. The distinguishing feature of Islam, which forms its essence and unites

³⁷ Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 21.

³⁸ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, *İhtilal mi İnkılap mı* (Ankara: Alaadin Kırıl Basımevi, 1942), 47.

³⁹ Ufuk Özcan, "İmparatorluktan Cumhuriyete Kimlik Değişimi: Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Hayatı, Dönemi ve Düşünceleri" (Doktora, İstanbul, İstanbul Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 1996), 87-88.

⁴⁰ Ağaoğlu, *Babamdan Hatıralar*, 30.

⁴¹ François Georgeon, *Osmanlı-Türk Modernleşmesi 1900-1930* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006), 133.

⁴² Georgeon, 111.

Muslims, lies in its emphasis on faith and worship. Beyond this, elements such as law, economics, and politics mentioned within religion are incidental additions or referred to only in passing. Institutions and practices like law and politics, which constitute the material aspects of social life, do not belong to the essence of religion.⁴³ Ağaoğlu argued that what distinguishes Islam from other religions is its commitment to refrain from interfering in law and politics, limiting itself exclusively to faith and worship. He stated, *“The unique aspect of Islam is its emphasis on monotheism and acts of worship that govern the relationship between the Creator and humanity. In this regard, Islam sets itself apart from all other religions and nations, with all Islamic sects concurring on these points.”*⁴⁴

Ağaoğlu consistently emphasized that Islam is rooted in faith, worship, and morality. He argued that the essence of Islam is immutable and eternal: belief, worship, and morality. The elements of Islam related to worldly affairs are secondary and were included incidentally. Ağaoğlu contended that if the Prophet Muhammad had died before the Hijra, only the components of Islam concerning faith, worship, and morality would have endured today, without any commandments related to worldly matters. Such verses were revealed later, incidentally, during the Prophet’s time in Medina when he had to organize the material aspects of life as needs arose. Nevertheless, the fundamental principles of monotheism and the accompanying moral teachings have remained unchanged.⁴⁵

Ağaoğlu justified his vision of Islam through Quranic verses, hadiths, and Islamic history. Despite the evolving nature of legal rulings over time, the consistency of moral, worship-related, and faith-based principles, the fact that verses regulating daily life were revealed after the Prophet migrated to Medina, the Prophet’s sayings such as ‘You know better about your worldly affairs’ and ‘If there is doubt in a command, resolve it with your reasoning’; the Islamic scholars’ principle of ‘If a revealed text contradicts tradition, tradition takes precedence’; and the established rule in Islamic societies that legal rulings change with the times—all demonstrate that faith, worship, and morality are the true essence of Islam.⁴⁶

Additionally, the Islamic science of *Asbab al-Nuzul* (the reasons for the revelation of verses or chapters) illustrates the transient nature of legal rulings. According to Ağaoğlu, the sections of the Quran concerning worldly affairs are the products of material changes. A glance at any work on *Asbab al-Nuzul* is sufficient to understand this. All the verses relating to worldly matters addressed specific needs arising from material circumstances. The evolving nature of law necessitated even the revelation of legal

⁴³ Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 40.

⁴⁴ Ağaoğlu, 40-41.

⁴⁵ Ağaoğlu, 41.

⁴⁶ Ağaoğlu, 46-47.

verses.⁴⁷ Since law arises from human relationships and is subject to change, the principles governing these relationships must adapt as life conditions evolve.⁴⁸

Ağaoğlu argued for interpreting religion in a way open to innovation, emphasizing that hindering social development and change harms individuals and society. He stressed the necessity of dynamically interpreting religious understanding to match changing times and circumstances. While the principle that “*rulings change as times change*” is acknowledged in Muslim societies, it has frequently been overlooked for various reasons: at times, innovation was resisted under the guise of religious justification, and at other times, it was outright blocked in the name of religion. Even customs, rather than canonical texts, were granted religious status, thereby suppressing individual thought and action and communities' material and moral progress. Those who viewed themselves as representatives of religion claimed authority in every area of life—scientific, political, social, financial, and educational.⁴⁹ These self-proclaimed religious representatives aimed to stop life and the process of change, reducing people to lifeless molds. Religious rhetoric served as a barrier to societal transformation. According to Ağaoğlu, those who see themselves as religious representatives must reinterpret religious values in light of time and ensure that religion evolves alongside contemporary realities.⁵⁰

