Extended Abstract

Orientalist Sociology: W. M. Watt’s Concept of History and Religion

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Introduction

William Montgomery Watt (1909-2006), was a world-renowned Scottish historian and orientalist who served as chairman of the English Society for Oriental Studies. He was a scientist who adequately covered a very extensive history, social philosophy and sociology of one of the world’s great religions, i.e. Islam. He has treated the close relationship between the religious beliefs and political doctrine in Islamic countries today. He has conducted fundamental studies of Islam and Muslim societies, as well as Muslim-Christian relations. Watt is the author of twenty-nine books and numerous articles in which he expresses his vision and scientific profile. Among them are Islam and the Integration of Society (1961) and Religious Truth for Our Time (1995). Watt combines history, theology, politics and sociology to provide a succinct study of all aspects of the origin, history and social reflections of the teachings of Islam. Montgomery Watt represents a significant progress among Western scholarship in portraying Islam in an objective light.

His works are a clear and comprehensive survey of the development of Islamic political thought, from the politico-religious structure established by Mohammed and his immediate successors, to its current status in the modern world.

Watt’s starting point is sociologistic: Islam is the result of the social environment and circumstances. We can say without hesitation that W. M. Watt made a great contribu-
In this study, which uses the method of documentation, descriptive, historical, comparative, discursive and other analyses, we treat Watt’s social philosophy, his concept of history and religion, sacred history, secular history, the end of history, etc.

**Watt’s concept of history**

Watt uses the concept of history, which is very important for sociology, and which “is nothing but the path that a society follows throughout history” (Şeriati, 1998: 113), in two directions:

1. History deals with events related to human intentions. This is the meaning of the following sentences: «The owner of history is God», «The events of human history are controlled by God». According to Watt, the changes and reforms made in the former Soviet Union, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, were realized with divine encouragement. God is the one who constantly brings new things into our lives and to some extent has control over human history (Watt, 1995: 97).

2. Writing history, explaining various events in time and space. According to Watt, the basic task of the historian is to unveil the matrices that reflect the great and complex social oscillations. (Watt, 1991: 159) Any attitude that expresses historical thought in order to be comprehensible and acceptable must be consistent with objective details. According to Watt, all attitudes and expressions about history go even further, and by selecting and classifying events they build patterns, some of which we attach more importance to. However, the models in question can not claim absolute objectivity. To write history means to be subjective, because the historian’s decisions depend on his values. Since the values are different, we conclude that we cannot talk about a single story. Explanation of fact-based history does not mean complete truth. (Watt, 1995: 20) “The contemporary historian generally ignores claims about motives that appear in sources; he should express personal motives in the light of knowledge about the totality of apparent behaviors” (Watt, 1986: 5).

**Sacred History in Christianity and Islam**

In Watt’s concept of the philosophy of history, history is divided into two parts: sacred history and secular history. He calls the history contained in the Gospel and the Qur’an
sacred, and describes it as *mythical* and non-objective (Watt, 2002: 132). The distinguishing feature of sacred history is the transcendental meaning, *God as an effective actor* and as *a controlling power* in the course of history. According to the view of sacred history, history is “a path which leads to a goal, which is not immanent to this history, but stands outside it.” Carlo Maria Martini and Umberto Eco say that history (1) has a meaning and a direction; does not constitute an amount of absurd and non-existent facts; 2) has pure immanent meaning; transcends the boundaries of history itself; it is not the object of reckoning but of hope and, (3) it is the ethical instance in which the meta-historical future of human adventure is set (Martini & Eco, 2009: 17-18). The concept of sacred history, which is related to the Jewish and Christian worldviews, was also part of the Ottoman worldview. The Ottoman state was a global state (*cihan devleti*), while the sultan had the epithet “ruler of the world” (*padişah-ı alem*) (Timur, 1984: 7-30).

**God as the controller of historical events**

According to the concept of sacred history, the development of events along the historical process is controlled by God. These events do not only cover the history of the Qur’an and the Bible, but also the historical experiences of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities and the representatives of these religions (Watt, 1991: 54).

In the Gospel and in the Qur’an, one of the ways God controls events is through direct intervention. God, who has absolute power, controls events in two ways:

1. Just as He has given tasks to Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad, He can initiate many events by “calling” certain people to perform certain tasks and take various initiatives.

2. God gives people strength to fight, to overcome various problems, and, on the other hand, weakens the opponents of those who do not believe in Him; makes them deceived by vain beliefs and so on.

Watt calls the various experiences described as divine vocations and undertakings “inner voices.” But, the answer to the divine call, the observance of that voice depends on the decision of the individual himself and his freedom is not excluded (Watt, 1991: 162). The inner voices mentioned should be understood as divine action in man. These voices have been placed in man since birth and stem from the suppression of the “tendency” and “radial energy” that constitutes his character and construction. In Christia-
nity, most of these calls are attributed to the Holy Spirit. It should be noted that these calls have the meaning of responding to the conditions in which man finds himself. The divine call to Abraham, Moses, and the Prophet Muhammad is closely related to the environment and social conditions in which they lived.

**Conclusions**

The objective of this research was to decipher the sociological thought of the historical aspect or the sociology of history of William Montgomery Watt, one of the most well-known traditional Orientalists (Ahmad, 2002: 181), a good connoisseur of the religions of the Abrahamic tradition, an author that represents a meaningful breakthrough in the decomposition of Islam within the Western scientific tradition and which goes beyond the classical line of Orientalism. From the analysis of his scientific discourse on history and religion we have reached the following conclusions:

- According to Watt, religion is one of the main institutions of society. Social life as a whole is closely linked to belief systems.

- He tried to deconstruct religious facts through the methods of modern science. His studies on Islam are systematic efforts, based on a particular methodology and a clear conceptual framework.

- In Watt’s ideological world there are visible traces of materialism and Marxism. It is clear that economically based explanations come to the fore in many of his texts.

- In Watt’s scientific universe we find nuances of secularist thought, Darwinian evolutionism, humanist worldview, as well as the tendency to strip religion of timeless, metaphysical and transcendental elements.

- According to him, history marks absolute progress, today is qualitatively better than yesterday.

- History is the backbone of sociology; one cannot speak of a single history as the values are different.

- According to him, secular history analyzes political, economic, social phenomena, while sacred history deals with matrices that have to do with the metaphysical dimension of events.
- In both Christianity and Islam there is a belief in the end of the historical process, namely the end of the world, which is called the apocalypse or the Last Day.

**Bibliografia**


Watt, W.M. (1997b). *İslami Hareketler ve Modernlik*, İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık


