

# Force of Islam: Muslim Temporal Spacing in the German Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This text discusses the case of Talip, son of Turkish immigrants to Germany and a recent convert to Islam. Specifically, the text addresses Talip's reasons for a (re)conversion and the details of his embrace of Islam as the religion of his ancestors. The argument is made that processes of conversion cannot be captured through the conceptualization of different stages or phases except in retrospect. In showing this impossibility, the text further argues that every conversion needs to attach itself or revolve around a specific event that is taken as cathartic for making the move towards the new faith. Attempts that delineate commonalities in processes of conversion and that then speak of phases or stages are able to illuminate the social dimension of this phenomenon. The focus on events, proposed here, is able to much better highlight the idiosyncratic, contingent and personal dimensions of the same phenomenon.*

I have known Talip for more than 15 years now but when I last met with him, in the summer of 2007, I was surprised. He seemed like a new man and it appeared to me, at first glance, that he had changed quite a bit over the three years since I had seen him last. To be sure, we had stayed in contact all this time through regular email and occasional phone conversations and so it was not a complete surprise for me to see him so changed. He had kept me informed about the very important changes that had taken place in his life. Talip had always been very proud of his Turkish heritage. His parents had migrated to the southwest of Germany when he was just two years old, had left him with an old German couple during the day while they were working in a local factory, and he had grown up in this German-Turkish world to become a successful technician for advanced radio installations. I had first met him in the fall of 1999 when conducting my dissertation fieldwork through

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a mutual friend – also a German-Turk – with whom I had gone to high school. As I got to know Talip better, I learned that he was very career-oriented and professionally competitive, but otherwise a quiet young man, even mellow and shy, in his early 20s who was pleasant to talk to and who – this is not to be underestimated – was always ready to share his experiences and reflections with me in the context of my research. I had, however, never heard Talip – at the time – speak about the relevance of religion in his life. He had, over time, come to appear to me as a thoroughly secular young man, not interested in the ongoing upsurge of religious sentiment among some of his Turkish friends. He stuck with his plan: to be successful professionally and to thus amply document his stake in belonging to middle-class German society – despite his Turkish origins.

### **Transformation in a Migrant's Life: A Surprise**

In the summer of 2007 we met in a Turkish tea house in the middle of town since Talip was no longer willing to meet me in the bars or cafes where we had once talked for hours about his life as the child of Turkish immigrant workers to Germany. Now, we were sitting in a very Turkish-looking tea house where only other Turkish immigrant men were present. There were no chairs, only cushions around small, low-made tables where the tea was served in typical Turkish fashion. But it was not the ethnic flair that had made Talip a regular here or, for that matter, offered the appeal to any of the other regulars. This was the tea room in the only *Masjid*, an Islamic center, of the small southwestern German town of Metzingen. I knew the place well: during my previous field work I had been here often since it was one of the few places where the *Nurcular* met, a Turkish Sufi order that aimed at reconciling the benefits of Islamic thought with those of modernity. The southwestern German region of Swabia is a quite affluent region, rural but highly developed in economic terms with a thriving industry that ensures the livelihood of locals and immigrants alike. This is important since the conventional wisdom that only disenfranchised migrants in Europe would turn to Islam as an alternative form of identification is difficult to sustain here. Willing to follow this wisdom to a certain degree, I was surprised to see Talip in this place and to see that he had, in only three years, turned to Islam. To me, he had always seemed a model case for immigrant upward mobility, to borrow Ayse Caglar's phrase.<sup>2</sup> He had always appeared to follow the prescribed path of a second-generation immigrant, staking his claim to make it in mainstream secular German society. Moreover, Talip had always adhered to a Turkish, secular and laicist ideology that followed the hallmarks of the Turkish Kemalist way of life to the letter. To be sure, he had never eaten pork but to hear him say that he now exclusively bought in *Halal* butcher

shops; that he was fasting during Ramadan; that he observed religiously (if you permit me the pun here) the prayer times; and that he had dropped all his secular Turkish friends to exclusively socialize with the members of the *Masjid* – all this was very surprising.

But I was most surprised about something entirely different. Over the last few years, Talip had kept me informed about the changes in his life and his conversion to Islam. What really surprised me the most was his utter dedication and conviction that this was the right way of life; what surprised me the most was his steadfast and passionate attachment to his newfound faith and that he was willing to make significant sacrifices for it. I would have, at the very least, expected him to be somewhat unsure about all this, to question his decisions and to ponder alternatives; but there seemed to be no indication that he questioned any of it even though the consequences had been quite dramatic. He had kept me informed about his conversion but he had never told me about the event that had triggered all of this: he had lost his job and was now unemployed because he had frequently gotten into trouble with his German and Turkish immigrant co-workers due to his refusal to make compromises in reconciling his job responsibilities and his religious practice. He had had many affairs with women that were mostly of a fleeting, short-lived nature and never lasted more than a few months; he stopped doing this virtually overnight three years ago. He had also broken with his father who had always been proud of Talip's accomplishments before his conversion. As Talip told me, the father, a staunch Kemalist, could not come to terms with his son becoming an "Islamist radical."<sup>3</sup> Many other members of Talip's family shared the father's feelings of concern and disappointment. But all this didn't seem to bother Talip in his passionate attachment to being a Muslim. He was, it appeared to me, willing to make all these sacrifices readily, willingly, gladly to pursue the chaste life of submission to his faith. He did not appear, even when he recounted these consequences of his conversion, in the least upset or troubled by them; he appeared to be someone entirely at ease with himself and his surrounding world.