In another article, Ağaoğlu discussed the role of religion and the transformations it has undergone: In primitive societies, religion was essential for educating individuals and uniting them around common emotions and ideas. However, alternative means have emerged in modern societies to serve this purpose. Furthermore, in recent years, religion has lost its inherent purity and beauty. It has been tainted by ignorant, sycophantic, and hypocritical individuals, becoming a tool used to depict despotism as a divine blessing.⁵¹

Ağaoğlu argued that Islam does not obstruct innovations or reforms related to women's rights, emphasizing that the primary issue lies in the will of governance. In this context, he stated that religious scholars (ulema) and leaders (sheiks) interpret Islam in ways that are incompatible with modernization to serve their interests. Ağaoğlu supported this view by citing the reforms implemented by Mehmet Ali Pasha in Egypt. He pointed out how Pasha forced religious scholars and leaders to sign the Reform Edict (Islahat Fermanı) under threat of death, viewing their resistance as evidence of opposition to reform.⁵²

Another aspect of Ağaoğlu's understanding of religion is his distinction between spiritual and worldly matters. He argued that religion should maintain a secular character and avoid intervening in earthly affairs. According to Ağaoğlu, the success of

⁴⁷ Ağaoğlu, 36.

⁴⁸ Ağaoğlu, 36.

⁴⁹ Ağaoğlu, 36-37.

⁵⁰ Ağaoğlu, *İhtilal mi İnkılap mı*, 46.

⁵¹ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, “Edebiyat Münakaşaları”, *Cumhuriyet*, Teşrinisani 1934.

⁵² Ahmet Ağaoğlu, *İslamiyette Kadın*, çev. Hasan Ali Ediz (Ankara: Birey ve Toplum Yayıncılık, 1985), 60.

Turkey's transformation depended on religious figures staying out of politics.⁵³ He believed that religion should remain a matter of conscience, avoid interference in material life, and abstain from involvement in political or social spheres. He argued that a religious understanding aiming to dominate every aspect of material and spiritual life is a remnant of the Middle Ages. In Ağaoğlu's view, the Islamic world still lives according to the codes of the medieval period. He stated, "*Regarding our religious mindset and comprehension, we have not advanced beyond the Middle Ages. We view religion not only as a command of conscience or a spiritual connection that governs the relationship between the Creator and individuals but also as a framework of principles that directs every aspect of our material and spiritual lives. Religion is with us from the cradle to the grave, fulfilling our spiritual needs while also seeking to regulate every element of our material existence—from our clothing and furnishings to our educational institutions and our social and political frameworks.*"⁵⁴ Additionally, he explored various aspects of Islamic history from a secular viewpoint.⁵⁵

After moving from Azerbaijan to Istanbul, Ağaoğlu engaged in discussions on Turkism and Islamism, sharing his perspectives on the decline and revival of the Islamic world through various platforms. He contributed articles to *İslam Mecmuası*, a journal that featured influential figures such as Ziya Gökalp (1874-1924), Mehmet Fuat Köprülü (1890-1966), Shaykh al-Islam Musa Kazım (1858-1920), and Bursalı Mehmet Tahir (1861-1925). In his writings, Ağaoğlu attributed the decline of the Islamic world to the behaviors and actions of three main groups: religious scholars (ulema), the ruling elite (ümera), and intellectuals (kalem sahipleri). According to him, societal progress depends on the efforts of this leading class; when they effectively fulfill their duties, society advances; otherwise, decline becomes inevitable. This leading class played a progressive role from the Golden Age of Islam (Asr-ı Saadet) to the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate. Leaders governed with merit, while religious scholars and intellectuals freely discussed science, technology, morality, and social issues, leading to societal progress. During this period, law, natural sciences, and mathematics advancements occurred. However, as corruption began to take hold at the leadership level, the leading class failed to meet its mission, resulting in societal decline. Ağaoğlu believed that societal progress hinges on the leading classes fulfilling their responsibilities and that governance is based on merit. He argued that the decline and fall of the Islamic world can be traced back to this process.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, while assessing the reasons for the decline of Islamic societies compared to Western civilization over the past two centuries,

