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**A Kurdish Sufi Master and His Christian Neighbors**

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# A Kurdish Sufi Master and His Christian Neighbors

**Abstract:** This paper examines the religiopolitical views of Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri, the leader of the 1880 Kurdish uprising. The paper makes use of new primary sources, which allow for offering a more coherent picture of the scopes and limits of Sheikh Ubeydullah's views on a number of key issues, especially on topics of religious universalism and tolerance, Kurdish education, and Kurdish nationalism. The paper uses archival research and primary sources of his alleged anti-Christian views similar to those found among Turks drove the Sheik's uprising. Instead, the paper argues that his views contrasted sharply with these and were, instead, rooted more in a Rumi-type religious universalism that was actually more hospitable to Christians. This paper particularly focuses on the Sheikh's relation with non-Muslims and makes extensive use of the transcriptions of a two and an hour conversation between the Sheikh and an American missionary figure. This lengthy conversation unveils much about the motivations behind the 1880 Kurdish uprising and touches upon Ubeydullah previously unknown and, interestingly, unorthodox thoughts about religious universalism and religious tolerance.

## Introduction

Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri was one of the most prominent Kurdish Naqshbandi sheikhs in the late nineteenth century. Decades earlier, his grandfather Sayed Taha had embraced Naqshbandi Sufism, an order whose influence had been revived and extended by the renowned Sufi master Maulana Khalid Kurdi or Baghdadi (1779–1827).<sup>1</sup> Sheikh Ubeydullah rose to prominence in the Kurdish political scene with his 1880 Kurdish uprising in which he left an everlasting mark on modern Kurdish historical memory.<sup>2</sup> This uprising offers a clear example of the fusion of Islam with nationalism. Religious nationalism would become widespread among Muslims in the ensuing century. Ubeydullah's project illustrated a harmonious form of Islamic revivalism with Kurdish nationalism, which reflected a certain

<sup>1</sup> For more on Naqshbandi Order, see. Dina Legall. *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandis in the Ottoman World, 1450-1700*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004); Serif Mardin. *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); Jenenne Castor-Thompson. *The Rose Garden: Autobiography of a Modern Day Naqshbandi Sufi*. (United State: Xlibris US, 2014). M. Gaborieau et. El. *Naqshbandis: Cheminements et situation actuelle d'un ordre mystique musulman: actes de la Table ronde de Sèvres*. (France: Editions Isis, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See Sabri Ateş's insightful paper, Ateş, Sabri. "In the Name of the Caliph and the Nation: The Sheikh Ubeydullah Rebellion of 1880–81." *Iranian Studies*, 47 (5x) (2014): 735-798

socio-historical context: the calamitous post-Russo-Ottoman situation in Kurdistan, the rise of nationalism, and the center's treatment of the periphery.

After his uprising's defeat, the Sheikh was banished to Istanbul where he lived in exile for two years. In 1882, hoping to organize another uprising, the Sheikh escaped from Istanbul. Yet, his attempts were shortly thwarted when he was recaptured by Ottoman authorities. First sent to Mosul, he was moved to Mecca where he would die a year later in 1883. Despite his prominence in Kurdish historical memory, there is a paucity of information about Ubeydullah's life and thoughts. Because of a lack of textual information regarding his life, there is still a lot left to be unearthed about the Sheikh's biography and his political and religious views.

One exception is the documents provided by the American missionary Henry Otis Dwight who interviewed the Sheikh in 1881, during the latter's exile in Istanbul. Dwight describes the Sheikh,

to be a small man of about forty-five, dressed in the ordinary attire of a Turkish gentleman from the East. He wore a white turban over a white fez and as the weather was chilly he had the yellow-striped head wrap of the Arabs wound about his throat and ears.<sup>3</sup>

As shown below, Dwight's interview portrays the Sheikh in a different light. This interview explains some aspects of the Sheikh's religious and political views that the existing scholarship has largely ignored.<sup>4</sup> Dwight's interview seems to be a rare primary source that evidences the Sheikh's intentions and preparation for yet another uprising after his defeat in 1880. I should emphasize that the focus of this paper is not a recounting of the chronology of the events. My primary concern here is analyzing the Sheikh's politico-theological views. Doubtlessly, Sabri Ateş has masterfully attended to other aspects of the Sheikh's place in Kurdish history.<sup>5</sup>

Many scholars view the Kurdish fear regarding the emergence of an Armenian state as the sole or the most significant cause for the Sheikh's uprising in 1880.<sup>6</sup> There are those likes of David McDowall, who, without sharing any credible evidence,<sup>7</sup> calls the Sheikh's enterprise "a scheme cooked up in Istanbul which offered Sheikh Ubayd Allah undisclosed official

<sup>3</sup> ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300. I am indebted to my friend Owen Miller for providing me with this document and many others.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, McDowall, David. (2004) *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.; Özoğlu, Hakan. "Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?" in *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey*, ed. Ayşe Kadioğlu and Emin Fuat Keyman. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 201: 203