In a way, Talip's behavior reminded me of the opening story in Jenny White's book on Islamism in Turkey. She, too, encountered such an attitude when she was working with the *Refah Partisi* in the period leading up to its eventual ban by the Turkish state as unconstitutional. She, too, recounted her utter surprise that the party members were not in the least concerned about the imminent ban on their party.<sup>4</sup> Whatever might happen, it seems, the faithful organized in this party would find a way – just like Talip was reassuring me that my concerns about his future were entirely unfounded and unnecessary.

This text, then, is an attempt to come to terms with my surprise about the recent turn of events in Talip's life. The text is an attempt to understand, to make sense, of that which appears to be irrational in Talip's behavior. In looking at his and other similar cases more closely, I hope to shed light on the bewilderment that we might well be entitled to feel when the progressive narrative of modernity is shattered so profoundly.<sup>5</sup> For we have, for quite some time now, happily embedded most cases of migration in this modern narrative of social upward mobility. As Talip's and other cases suggest, however, we can no longer continue to perform such a gesture; a gesture that is, I suspect, more rooted in our own desires than in the desires of those migrants we study.

### **The Event – In Search of Origin**

On that warm, sunny day in May 2007 when I finally met Talip again, I was eager to find the reasons for his conversion. I wanted to find out what specific event in his life had triggered all this – especially because he had been vague and unresponsive about my questions to this effect on the phone and in my emails to him when he had first told me about his newfound faith. I needed to establish an event, needed to find a particular thing that had happened to Talip in his life that would offer an explanation. For, after all, he might well have turned to religion but there needed to be, I felt, a reason for this, and it had better be a good one. After all, I felt a little betrayed by him. I had met him, had gotten to like him and befriended him as a certain kind of person almost 10 years ago and now he had changed so completely. In a sense, I felt a bit like his father, too: he had left the well-worn, good, and prescribed path that I had seen taken by so many second-generation immigrant Turks in Germany – he had left the path of social upward mobility. But what was most difficult for me to forgive him for was that he had done all this while I had been away, for three years, and unable to trace and monitor his conversion firsthand in daily interactions. Why could he not have found his faith when I was there, present, to share this path with him? I was thus selfishly searching for an event that would offer an explanation.

What had triggered Talip's conversion? Initially, Talip himself was evasive and non-committal in his answers to this question. Perhaps his reluctance came as a response to the obvious urgency in my desire to understand something that was not at all a problem for him. He told me that in fact there had been no single event that had triggered his conversion. Then, he began to speak about his present life and, sensing that I would not get any further with my initial question, I followed his lead as he reported about his new life. He was eager to make me understand the very deep sense of community that he had found among his Muslim

brothers and sisters. He explained to me that he had never experienced anything like it and stressed repeatedly how selfless and communal the social fabric of this group was and how readily they had allowed him to become a member, had helped him with his problems and had shared with him their own experiences about becoming members when he initially joined them.

It is important here that we recognize the importance of Islam offering itself as a complete ideology. This importance derives from the very fact that its completeness lies precisely in its difference to late modern capitalism

He was just about done with his narrative of how his life had changed over the past few years when an older man came over to our table to join the conversation. It was Mehmet, a man of about 70 years who had played a leading role in establishing this *Masjid* and continued to be one of the most central figures in its operation. He greeted both of us warmly, inquired what we spoke about and, after accepting Talip's deferent greeting, sat down to join us. Immediately, Talip's demeanor changed dramatically. While it had been a conversation among old friends until now, casual and governed by the relative freedom of a mutual acceptance of equality, the presence of hierarchy now creeping into our conversation was impossible to miss. Talip, who had been quite personal in his narrative, immediately started to inject quotes from the *Qu'ran* and the *Hadith* to make his points and our conversation quickly deteriorated into a discussion of the benedictal character of Islamic orthodoxy. As Talip was displaying his newly acquired knowledge of the sources of Islam, Mehmet was benevolently nodding his head, occasionally praising how much Talip already knew and how cogently he was using the sources. On a few occasions, Mehmet also complemented Talip's statements with a few of his own, likewise drawing on the sources of Islamic orthodoxy and always in an attempt to back up what Talip had said in his own, less scholarly way before.

