Ada Holly Shissler’s book *Between Two Empires: Ahmet Agaoglu and The New Turkey* is an intellectual biography which started as a dissertation Project at UCLA. Ahmet Agaoglu was an interesting figure in his own milieu. He was involved with the majority of intellectual movements and with many of the political movements that shaped the Russian Caucasus and the Ottoman Empire. But why did she choose him to study? She answers:

“...because it is in so many ways both remarkable and representative. It is the career of a man of talent, conviction, initiative and some means, who lived in very unusual and interesting times. He was involved directly or indirectly in three revolutions (1905 in Russia, 1908 in the Ottoman Empire, 1917 in Russia), a world war and a war of resistance to foreign occupation (the Turkish War of Independence). He was a man who functioned absolutely fluently in at least five languages (Azerbaijani, Ottoman, Russian, Persian and French) and possessed multiple university degrees; who wrote books, published articles, edited newspapers, taught university and high school courses in the fields of foreign language, literature, law and history; who was elected to public Office in three states and who held political appointments as well. Thus he is interesting simply in the diversity of his experiences and in his scope.” (p.1)

In this project, she uses a range of secondary and some primary material to supply the details of Agaoglu’s life and activities. Her object is to analyse Ahmet Agaoglu’s intellectual development through and examination of some of his published works. She uses a careful examination of some representative pieces within his historical context as a way of illustrating some of the dynamics of identity construction for Middle Eastern reformers at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth. According to her selection of articles, the main structure of the book is based upon Ağaoğlu’s journalistic production over a period of many years. First, she examines the early French material in detail, because according to her, it forms a baseline or point of departure as his first published work, and also because it provides insight into the early French influences on his thought. After that, she tries to select pieces that are more oriented towards intellectual questions and less towards the reporting of news. She especially focuses on works that deal with questions of identity and modernity, in particular, pieces that deal with nationality and nationalism, religion, the status of women, inter-ethnic relations (especially with the Armenians) and education. She concentrates largely on his works in French, Ottoman and Azerbaijani.

According to Shissler, during his career, Ahmet Agaoglu was concerned with two central issues: the establishment of a liberal, civil society, populated by ‘whole persons’, and the creation and maintenance on a conscious level of a shared mentality which would lend cohesion to that society of free men. To reach these goals for his own community (mainly the Muslims of the Russian Empire), he emphasized on liberal institutions while at the same time he privileged language and religion as the two most important elements structuring and engendering that common mentality which was, for Agaoglu, the essence of nationality.

Ahmet Agaoglu was born in the city of Şuşa in the Karabagh region of Russian-controlled Azerbaijan in 1869. He was a scion of an old family of Azerbijani beys, and he was tormented by the doubts as to his role and proper place. The economic conditions, political structures and even the ethnic composition of his homeland were changing with breathtaking rapidity. Like his earlier generation of intellectuals, for Shissler, Agaoglu felt a pressing need to define his relationship with the West. His father, Mirza Hasan, was a large athletic man, who spoke Persian and Arabic as well as Turkish and occupied himself with the family’s cotton holdings. Agaoglu defines his father with his words:
“…If someone were to ask him ‘Who are you?’ he would reply ‘I am of the community of Blessed Mohammed, I am a devotee of Ali, my father is Mirza Ibrahim and his father is Hasan Ağă of the Kurteli (tribe).’ It never occurred to him that he was a Turk…” (p.43)

In contrast to his father, Agaoglu was filled with a sense of longing even loneliness, with a sense of things lost and of belonging nowhere. The following description of his departure for St. Petersbourg and the university there is a representative:

“… I was to lose the wholeness with which history and nature had endowed me. But I was not to acquire a new wholeness. I was to become a half-way patched up thing. This patched-up quality is an endless drama. It is an inner drama, it is a spiritual tragedy. At no time now do I feel complete and whole. And you know, it is a torment of Hell to feel half-patched. I enjoy both European and Eastern music, but at the same time I see and I feel that I do not experience the first as completely and fully as a European, nor the second like an Easterner.” (p.44)

The contrast between the two descriptions could hardly be more stark. The father is a man secure in his world. The son is tormented by in search of something. I have chosen those dramatic paragraphs because, they drew me into the work in the beginning of the book and they clearly show the identity crisis of Ahmet Agaoglu in the early years of his intellectual career.