<sup>5</sup> See Ateş. "In the Name of the Caliph and the Nation: The Sheikh Ubeydullah Rebellion of 1880-81."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. McDowall, David. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. ( London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).; Özoğlu, Hakan. "Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?" in *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey*, ed. Ayşe Kadioğlu and Emin Fuat Keyman. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011) 203.; Also, Robert W. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> McDowall. *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 58

sponsorship to form a movement that could act as a counterbalance to the Armenian threat.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Hakan Özoğlu attempts to portray the Sheikh’s revolt as a mere religious reaction that was only connected to Istanbul.<sup>9</sup> However, the only evidence he uses to back this claim are the alleged remarks by the Sheikh, asking “what is this I hear, that the Armenians are going to have an independent state in Van, and that the Nestorians are going to hoist the British flag and declare themselves British subjects.”<sup>10</sup>

We should regard the above quote with great caution for several other reasons. First, as I will show below, the sentiment contradicts Sheikh Ubeydullah’s religious views and his overall relation with non-Muslims. Second, both the source and context of these utterances are contradictory and dubious: Captain Clayton, the British official who reported this statement to his superior in July 1880, claims that he had heard it from Toussoun Pasha, an Ottoman governor in Kurdistan. Toussoun Pasha had an active role in the state’s campaign against the Sheikh.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, he had informed Clayton that he had heard the alleged remarks from one of his subordinates. These alleged remarks have convinced some historians that the prospect of an Armenian state was the *prima causa* for the Sheikh uprising against the Ottomans.<sup>12</sup> If we look, for instance, at the Sheikh’s poems, we can determine that the Sheikh had become disillusioned with the Ottoman state during the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman war.<sup>13</sup> Abdulqader's (the Sheikh’s son) revolt against the state in 1879 provides another evidence to corroborate such a conclusion.<sup>14</sup> Toussoun Pasha’s own comments, included in the British report, show that the Sheikh’s uprising was a Christian friendly. Thus, the same Pasha informs Clayton that the Sheikh was trying to build a coalition with both the Nestorian and Armenian communities and had promised “the chief Armenian ecclesiastic... that he would protect the Christians.”<sup>15</sup> The Sheikh even had urged all to refrain from paying taxes to the Ottoman government.<sup>16</sup> The pasha also tells Clayton that “some little time ago” the Sheikh had tried to send his son with a proposal to Istanbul to pay a large sum “to the Sultan... when semi-independent, and will offer to pay a still larger sum if [the Sheikh’s] authority over Kurdistan is recognized and his rule is not interfered with.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Özoğlu, “Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?": 203-15

<sup>10</sup> FO 195/1315/No. 23. Clayton to Trotter. Political [Confidential]. Bashkala: July 11, 1880

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Clayton to Trotter. Political (Confidential). Kochhannes: 2nd August 1880.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*; Özoğlu, "Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?"

<sup>13</sup> Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehri. *Tuhfatul ahabab: Mesnevi Şex Ubeydullah Nehri*. Revised by Seyid Islam Duagû. Urmia: Husseini, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> See Speer, Robert E. *The Hakim Sahib, the Foreign Doctor: A Biography of Joseph Plumb Cochran, M. D., of Persia*. New York: Revell, 1911: 75.

<sup>15</sup> FO 195/1315/No. 23. Clayton to Trotter. Political [Confidential]. Kochhannes: 2nd August 1880.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

These alleged remarks seem to have been nothing more than rumors and part of the Ottoman campaign to pit different communities against one another and deprive the Sheikh's uprising of any possible European support. Clayton suggests this when he recounts that a certain "Samih Pasha told [him] that he had heard that the Sheikh had a plan for exterminating the Christians in view of the talk that has been going on about the formation of an Armenian State."<sup>18</sup> Ottoman officials were willing to go to great lengths to spread these rumors especially after the Sheikh's attack on Iran. According to British records, the Ottomans had hired Russian mercenaries to scare Christians as they simultaneously cautioned British Officials of "the Sheikh's ulterior motives" and painted his uprising as motivated by anti-Christian sentiments. As Clayton recounts,

there is a certain Russian 'loupeur' named Tchilingiroff, a restless adventurer who has been acting as a sort of factotum of the Sheikh and has recently been brought here by the Turkish authorities. This man has been telling the Armenians that they all owe their lives to him that the Sheikh intended to massacre them, but that he had persuaded him to turn against the Persians instead (emphasis added).<sup>19</sup>

Missionary writings have long been a significant source for our knowledge of the Sheikh's religious thought, his worldview, and his political activities. To shed greater light on the Sheikh's views and relations with non-Muslims in the context of the 1880 Kurdish uprising, this paper examines previously unexplored sources. The first of these is the transcript of Henry Otis Dwight and Ubeydullah's two-hour conversation in 188.<sup>20</sup> This conversation reveals the Sheikh's unorthodox religious thoughts and his positive views of Christians and his negative views of the Ottoman Turks and Persians. Such negative views about Turkish and Persian religiosity is also observable in his collected poetic work, *Masnavi*, which I will also discuss.<sup>21</sup> Together these sources provide insight into three major issues that cast new light on the Sheikh's motivations behind the uprising. I will attend to those issues separately: first, the Sheikh's ideas about religious universalism and his approach to Christianity in particular; second, his views on Kurdish education and its vitality; and, third, the Sheikh's perception of the Ottoman Turks and Persians.

