THE WORK ETHIC AND AHI TRADITION OF TURKEY

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PREFACE

I have been studying on business ethics since my PhD thesis. Work culture and work related issues have always been attracting research topics to me. In my PhD thesis, I compared Muslim, Protestant and Catholic work ethics in Turkey, Britain and Ireland. After completing my PhD thesis, I continued to study work ethics in different societies, such as Japan, Denmark, Norway, China and Germany. I conducted several cross-cultural research projects and published some articles in scholarly journals. However, when I reviewed my previous works I noticed that a very important cultural element in Turkish work ethic was ignored. This important element was the Medieval Ahi Brotherhood and its Ahi work ethic. With this awareness, I decided to summarize my previous works about work ethic and connect them to the Ahi tradition of Turkey in a new book. Therefore, the aim of this book is to review different work ethics and Ahi tradition together.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to overview the concept of work ethic based on Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic thesis, and to reveal work oriented attitudes in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, also in Muslim Ahi tradition of Turkey. Ahi tradition includes very strong work ethic with this-worldly ascetism which is explained in Weber’s thesis.

“Ahı” is an Arabic word and means brother. However, in Turkish the word of “Ahı” only refers to a medieval brotherhood and its members. An Ahı is a person who is a member of Ahı brotherhood. The term of “Ahiilik” in Turkish means “Ahi organization”.

The Ahi religious order was established and developed by Anatolian Turks in the 13th century. The Ahı institution was a kind of guild organization which organized and controlled all commercial, cultural and educational activities in Turkish society. However, the Ahı organization was not only an economic organization but also a religious Sufi order that follow the ancient Futuwwat Order’s principles as its moral basis. We do not have satisfactory information about Medieval Futuwwat Order. We only know that they had close relationship with the Ismaili Order and İhvan-us-Safa Movement. Some argued that even their origin comes from Karmati Movement (Tokalak, 2017).

In addition to economic and religious aspects, Ahı organizations also had some kind of military functions, especially during invasion periods. Military branches of Ahı organizations were composed
of male and female military units. Male military units of Ahi organizations were called “Gaziyan-i-Rum” which can be translated as Knights of Anatolia. Female military units were called “Bajiyan-i-Rum” which can be translated as Sisters of Anatolia. In Seljuk Empire, Turkish people of Anatolia mostly used the term (Rum) means land of Romans or Anatolia instead of Turk for their ethnic identity. Because they were living in the territory of former East-Roman Empire. The term of Roman later was only used for Greek speaking Orthodox Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Anatolia peninsula was known by Turks as country of Romans. The term of Roman does not refer any particular race or ethnicity but only a cultural and geographic identity. However, Ahi Movement was not a military order like Knight Templars. They just organized defense units against Mongol invasion of Anatolia and dissolved military units after the establishment of Ottoman State.

In sum, the Ahi institution was an economic, religious and military organization which shaped Turkish business and work ethic in the medieval times. The Ahi institution contributed to the Turkish settlement of Anatolia and development of Turkish moral values. During the 13th century, Ahi organizations played an important role in attracting of Turkish immigration to Anatolia. The Ahi convents (zaviye) provided accommodation for newly arrived immigrants and also work opportunities for the skilled ones. Ahi order has its own code of conducts. These ethical principles shaped Turkish commercial culture in the region and its ethical effects can be traced in modern Turkish small business.

Ahi spirit and principles of Ahi movement has many common roots with modern business ethics. Ahi spirit strongly encourages work ethic. Ahi people do not believe in personal salvation in an isolated other-worldly ascetism. Like Protestant Puritans, they believe that work and profession are sacred activities to please God. When Max Weber wrote his famous “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” he argued that only Protestant and particularly
Calvinists societies can develop the spirit of capitalism or work ethic. He only analyzed other-worldly Islamic Sufism of the 19th century. If he had the opportunity to analyze the Ahi movement, it is very likely that he would have had different views about Islamic work ethic.

We can see a considerable similarity between the altruist nature of Ahi movement and the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) of modern business ethics. According to CSR business firms have an obligation to society that extends beyond its narrow obligations to its owners or shareholders. Two actions are encouraged in CSR. First business should protect, which avoiding negative impacts on society. Second, business should improve the welfare of society which implies creating positive benefits for society. The idea of social responsibility supposes that the corporation has not only economic and legal obligations, but also certain responsibilities to society which extend beyond these obligations. Business has an economic obligation to society. Business has a responsibility to produce goods and services that society wants and to sell them at a profit. Unless a business is economically viable, its other responsibilities become moot. To achieve its economic responsibilities, business must be effective, efficient and make wise strategic decisions.