⁵³ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, "Necat Kendi Elimizdedir", *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, Safer 1331.

⁵⁴ Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 29.

⁵⁵ Özcan, "İmparatorluktan Cumhuriyete Kimlik Değişimi: Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Hayatı, Dönemi ve Düşünceleri", 88.

⁵⁶ Ahmad Agayef, "İslâm Âleminde Görülen İnhitatin Sebepleri", *İslam Mecmuası* 1, sy 2 (Rebiülevvel 1332): 57-58.

Ağaoğlu emphasized not the erosion or corruption of spiritual values but rather the West's acquisition of materially and morally superior tools of civilization.⁵⁷

One of Ağaoğlu's notable traits was his advocacy for reform within Islam. His ideas on religious reform are particularly evident in his work, *Three Civilizations*. During the Republican era, Ağaoğlu became a reformist intellectual who fervently supported religious changes.⁵⁸ He argued for total human freedom in worldly affairs: "*In worldly matters, we are free to act as we wish. We can shape our material lives as we see fit while considering the common good.*"⁵⁹ Ağaoğlu believed Islam does not hinder innovation or reforms related to women's rights and that renewal and reform rely on the leadership's will. He expressed this view: "*Neither the Quran nor Shariah opposes innovation. However, their proponents—the ulema and the sheiks—have tried to present Islam as incompatible with civilization, motivated by their interests.*"⁶⁰

Ağaoğlu emphasizes the need for reform in the religious sphere, evident in his relationship between religion and nationalism and his approach to women's issues. In his work *Women in Islam (İslamlıkta Kadın)*, Ağaoğlu situates Islam's perspective on women's rights within a historical context and presents a critical proposal for Islamic societies undergoing modernization. He contends that women's rights are essential for the development of Islamic institutions and that neglecting these rights leads to historical and social regression. According to Ağaoğlu, strengthening women's social status is not merely a matter of rights but also vital for reconstructing society.⁶¹ In his analysis of the relationship between religion and nationalism, Ağaoğlu argues that nationalism does not cause estrangement from religion. He states, "*Religion is one of the most important principles and foundations of nationality; therefore, for those who understand and consciously pursue the nationalist movement, it is impossible to become estranged from religion.*"⁶²

Since the Second Constitutional Era (II. Meşrutiyet), the role of women in Islam has been a key topic for Muslim intellectuals. Nearly all thinkers who reference Western modernization have grounded Turkish modernization in the status of women.⁶³ The issue of women in Islam, or the status of women, was a key topic on Ağaoğlu's agenda and was viewed as one of the keys to the progress of the Islamic world. According to Ağaoğlu: "*The salvation of Muslims, both their spiritual and political advancement, hinges entirely on resolving two critical issues: the status of women and the reform of their alphabet. Only when today's Muslim woman becomes a free and aware mother*

⁵⁷ Özcan, "İmparatorluktan Cumhuriyete Kimlik Değişimi: Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Hayatı, Dönemi ve Düşünceleri", 86.

⁵⁸ Yüce, "Ağaoğlu, Ahmet", 465; Muhit Mert, "Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Geçiş Sürecinde Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Dinî Düşünceleri", *Hitit Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 5, sy 10 (30 Aralık 2006): 22.

⁵⁹ Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 42.

⁶⁰ Ağaoğlu, *İslamiyette Kadın*, 60.