## The Sheikh's religious universalism

Sheikh Ubeydullah was born and lived his life in Hakkari, an area that had a sizable Christian community. According to the historian Martin van Bruinessen, "These communities were in many ways the equals of their Muslim neighbors. Those of central Kurdistan had tribal organization and until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted a significant force, that was an active

<sup>18</sup> Ibid; No. 46; Clayton; Van 27<sup>th</sup> November 1880.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>21</sup> See, Nehri. *Tuhfatul ahhbab*.

factor in Kurdish politics.”<sup>22</sup> However, here rather than attending to the larger issue of the history of Kurdish-Armenian relations, I will concentrate on Ubeydullah’s perception of his Christian neighbors. I will mostly focus on the Sheikh’s view, in the light of his interview with Dwight.

The conversation between Dwight and Ubeydullah takes place after the latter’s 1880 uprising. Yet, Dwight reports that the Sheikh was already planning a new uprising against the Ottoman state even as he sat in exile in Istanbul. The existing scholarship does not have much to offer about the Sheikh’s post-exilic political activities, but Dwight’s interview unveils new details about this period in his life.<sup>23</sup> Dwight starts his account of the interview through the description of the circumstances in which he took his meeting with the exiled Sheikh, noting that:

the Sheikh, although to all intents and purposes a prisoner, is treated with respect as a guest of the Sultan. The reason for this attention is that the Sheikh Obeidullah is a principal chief of the order of the Nakshabendi dervishes, besides being of a noble family with a pedigree of six hundred years. As religious chief he represents some two million devoted adherents in Kourdistan, besides counting many of the Pashas of this city [i.e.; Istanbul] as his disciples. As the scion of a noble family, he claims to be of the blood of the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most important and notable parts of their discussion was on religious differences and the Sheikh’s perception of Christian missionaries. Based on Dwight’s account, Ubeydullah does not seem to have much concern himself with religious formalism and consequential theological differences. This seems to be consistent with the views found in the Sheikh’s poetry.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, Sheikh appears to be acutely interested in the practical outcome of the religious agent’s devotion and the ways in which heartfelt beliefs are reflected in one’s action rather than one’s words. As a Sufi, the Sheikh’s emphasis is on the inward expressions of religiosity instead of their outward forms. In his discussion with Dwight as well as in his poetry, the Sheikh discusses how he was very much influenced by 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi and claims that his entire revivalist project in Kurdistan was nothing but a revival of Rumi’s *Masnavi*.

The Sheikh tells us that he composed his own *Masnavi* with the sole purpose of explaining the *Masnavi* of Rumi to Kurds. This is the case, since according to him, “the deep meanings in the poems of the *Amir* (prince) of this Order (i.e.; Rumi) had yet to be revealed to the common

<sup>22</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds and Islam "Working Paper no. 13, Islamic Area Studies Project, Tokyo, Japan, 1999. Accessed, August 19/ 2017.

<http://www.ozelburoistihbarat.com/Content/images/archieve/kurt-sorunu-dosyasi-the-kurds-and-islam-ingilizce-9dce6c05-2731-4a0e-9126-233dd098e295.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> See, ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See, Nehri. *Tuhfatul Ahabab*: 129

people (*avâm*).<sup>26</sup> In his conversation with Dwight, the Sheikh reiterates Rumi's approach to the phenomena of religious plurality when he talks of the ultimate goals of Islam and Christianity. He claims that religions are essentially the same and religious differences emerge through their articulation of the followers and therefore he contends that:

*We seek what you seek.* In the great religious poem of the Mesnevi, there is the story of four men who found some money in the road, one was a Persian, one a Turk, one a Kourd, and one an Arab. Each one said in his own language, "Let's buy grapes with it and eat them together." But neither could understand the other and so they fell to fighting. At last twine, thus they were nearly killed a fifth man came along and asked what was the matter. "Why he exclaimed you all want the same thing only you don't know it!" *This is the way with many of our differences on religious questions* (emphasis added).<sup>27</sup>

As stated above, it is clear that the Sheikh was under the influence of Rumi's works.<sup>28</sup> Such an influence is apparent in the Sheik's theological thought and his belief that the value of one's religiosity is in one's inner wealth and actions. For the Sheikh, even the essence of religious conflicts rested in religious agents' inability to realize that religions are merely different expressions of one fundamental reality. Here, too, Ubeydullah echoes Rumi who believed that formal discrepancies showed the nature of religious articulations by the agents, rather than proving real differences in religions. "The main purpose of prophets and religions" advocated Rumi "is to cultivate people's spirits and heal their souls... to fill their hearts with the love of God and love for one another and to cleanse them of sickness and hatred."<sup>29</sup> Rumi is often remembered as refraining from theological debates and contentious religious argumentations. According to one story, when a Jewish person asked him, "whose religion is better, yours or mine?" Rumi replied simply: "Yours."<sup>30</sup> Rumi sums up his idea of the unity of religions in his story of Moses and the Shepherd, where God criticizes Moses for the latter's rigid religious formalism:

To each I have given a unique face  
And a way to express and embrace.  
Hindus in their own tongue, God will praise  
Sindhis in prayer, their arms will raise.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Nehri. *Tuhfetu'l ahabab*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>28</sup> Rūmi's major works are *Masnāviye Ma'nawī* and *Dīwān-e Kabīr* or *Dīwān-e Shams-e Tabrīzī*. For the complete Persian works of Rumi online, see Ganjoor. Accessed 07/08/2017. <https://ganjoor.net/moulavi/>

<sup>29</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush. "An Islamic Treatise on Tolerance" in Kelly James Clark. *Abraham's Children: Liberty and Tolerance in an Age of Religious Conflict*. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2012: 265.

