

THE COMMUNITY OF THE LEARNED AND
ŞEYHÜLİSLAM IN THE EARLY OTTOMAN STATE
(1300–1566)*

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Introduction

The term *şeyhülislam*, composed of two originally Arabic words, *şaykh* (old man or chief) and *islām*, first appears to have emerged as an honorific title reserved for the most highly respected among the *ülemā*, as well as for the most prominent Sufis in the province of Khurasān in the second half of the fourth century A.H., namely in the end of the tenth century A.D.¹ From its appearance in Khurasān, *şeyhülislam* as a term and as an office (not yet in the sense of the Ottoman usage which will be treated in detail below) spread into various lands, such as Arabia, Persia, China and India, etc.² The title seems to have developed in somewhat different forms in each of these diverse lands, notwithstanding the fact that it has signified generally a judicial authority over the learned class. In this survey, I shall rather confine my research specifically to the early evolution of *şeyhülislam* as a high religious office in the Ottoman Empire, after offering a few important points with regard to its general aspects.

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¹ J. H. Kramer, "Shaikh al-Islām", *First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913–1936*, eds. M. Houtsma and A. Wensinck (Leiden, 1987), 7: 275.

² R. W. Bulliet, "The Shaikh al-Islām and the Evolution of Islamic Society," *Studia Islamica* (1972) 35: 54.

In some of the Muslim territories certain titles of reverence came into use in addition to that of the more widespread *Şeyhülislam*: *‘Imād al-Islām* (Pillar of Islam), *Fakhr al-Islām* (Honor of Islam), *Rukn al-Islām* (Basis of Islam), *Zayn al-Islām* (Ornament of Islam), *Shams al-Islām* (Sun of Islam), *Jamāl al-Islām* (Beauty of Islam), *Ḍiyā’ al-Islām* (Light of Islam), *Bahā’ al-Islām* (Splendor of Islam), *Hujjat al-Islām* (Proof of Islam), *Burhān al-Islām* (Authority of Islam) and *Nizām al-Islām* (Order of Islam, and so on.³ Each of these honorary epithets was attributed to only a few scholars who specialized in various Islamic disciplines, but more particularly in Islamic law. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), for instance, received the appellation *Hujjat al-Islām* (Proof of Islam) for having composed several eminent works in defense of Islamic dogmas against the attacks of philosophers.⁴

The term *şeyhülislam*, however, was not uniquely applied to one or two individuals, but according to one Ottoman Turkish source, as a title it had been attributed to three groups of people before the advent of the Ottoman State.⁵

(i) A learned person is called *Şeyhülislam* by his countrymen without any restriction,⁶ (ii) the man who was recognized with the nickname of *Şeyhülislam*,⁷ (iii) the man who acquired a certificate (*icāzetnāme*) to issue *fetvās* (religious verdicts) on some judicial matters.⁸

³ Mehmet Pakalın, *Tarih Deyimleri ve Terimleri Sözlüğü* (Istanbul, 1965), 3: 347.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ‘Alī Emīrī Efendi, “Meşihāt-ı İslāmiye Tarihçesi,” *İlmiye Salnāmesi* (Istanbul, 1334), 305.

⁶ For instance, the celebrated theologian Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī was generally known as *Şeyhülislam* to the people of Herat. See, *ibid.*, n. 1.

⁷ ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Isbijābī became famous by his nickname *Şeyhülislam*. *Ibid.*, n. 2.

⁸ ‘Alī E. Efendi, in referring to the *Kitāb al-A‘lām*, notes that *Şeyhülislam* Abū Muẓaffar İbrāhīm al-Burhānī obtained the