⁶¹ Ağaoğlu, *İslamiyette Kadın*.

⁶² Ahmed Agayef, "İslâm'da Dâvâ-yı Milliyet", *Türk Yurdu* 6, sy 10 (70) (Temmuz 1330): 306.

⁶³ Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem Medeniyet ve Örtünme* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1992), 15-20.

and wife can she truly recognize and fulfill her social responsibilities. Under such conditions, she will be able to shape her children's character and willpower and instill noble sentiments and elevated ideas in them. Within the current framework, the children of Muslim women are merely meaningless existences... The stifling atmosphere of the harem, where a lazy and purely animalistic life is led, also hinders the physical development of women, leading to the physical degeneration of the race. The difficulty of the alphabet, on the other hand, makes literacy a challenge, closing the path to enlightening the minds and hearts of Muslims. Women and the alphabet are, in fact, the two most genuine enemies of the Islamic world, it's two untreated ailments that, under their influence, this world is slowly perishing. Only recently have Muslims begun to consider these two issues seriously. However, efforts in this regard, such as opening schools for boys and girls alike and attempting to reform the alphabet in places like Istanbul, Cairo, Bombay, and Calcutta, cannot yet be considered sufficient."⁶⁴

During his time in France, Ağaoğlu summarized the issues facing Muslim societies: *"If things continue as they are today, it is clear that the Muslim world is doomed to political extinction, and the meaning of political extinction is well understood—examples of Muslim countries that have lost their independence stand before our eyes. We cannot fight Krupp's cannons with our dervishes: something else is needed, and that something is individuals with the spiritual strength to dedicate themselves to noble ideals and defend them materially. However, the condition of women within Muslim families strips individuals of all initiative and personal energy, effectively stifling them. For the individual to be revitalized, our women must fully enjoy the rights granted to them by our religion.*"⁶⁵

Ağaoğlu emphasized that Islam brought about a revolutionary transformation in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly highlighting the rights granted to women. He noted, *"Muhammad granted them such extensive rights that even today, some countries like France have yet to find the courage to acknowledge them. According to the principles in the Qur'an, daughters were entitled to inherit from their parents, and girls, upon reaching maturity, were free to marry whom they chose.*"⁶⁶

When addressing the injustices faced by women in the Islamic world, Ağaoğlu attributed the underlying causes to the influence of Iran and a departure from the true essence of Islam. He argued that during the Abbasid period, the Persian-origin Barmakids wielded substantial influence over the caliphate, serving as favorites and viziers for multiple generations. Ağaoğlu maintained that Muslim women can effectively fulfill their duties only when they are free and conscious individuals. In such circumstances, women could instill strong character and willpower in their children. According to Ağaoğlu, the harem culture significantly contributed to racial degeneration by hindering women's development and confining them to a passive existence. He traced the

⁶⁴ Akçura, *Yeni Türk Devletinin Öncüleri (1928 Yılı Yazıları)*, 220-21.

⁶⁵ Georgeon, *Osmanlı-Türk Modernleşmesi 1900-1930*, 109-10.

⁶⁶ Ağaoğlu, *İslamiyette Kadın*, 16-28.

origins of harem culture to Syrian and Iranian influences and censured it. He pointed out that this system had cast a shadow over family life among the upper classes of Muslim societies and weakened movements advocating for women's emancipation. Ağaoğlu argued that this corrupt system led to societal and moral decline, physically and spiritually damaging women.⁶⁷

In contrast, the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad valued women. To demonstrate that women were respected during the early Islamic period, Ağaoğlu referenced the Surah an-Nisa of the Qur'an: "*O mankind! Fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women.*"⁶⁸ During his time in Russia, Ağaoğlu took a conservative and defensive position on women's issues in his book *Women in Islam*, written in Russian. However, after relocating to Istanbul, his viewpoint changed, becoming more critical in the 'Family' chapter of his book *Three Civilizations*.⁶⁹