<sup>30</sup> Shams al-Din Ahmad Aflaki. *Manaqeb al-Arefin*, vol. 2. Tehran: Dunya-ye Ketab,1996: 484.

<sup>31</sup> As we can see, in this poem, the religious experience, and inner state are considered to be central to religiosity rather than the form of religious articulation or one' claim to the Truth,

Sheikh Ubeydullah appears to have believed in the essential unity of religions and his acceptance of non-Muslim can be also attributed to Rumi's influence on him. Such a view on the foundational sameness of religions manifests in the Sheikh's unbound praise for the moral character of the Christian missionaries. That is why the Sheikh seems to shock his company by stating,

that the missionaries in Oromia were men whom he knew to be of most noble character, and that the Turkish Mufti at Van had told him that the Protestants there were men of amazing moral purity, *that in fact they were as pure as an ideal Moslem (!) and were truly servants of God* although they had not *the Moslem name* (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup>

Dwight unveils aspects of the Sheikh's religious thought that might shock the students of Kurdish and Islamic history. The case in point is Ubeydullah's view on apostasy. Since the rule of Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Islam started in 632, Muslims have legislated death on apostasy. Defining apostasy as an offense that deserves death was initially rather a political decree. Such a law mostly gained credence during the wars on apostasy (*hurub al-ridah*) in the aftermath of the death of the prophet of Islam.<sup>33</sup> With the passage of time, however, Muslims have come to view the rules on apostasy as divine principles.<sup>34</sup> All the existing schools of Islamic law

Since the heart is the essence, to transform  
It's motive, to give birth to shape and form.

Moses was rebuked when he criticized the Shepherd for asking God:

Where are you so your needs I can serve  
Mend your shoes, your hair comb, curl & curve.

This form of communicating with and the personification of God angered Moses:

Said Moses, poor man, you just ruined your luck  
Not yet found God, infidel, you are stuck.

Who do you think you address? Uncle or aunt?  
For Glorious One, body and need don't count.

The English translation is done by Shahriar Shahriari. Accessed 7/11/2017,

[http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/jrumi/masnavi/moses\\_shepherd.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/jrumi/masnavi/moses_shepherd.php).

<sup>32</sup> ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

**33** See, for instance, Vernon O. Egger. *A History of the Muslim World since 1260: The Making of a Global Community*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004: 34-6.

<sup>34</sup> In recent history, sometimes such views have triggered international crises. The case in point was 1988 Khomeini's Fatwa (religious verdict) against British Salman Rushdie who was accused by many conservative Muslims for apostasy after writing his novel *Satanic Verses*. See Rushdie's official website: Accessed. August 12, 2017. <http://www.salmanrushdie.com/>. Also, Salman Rushdie. *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking Penguin, 1988).

(shari'a) view conversion from Islam as an act that is punishable by death.<sup>35</sup> Hence, Shari 'a treats leaving Islam as a capital offense.<sup>36</sup> Even Modern Muslim reformists have faced the perennial challenge of dealing with apostasy: since they have to defend penalty for changing one's religion, which in its modern sense, is well situated within the confines of individual rights. Some modernist Muslims such as Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Riḍa have tried to offer a somewhat unorthodox reinterpretation of the Prophetic era. So, they defended that apostasy can be unpunished only when it poses a danger.<sup>37</sup> More traditionalists 20th-century scholars like Abu al-'Ala Maududi and Egyptian Muhammad al-Ghazali ventured a different justification that is: apostasy is an act of rebellion against the socio-political order rather than a mere change of religious beliefs<sup>38</sup> and therefore the Shar'i punishment was not legislated against the freedom of belief.

Contrary to the commonly held Muslim beliefs, Ubeydullah did not concern himself with the outer manifestations of religions or the resultant identitarian and sectarian divides. Hence, religious conversions seem to have been secondary issues for the Sheikh. As long as the convert was sincere it did not matter much whether s/he had become a Christian or Muslim.<sup>39</sup> Recognizably, such an approach to religious conversion positively affected the Sheikh's relations with his Christian neighbors while putting him at odds with both more mainstream interpretations of Shi'i and Sunni Islam. As a Sunni, the Sheikh was not expected to tell his Kurdish countrymen to emulate the convert as a paragon of piety. In addition to his piety, the converted man's concerns for Kurdish education and welfare had earned him the Sheikh's respect. Perhaps, the convert's devotion to Kurds' education more than religious universalism induced the Sheikh's respect for him.

