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An Ottoman response to Darwinism: İsmail Fennî on Islam and evolution

ALPER BILGILI

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An Ottoman response to Darwinism: İsmail Fennî on Islam and evolution

ALPER BILGILI*

Abstract. The Scopes trial (1925) fuelled discussion in the United States on the social and political implications of Darwinism. For the defenders of the 1925 Tennessee law – which prohibited the teaching of Darwinism in schools – Darwinism was, amongst other things, responsible for the German militarism which eventually led to the First World War. This view was supported by İsmail Fennî, a late Ottoman intellectual, who authored a book immediately after the trial which aimed to debunk scientific materialism. In it, he claimed that Darwinism blurred the distinction between man and beast and thus destroyed the foundations of morality. However, despite his anti-Darwinist stance, İsmail Fennî argued against laws forbidding the teaching of Darwinism in schools, and emphasized that even false theories contributed to scientific improvement. Indeed, because of his belief in science he claimed that Muslims should not reject Darwinism if it were supported by future scientific evidence. If this turned out to be the case, then religious interpretations should be revised accordingly. This article contributes to the literature on early Muslim reactions to Darwinism by examining the views of İsmail Fennî, which were notably sophisticated when compared with those of the anti-religious Darwinist and anti-Darwinist religious camps that dominated late Ottoman intellectual life.

Introduction

Any country where commenting on the laws of evolution or speaking about Darwinism is perceived to be blasphemous has not emerged from the Middle Ages. And [those belonging to] the Middle Ages have no right to exist in the twentieth century. Any head, turbaned or not, has to understand this fact unless it desires to be smashed! ... Kastamonu! If you do not want to be Thessalonica, or Kosovo; if you do not want to witness Muslims being killed, or their honour and chastity exploited; then wake up urgently, and do not desire to kill those who already woke up and who try to awaken you!¹

So wrote Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932), a prominent Ottoman ideologue and science popularizer, in his controversial magazine *İctihad* in 1913, in response to the arrest of three teachers for teaching Darwinian evolution in Kastamonu (a city located in northern Anatolia). Cevdet reminded Turkish readers of the suffering which Muslims had endured in Thessalonica and Kosovo, following the Ottoman defeats. Only a country with a sci-

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1 Abdullah Cevdet, 'Kastamonu'da Kurun-i Vusta', *İctihad* (1913) 58, pp. 1271–1274, 1273.