Ağaoğlu argued that modernization had weakened religion and diminished its influence. He believed that one significant reason for this decline and religion's inability to play a positive role in society was the lack of translation of prayers and verses into Turkish, which led to their misunderstanding. This detachment resulted in a drift from the essence of religion and a rise in superstitions, which the public perceived as integral to the faith. Furthermore, the emergence of sects within the Islamic world and the insufficient understanding of Islam's moral principles added to this confusion.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The intellectual world of Ahmet Ağaoğlu, who lived during the late Ottoman period and the early years of the Republic of Turkey, reflects the political, sociological, and cultural transformations and tensions of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic. His views on religion and society do not simply represent the personal explorations of a thinker; they also illuminate the social dynamics, struggles for modernization, and sociological changes of the era.

Ağaoğlu assessed the functions of religion on individuals and society from both sociological and historical perspectives, providing a compelling analysis. He limited Islam to aspects of faith and worship, interpreting it within a secular context and excluding its political and legal dimensions that impact daily life. According to Ağaoğlu, religion should exist as a component of individual conscience but should not interfere with social and political realms. This view underscores the significance he attributed to modernization and reform efforts, positioning Islam as a crucial part of this process. He regarded Islam as a vital element of this society's transformation, shaped by the mentality it fostered.

⁶⁷ Ağaoğlu, 46-59.

⁶⁸ Ağaoğlu, 27.

⁶⁹ Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 69-74.

⁷⁰ Ahmet Ağaoğlu, "İslam Alemi 8", *Türk Yurdu II* (1328): 548-49.

According to Durkheim, religion serves as a mechanism that binds society, enhances social solidarity, and plays a vital role in shaping social norms. Religious rituals and practices strengthen the collective consciousness of individuals, ensuring societal unity. In this context, Ağaoğlu's perspective of religion as a cohesive force for society aligns with Durkheim's insights into the socially integrative functions of religion. Ağaoğlu also emphasized that religion is a tool for fostering individuals' sense of social belonging. However, he contended that to fulfill this function properly, religion must be free from traditional and dogmatic interpretations and reinterpreted within a modern, secular framework. Ağaoğlu's views on the societal role of religion create a meaningful connection with Durkheim's theoretical approaches to the central role of religion in social life cohesion.

Ağaoğlu explained the backwardness of Islamic societies as rooted in their entrenchment in conservatism, contrasting with the progressive orientations of the West. Therefore, he emphasized the necessity of interpreting religion through an innovative, reformist, and modern lens. His individualist approach to religion, influenced by Shiite tradition, highlights the need to question religious authority and reinterpret religious texts to meet contemporary demands. In this context, Ağaoğlu's call for reform in Islam seems crucial for modernizing the Islamic world and integrating it with Western civilization. In this sense, the progress of the Islamic world relies on renewing, particularly, the legal and political dimensions of Islam.

In conclusion, Ahmet Ağaoğlu's views on religion and society reflect a progressive approach for his time, providing solutions to the crisis encountered by the Islamic world during the modernization process. His ideas remain open to evaluation regarding sociological analyses of religion's social functions and the relationship between individuals and society. This study has aimed to explore Ağaoğlu's understanding of religion and society within a religious and sociological framework, emphasizing the historical context of his ideas and their relevance to contemporary discussions. It has shown that the views of this prominent figure in Turkish-Islamic intellectual history warrant discussion in a broader academic context. Ağaoğlu's perspective on modernization and reform is an intellectual legacy that continues to illuminate the challenges Islamic societies face today.

Declaration

I declare that this study is original; that I have acted by the principles and rules of scientific ethics at all stages of the study, including preparation, data collection, analysis, and presentation of information; that I have cited sources for all data and information not obtained within the scope of this study and included these sources in the bibliography; that I have not made any changes in the data used, and that I comply with ethical duties and responsibilities by accepting all the terms and conditions of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). I hereby declare that if a situation contrary to my statement regarding the study is detected, I agree to all moral and legal consequences that may arise.

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