## The Sheikh and Kurdish Education

Sheikh Ubeydullah believed that there was a direct connection between Kurds' lack of access to public education and their predicaments. The Sheikh thought of Kurds as an ethnically unique people with a "noble" ancestry. The Sheikh asserts that no matter how great one's capabilities are or how noble one's ancestry (*asl-e najib*) might be, proper education is still necessary to fulfill one's potential.<sup>40</sup> The Sheikh states that despite the fact that raw gold constitutes the same material that is made into jewelry, like the Kurdish people, it needs

<sup>35</sup> See Heffening, Wilhelm. "Murtadd," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* 2, vol. 7, p. 633-35; Zwemer, Samuel M. *The Law of Apostasy in Islam*. New York, London: Marshal Brothers Ltd., 1924: 31-54.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Muhammad 'Abduh and Muhammad R. Rida. *Tafsir al-Manâr*. vol. 5. Cairo: al-Hayah al-Misriyah al-'Ammah li al-Kitab, 1973.

<sup>38</sup> See Peters, R. and G. De Vries. "Apostasy in Islam." *Die Welt des Islams*, 17 (1976-77): 1-25.

<sup>39</sup> ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>40</sup> Nehri. *Tuhfetu'l ahhab*, 121

refinement to take on luster and value.<sup>41</sup> To him, Kurds were exceptional in their “mastery in art and sophistication (*fazl u honar*): No one could be as talented as Kurds if they were properly educated.”<sup>42</sup> Not just on the individual level, Kurds could shine collectively if they could come together around a unified political goal. He thus estimated that his nation was facing two problems: the lack of access to public education and their lack of political unity, which the first seems to have caused the second. However, if Kurds were “united under one leadership, they would have had a unique state (*bi-masal va bi-nazir*).”<sup>43</sup>

Education was certain to be ranked among the highest of the Sheikh’s priorities in his pursuit of Kurdish independence. According to Dwight, the Sheikh’s converted relative (Kafee Bey) was also “ardent to have some of our books published in Kurdish and to have something done for the enlightenment of his benighted people.”<sup>44</sup> Education and the welfare of Kurds constituted a common ground between the Sheikh and Kafee Bey. When asked what his people most needed, the Sheikh pointed to Kurds’ educational condition and the Ottoman government’s unwillingness to support.<sup>45</sup> The Sheikh tells Dwight that education, books, and schools were the main needs of Kurds.<sup>46</sup> Ubeydullah does not seem to differentiate between religious and secular education in terms of their values. He introduces Kurds to Dwight as a nation that was composed of the seekers of knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

It is evident that for the Sheikh education was a panacea for Kurdish plight. In addition, he thought the lack of public education in Kurdistan was the principal reason for Kurdish exclusion from political life in both the Ottoman and Qajar contexts. In his letter to Iqbal ad-Dowleh, the governor of Urmia, the Sheikh writes “we admit that there are bad Kurds along with the good ones but there is no one who even thinks of educating [the bad and therefore it is impossible] for Kurds to right their wrongs without education.”<sup>48</sup> He held that education was the key to a more decent and humane life and a way for Kurds to escape from their present predicament. In the Sheikh’s view, education was vital for Kurds because education could constitute the foundation for Kurdish collective self-consciousness and their survival: it held both a collective emancipatory aspect and was a determinative factor in individual human agency.

It is here, on education, where Sheikh Ubeydullah’s Kurdish nationalism is most evidently manifested. He thought Kurdish illiteracy represented an existential threat since it darkened

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> ABCFM, Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12, 1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See the Sheikh’s letters to Iqbal ad-Dowleh in Celil, Celili. *Kürt Halk Tarihinden 13 İlginç Yaprak* (*Thirteen Interesting Pages from Kurdish People’s History*). Istanbul: Evrensel, 2007: 38-43.

their consciousness of the immensity of the Ottoman and Qajar state's exclusionary policies. Kurdish illiteracy manifested a certain hegemonic relation and enabled the states to perpetuate the criminalization of Kurdishness. From the Sheikh's perspective, Kurdish illiteracy legitimated an oppressive and exploitative politico-cultural relation between Kurds and the ruling states. He was adamant that without Kurdish education there was no collective future for Kurds. Even if, as he definitely believed, that Kurds possessed a certain racial aptitude and capacity to "make progress," he claimed, "that we are doomed to destruction unless [we receive] help from some sources close to us."<sup>49</sup>

The above remarks also show the Sheikh's consciousness and fears of existing racial stereotypes about Kurds as much as they reveal the era's prevailing ideas about human progress and race. It is striking to see that the Sheikh links education as a historically connected phenomenon with the configuration of knowledge and power and the nation's politico-cultural struggles. Ubeydullah could not imagine the dialectical aspect of education and the ways in which modern states utilize education for the perpetuation of oppression and dominance.<sup>50</sup>