Russia was also changing and becoming more modern and less dynastic state, accordingly, the role of the Agaoglu’s family were becoming increasingly marginalized from the actual life and administration of the region. So, according to Shissler, the young Muslim elites were forced to look elsewhere, outside their traditional roles and outside of government service, to make a place for themselves. In addition to that, they also found themselves among the competition from other groups in trade and industry, and some legal disabilities and limitations on Muslims in many of the professions and in regard to holding elective office. Therefore, Ağaoğlu concentrated not only on the role of a liberal social order in the achievement of progress, but doing it from a distinctly community-oriented standpoint.

For Shissler, Agaoglu as a Shi‘ite, was aware of the problem of sectarian divisions in the Muslim community. And he was also very sensitive to the argument that an ethno-linguistic identity base, could create splits in the religious community. However, throughout his career he devoted himself to show that far from being opposed to one another, religion and nationality reinforced one another. Especially, his sojourn in France helped him in this struggle. He studied with the prominent orientalists such as Darmesteter, Renan and Madame Juliette Adam. They were particularly interested in the philological-historical investigations into how ‘mentalites’ were constructed, and they specifically saw the study of myth and religion as an integral part of this process. This three French figures who befriended him showed him a non-radical liberalism, that put great stock in religious feeling, religion and tradition; and that rejected the older Voltaireian vision as cold, lacking in heat and humanity and overly sceptical, materialistic and individualistic. In addition to the values of merit, rationality and progress, for them, one must have ideals and faith and keep a covenant with the past that is based on conserving a ‘mentalite’, which however, must not intrude in such a way as to prevent freedom of thought.

Agaoglu saw religion as an inevitable component in the formation of the national mentality and in the process of civilization, he was not willing to reject it in the first place. However, for Shissler, he was well aware of the argument that said religion especially Islam, was in superable impediment to free thought. Therefore, he was always concerned to point out that religion was by nature an historical phenomenon that developed and adapted with the environment and this developmental and interpretative process was not wrong. Rather, it was a product of its context. Thus, for Agaoglu, the important thing was
to get people properly educated so that they would understand and practice this flexibility. Finally, he argued that the strength of the whole was the strength of the parts; strong Muslim nations meant a strong Islamic World almost by definition.

Although his thoughts changed on how to combine these elements, his certain points remained constant in his thinking. He never lost interest in the Muslim community of the place of his birth; his goal remained the creation of a non-cosmopolitan society which was liberal both in its official institutions and in the outlook of its people. Because for Shissler, Agaoglu believed these were future- the road to progress, well-being and strength.

According to Shissler, the facts of Agaoglu’s life were available from a wide array of published sources. However, he emphasizes that when this work began its life, there was no one that had assembled the information available in those sources. In 1999, however he adds, Fahri Sakal’s Agaoglu Ahmed Bey (Türk Tarih Kurumu Basmevi, 1999) appeared which has helped to fill that gap. Shissler uses Dr. Sakal’s book for the Republican period particularly. That is to say, this work is the first comprehensive book that is dedicated to both Agaoglu’s early life in the Russian Empire and his intellectual turning points throughout his journey between Europe and the Middle East. The work is very detailed and fascinated me in Shissler’s effort to combine Agaoglu’s thoughts with the historical contexts of their evolution. Throughout the work, Shissler tries to select the articles that represent best the ideas of Agaoglu and she tries to explain their background with using both the context and the milieu in which Agaoglu is also a part of. Therefore, it is not only a study of theoretical analysis but also a look to the intellectual environment of the 19th and 20th centuries and this makes the book attractive for general audience.

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The presented book is ten years old. In the field of political science, this usually means “out of date.” But I want to show here that Hakan Yavuz’s piece on political Islam in Turkey is highly valid also for the present. In the past several years, the issue of political Islam, i.e. Islamism, has become mainstream not just in political science or international relations. Religious motivated terrorism, or recent events in the Middle East known as the Arab spring are elusive without taking into account the issue of political Islam. In the case of public discussions surrounding the Arab spring, we can often hear phrases like “following the Turkish example” or “taking lesson from the successful Turkish story.” Authors of these opinions mean more or less to incorporate moderate Islamists into the liberal style democratic process. Journalists and scholars frequently reference the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) as a successful example to imitate in post-revolutionary Arab societies. And it is here where Yavuz’s book can be extremely useful for us to problematize this notion.

In this book we are presented with the history of the long-lasting struggle between the Turkish secular state and devout Muslims on Islam’s role in society and politics. As the author says in the beginning: “this book is the story of the ‘other Turkey’” (p.vii). It deals with a Turkey often overlooked in the works of Kemalist and foreign historians. It reconstructs the development of “AKP’s successful model” praised by many observers and subsequently also provides an in-depth explanation as to why these claims are worthy reconsideration.