To him, education was a tool to be wielded to achieve self- and communal empowerment. It was, for him, the sole foundation of human agency. In his words, education was the "attribution of man and if you take it away from the man there is nothing left upon which hangs the attribute."<sup>51</sup> Hence, the Sheikh saw education as the ground for a political project that could restore Kurdish individual and collective selfhood. Per the Sheikh's description, education would have assured the possibility of a humane life for Kurds and, most prominently, a life free from Turkish and Persian dominance. He perceived education as a necessary condition for the creation of a cohesive nation and as the sole means to combat foreign domination and internal anarchy. Because of this, he believed the Ottomans and Persians would stop at nothing to prevent Kurdish access to education and progress:

The Turks on one hand are determined that they shall not develop and prevent the opening of schools, arresting or killing every man of influence who attempts to foster aspiration among the people. The Persians on the other hand (Sheikh Obeidullah's territory is on both sides of the frontier west of Oroomiah) are using force to turn the people from their faith and are robbing and killing on every hand.<sup>52</sup>

The Sheikh had no hope for the possibility of Kurdish public literacy under the rule of either Persians or Ottoman Turks. Let alone educating Kurds, the Sheikh claimed that the Persians had been actively depopulating Kurdish regions and repopulating them with non-Kurds. If what he said reflected his beliefs, Ubeydullah must have thought of the Persian state's policies

<sup>49</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission*, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12., 1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>50</sup> For more on the State's use of education as a means for the reproduction of the State's ideology, see Mayo, Peter. *Hegemony and Education under Neoliberalism Insights from Gramsci*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Also, Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York Monthly Review Press, 2001.

<sup>51</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission*, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12., 1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

in Kurdistan as genocidal. Therefore, he offered an extraordinary justification for his uprising in 1880 as he described it as an “attack on Oromiah of two years ago [as] merely an attempt to destroy the perpetrators of intolerable outrages. They have even taken our babies and thrown them into cauldrons of boiling oil.”<sup>53</sup> He did not view Ottoman Turks in much of a better light. As Dwight notes, the Sheikh expressed “without reservation his abhorrence of Turkish rule and his conviction that nothing but destruction awaits the Empire and who has trust in it. ‘He said that the Kourds of his own district are hemmed in by enemies.’”<sup>54</sup>

## Nationalism and the Sheikh’s Religious Universalism

The Sheikh’s religious tolerance did not extend to his Persian and Turkish Muslim brethren or overlord. Also, the Sheikh does not seem to differentiate the ruling Persian and Ottoman Turks from their respective states. His views could have been affected by the fact that the Sheikh’s experience, with those communities, was limited to his encounter with the state officials. Additionally, Ubeydullah’s religious views were evidently influenced by the rise of both nationalism and the prevailing politics of race in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> In his interview with Dwight, the Sheikh accuses Persians and Turks of their lack of a “true and heartfelt religiosity.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in his *Masnavi*, he claims that, unlike Kurds, Ottoman Turks were only nominally religious and lacked any religious feeling.<sup>57</sup>

In his discussion with Dwight, the Sheikh returns to the question of religiosity and insinuates that the missionaries were uninformed about Kurdish religiosity: “You think us [Kurds as] bad men because you see the Mahometanism [or Islam] of the Turks. That is in no respect to Mahometanism. Among [pious] Kourds there are no licentious men, no dishonesty, no lying.”<sup>58</sup> He tries to convince Dwight that Kurdish Islam was distinct from that of their Others. Kurds supposedly lived an ‘authentic Islam’, which manifested in their ‘virtuous life’ and ‘moral superiority.’ The Sheikh compared the Islam of “pious Kurds” with “true Christianity” of which he thought missionaries were the embodiments. He thus “went on and his face lighted up with a smile, ‘We seek what you seek.’”<sup>59</sup>

In his *Masnavi* too, the Sheikh presents an ethnicized view of religiosity, a phenomenon that gained greater currency among various Muslim communities by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>60</sup> While

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> For more on this, see Soleimani, Kamal. “Sheikh Ubeydullah and Islamic Revivalism” (*The Kurdish Studies Journal*, 4 (1), (2016): 5-24.

<sup>56</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission*, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>57</sup> Nehri. *Tuhfetü'l ahbab*: 111.

<sup>58</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission*, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Soleimani, Kamal. “Sheikh Ubeydullah and Islamic Revivalism: 5-24.

the Sheikh paint's Ottoman Turks' religiosity as being non-existent, pretentious, and insincere, he portrays Kurdish religiosity as real, vibrant, and mirroring the purity of the heart in Kurdish life.<sup>61</sup> Only the Arabs' bravery and piety could be compared with that of Kurds since, according to the Sheikh, they have a common origin.<sup>62</sup> In this vein, he notes that:

'd' in Kurd stands for *din* (religiosity)

'k' stands for *kamâl* and perfection

'r' for *rushd* spiritual maturation

Only in Kurds can you find<sup>63</sup>

All these virtues combined <sup>64</sup>

The Sheikh claims that the Ottomans Turks were *munâfiq*, lacking any real faith, while pretending to be Muslims. In his *Masnavi*, he recounts a hadith, attributed to the Prophet of Islam, the Ottomans' Islam was the embodiment of that hadith.<sup>65</sup> According to this hadith, the Prophet declared that there were three criteria by which one can tell if a person is a *munâfiq*; a) if he tells untruth as he speaks; b) if he breaks whatever promise he makes; c) if he deceives whenever he is trusted.<sup>66</sup>

The Sheikh's views about his Others were colored by a number of factors: the extraordinary situation in Kurdish regions, the rise of nationalism, and the center's treatment of the periphery. The post-War situation had turned Kurdistan into a place of utter misery. Capitan Clayton, in a report of his 1880 visit to his superior British official, vividly captures the region's reality. Despite the length, his description deserves great attention as he writes:

In several of the villages I visited only three or four of the richest households had any bread to eat at all; the remainder had slaughtered and salted their sheep and lived on this meat without any vegetable diet whatsoever, and disease was beginning to show itself in consequence. In other places, the villagers go out on the mountains and collect a certain root which they grind and use for making bread. The root is a somewhat large one, semi-woody and semi-succulent with a very bitter taste. The plant to which it belongs is said to have large broad leaves but I could not form the description of what species it belongs [to]. Several cases were reported to me of persons having been frozen to death whilst searching for it, and in nearly every village children had died from want of proper nourishment. The best bread I saw in the villages was made with one-third of this root and two-thirds barley meal (but such bread only the richest could afford) the worst consisted of a mixture of the root and linseed or hemp seed with hardly any flour

<sup>61</sup> Nehri. *Tuhfetu'l ahabab*:120-21.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> *Ke nadârad hích aqvam-e dígar*

<sup>64</sup> Nehri. *Tuhfetu'l ahabab*:120-21.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 109, 27.

<sup>66</sup> 'Alâmâtul munâfiqi thalâthaturi: 'idhâ hadatha kadhîba, wa 'idhâ wa'ada 'akhlafa, wa 'idhâ 'utmi'una khâna.

at all. This last kind of bread is said to produce a narcotic effect, often sending those who eat it into a sort of swoon or trance.<sup>67</sup>

Ubeydullah too, in his *Masnavi*, laments bitterly about the contemporaneous situation in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Kurdistan.

He refers to the previous decades of Kurdistan as the beacon of knowledge and spirituality all of which had been replaced with lawlessness and ignorance.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the lawlessness, due to destruction to the Kurdish principalities in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sheikh believed Kurdistan had lost its vibrancy. This situation, he claims, had left the people “to roam in the valleys of ignorance.”<sup>69</sup> The Sheikh argues that Turks and Persians used Kurdish ignorance and lawlessness to their advantage. He accused them for using the existing situation to perpetuate and legitimize their oppressive presence.<sup>70</sup> This is why despite his defeat in 1880, the Sheikh had not given up on another uprising against the states.

As indicated above, as far as I know, Dwight’s interview is the only available primary source that clearly evidences the Sheikh’s intent for his third uprising. Most importantly, this time around instead of the Qajars, the Ottoman state would have been the target. Knowing that the Sheikh was “contemplating a general insurrection of the Kourds,” Dwight informs us that “I tried to dissuade him from violence, assuring him that the result would be the destruction of all his hopes since a [Kurdish uprising] would satisfy England that the lawless reputation of the Kourds is well founded.”<sup>71</sup> Here, Dwight not only expresses his fears of the possible outcomes of a new Kurdish uprising but also reveals British views of Kurds, which sounded to be identical with that of the Qajar and Ottoman states. Still, Dwight’s report proves an utter inaccuracy of some historians’ claims in that the Sheikh was inchoate with the Ottoman against Christians.<sup>72</sup> As indicated earlier, scholars like McDowell and Özoğlu claim that the Sheikh’s 1880 uprising was inherently anti-Christian. McDowell goes on to state that the Sheikh’s uprising was nothing but “a scheme concocted in Istanbul.”<sup>73</sup> The above scholars, however, do not present any credible evidence for their claims. In contrast, Dwight attests that the “Sheikh [laid?]”<sup>74</sup> out without reserve his abhorrence of Turkish rule and his conviction that nothing but destruction awaits the Empire and who trusts in it.”<sup>75</sup> It is significant to note that in 1882, the Sheikh’s scion, Abdulqadir – who led the 1879 uprising and was also a commander in the 1880

<sup>67</sup> FO 195 / 1315. No. 2 Political to Trotter from Clayton. Van, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1880.

<sup>68</sup> Nehri. *Tuhfetu'l ahbab*: 129

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Parliamentary Papers. Turkey No. 5. (1881. Inclosure 3. No 5/61).

<sup>71</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission*, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. McDowall . *A Modern History of the Kurd*, 58, and Özoğlu. “Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?”, 203.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> This word is not legible in the original document.

<sup>75</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission*, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12.,1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300.

uprising – still continued his armed activities against the Ottoman state. The Ottoman state records confirm that in 1882, “Sheikh Abdulqadir, the son of Sheikh Ubeydullah, in his attack on the imperial army martyred ten soldiers and injured twelve more. He also captured thirty soldiers including their commanding officers.”<sup>76</sup>

Another illuminating aspect of Dwight’s report is that Ubeydullah’s defeat against the Qajar state made him disillusioned with possible European support for Kurds. Nonetheless, his disappointment with possible European support had not extinguished the fire in his rebellious soul. On the contrary, he deemed the Europeans to be mostly an obstacle to Kurdish national aspirations. Therefore, in response to Dwight’s attempts “to impress upon the Sheikh the necessity for patience”, the Sheikh “said bitterly ‘the position of Europe is to neither help us nor allow us to help ourselves.’”<sup>77</sup> However, it seems that missionaries like Dwight were convinced that Britain was concerned with the well-being of the people of the region, chief among them the Armenians. He assumed that British support of the Armenian minority would have a positive effect on the Kurdish situation, too. He seemed to have had trouble convincing the Sheikh of this saying that it “was very difficult to make him comprehend that England is determined to introduce good government into Armenia, and that the result of this would be to give a good government to his people also but that such a measure requires time.”<sup>78</sup> Later events, however, proved Dwight wrong. England was not “determined to introduce good government into Armenia” either.

## Conclusion

In this paper, my aim was to bring some unknown aspects of the Sheikh of Nehri’s religious and political thoughts to light. Through his case, I tried to illustrate some characteristics of Islamic thought evidencing the rise of Muslim nationalism(s). Ubeydullah rose in the periphery and yet his uprising should not be viewed as a peripheral event. The Sheikh’s uprising and his views illustrate a complex case of Kurdish nationalism’s relationship to Islam, the diverse nature of Kurdish Naqshbandi Order, and signify his role in the spread of Kurdish national

<sup>76</sup> See, *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (BOA: The Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office): Dosya No: 3, Gömlek No: 4, Fon Kodu: Y. PRK.A; Tarih: 23/M /1300 (Hicri)/ [4.12.1882]. It is interesting that despite Abdulqadir’s background, Özoğlu still portrays him as a pro-Caliphate. So, he states that the head of the pro-Caliphate “faction”, in post-1912, was none other than Seyyid Abdulqadir. Özoğlu sees no contradiction between the above claim and his earlier remarks when he states: “It is interesting to encounter his name in the CUP, then an underground organization that worked against the sultan/caliph Abdulhamid II, because Abdulkadir himself was a part of the Ottoman religious establishment” (90). These assertions become even more interesting when they are contrasted with the state records. The state documents reveal Abdulqadir had no qualms in fighting the caliphal rule and killing and injuring its soldiers, in 1882.

Özoğlu, Hakan. *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004: 124.

<sup>77</sup> ABCFM, *Western Turkey Mission, ABC 16.9.3, v. 12., 1880-1890. v. 4. C-E, No. 300*

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

consciousness. What is even more significant is the fact that this supposedly traditional Naqshbandi Sheikh held quite unusual Islamic religious views. Despite his relatively young age, the Sheikh had an enormous following. However, there is not much information available as to what extent his uncommon beliefs were known to or gained any credence among his followers. Despite the utter display of the Sheikh's Kurdish racial and nationalist views, his poetic oeuvre does not contain unorthodox religious views. It is also possible that the Sheikh's views were becoming known to the greater populace since-- according to the Ottoman state's records-- some Kurdish clergymen protested the Sheikh and accused him of disbelief. This happened especially as the Ottoman forces transferred him to Mosel, in 1882.<sup>79</sup> Yet, in many ways, his poetic work corroborates the account of him provided by Western missionaries. The two put together reveal quite a lot about the Sheikh's previously unknown religiopolitical views and his charismatic personality.

As shown, Rumi's impact on the Sheikh's religious thought is also indisputable. However, there are certain factors that set the two clearly apart. Notwithstanding their important commonalities, each of these figures' religious views and poetry carries the hallmark of 'the spirit' of their age. Despite Rumi's allusions to the beauty of his mother tongue and comparing it with Arabic, unlike Ubeydullah, he does not ethnicize or racialize religious beliefs. Conversely, Ubeydullah's universalist views were affected by his nationalist politics. In Ubeydullah's view, the nature of one's racial character affected the content and the purity of one's religiosity. Therefore, he argues that Kurdish religiosity, just like their ethnicity, was distinct from that of Turks and Persians. Kurds, he claimed, espoused the "truest or purest religion (pâk din)." This is the reason why he challenged the American missionary not to judge Islam based on Turkish and Persian religious practices. The "true Islam" was represented by Kurdish religious experience and practices as they were the only "people of the purest religion."

As noted, Ubeydullah's uprising was significant in exemplifying the fusion of Islam with nationalist aspirations. A phenomenon that was going to become widespread among Muslims in the next century. The religiopolitical project of Ubeydullah was a remarkable example of how Islamic revivalism could go hand in hand with nationalism. Such a fact is an utter negation of claims that the Sheikh's rising was but an Ottoman-Kurdish conspiracy against Christian in the Eastern provinces of the empire. The Sheikh's views and acts fly in the face of such a speculative scholarship.

<sup>79</sup> BAŞBAKANLIK OSMANLI ARŞİVİ(BOA): Dosya No: 486; Gömlek No: 64; Fon Kodu: A.}MKT.MHM Tarih:29/Ca/1298 (Hicri) [28.04.1881]

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