What made this intrusion of Mehmet and the subsequent change in Talip's style of narrative so valuable for me was that the topic remained the same. But while Talip had initially, when we were alone, reported his conversion and its consequences in very personal terms, he had now shifted the register to justify his choices from the perspective of a whole plethora of orthodox statements of doing right by his faith. He had thus given me, sparked by Mehmet's appearance, the same story but in fundamentally different ways: he had given me a personal and an official version from the perspective of his present way of life.<sup>6</sup> In the following example from our conversation, I returned to the question of Talip's break with

his family, especially his father. After asking whether Talip did not feel regret over this break, Mehmet jumped in and answered the question for Talip, again taking recourse to proper Islamic sources. Citing a specific *Hadith* about migration and following the truth of faith, Mehmet also offered his own interpretation of this *Hadith*. Here is the text of the saying, which Mehmet first recited to us in Arabic and then translated into German:

The reward of deeds depends upon the intention and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. So whoever emigrated for Allah and His Apostle, then his emigration was for Allah and His Apostle. And whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration was for what he emigrated for.<sup>7</sup>

Mehmet interpreted this *Hadith* in a very interesting way and related it to Talip's context. He explained that Talip had performed an emigration from his prior life by embracing his faith. Because this emigration was performed in the name of Allah, Talip was justified in breaking with some members of his family for they had only emigrated for their own benefit. Here, Mehmet skillfully weaved together the migratory background of Talip's parents with the latter's own 'migration' when he embraced Islam. Talip himself had earlier, before Mehmet had joined us, narrated and justified his break with his father by simply stating that his father had strayed from the true path of faith and he, Talip, was thus justified in breaking with him all the while hoping that his father would someday also return to the righteous path. The upshot of this example lies in following: Talip was quick to confirm the validity of Mehmet's analysis as it more substantially corroborated his own personal narrative of the story of his break with the father. This means, however, that Talip fully supported the primacy of the official Islamic doctrine and accepted it as governing his life. In other words, Talip had fully submitted to the law as spelled out by the accepted Islamic sources and was striving to live to the letter of this law to the best of his ability even if that meant breaking with some of his most immediate family members.

As this procedure repeated itself in subsequent conversations over the following weeks, I was very much taken aback by the uncritical manner in which Talip practiced his new belief. He had certainly been exposed to a substantial training in critical thinking: he had finished high school, had a university degree in engineering, and had always struck me as a very reflective and thoughtful person. His new practice of uncritically incorporating Islamic doctrine into his life and radically breaking with any critical reflection upon it struck me as unusual. As a consequence, I began to pursue with even more determination the search for an answer to the 'why' of this change.

But it was not until several weeks into my field stay that Talip started to sincerely address my questions of what had brought about the turn to Islam. What emerged as the sum of various answers he gave me on several occasions to this question is, however, somewhat surprising: it was in fact not a single event that had led him to embrace Islam; rather, it was the rising feeling of an unfulfilled life that lacked direction. In one statement, Talip put it thus:

I was at this party with some of my friends. And after a while, I found myself sitting alone on a bench and watching the others as they danced and drank beer and were hitting on women. At that moment, I just felt that my life was so empty and I asked myself whether I really wanted to go on like this forever. I decided there and then that I would not do that – I became a Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

It was not a specific event at this party that induced Talip to become a Muslim. In previous times, we had been to many similar events and I had never seen him, on any of these occasions, in a pensive or reluctant mood as he was trying to pick up women, drink beer or hard liquor, or dance to gangsta rap. There was nothing in this narration of the event that could substantiate his choice. Since I could still not discern any particular event that had triggered Talip's conversion, I resolved to search elsewhere for reasons.

Sometime later, I asked him whether his turn to Islam had anything to do with his background as the son of migrant parents. This came about in the context of my question whether it had to be specifically Islam or whether it would be possible that he could have chosen other, similar religions such as Lutheran Protestantism or Catholicism. To this he clearly answered that Islam was the only religion that made sense to him and that he had not been in search for a religion in general but that it had always been only Islam which appealed to him. To my injunction that he had been profoundly secular until recently, he replied that this did not matter anymore, now that he had found the true faith. He also confirmed that this was most likely rooted in his own heritage as the son of at least nominal Muslims that his parents were.

It was then here that I had to look for the gesture that performed this claim for origin. This gesture was not rooted in an event that had actually happened to Talip. In fact, nothing had happened to Talip, nothing changed, nothing unsettled him – and precisely what he had found unbearably unsettling was this very fact that nothing had happened. In his profoundly (post)modern desire for a catharsis — an event that would fundamentally change the fabric of his own life, would annihilate it so that he could arise as a new man — Talip had attached himself to an event that was not properly his but that allowed him to turn his life upside down,

to affect the fundamental changes he so longed for. It was this event that allowed him to reach out and find a new community that would both reflect his desire for change and share his attachment to the original moment of the event, that ushered in precisely the order that Talip was now attached to. The event I had been searching for had already long happened, exactly 1,385 years ago, in Mecca when Mohammed had collected his few faithful and had migrated to Medina. This was the event that had happened in Talip's life, the event that had encroached upon and taken control over it. To this event, Talip was passionately attached and this attachment had not been induced by a cathartic event in his own life. Rather, the very lack of such an event, of change in general in Talip's life, had forced him to embrace the truth of the event of Mohammed and the *Hijra*.

This is a substantial claim and we should not proceed too hasty with our assessment here. We would first need to establish, in Talip's life, the expression of feeling a void, of feeling a lack that would induce him to seek catharsis. It is fortunate, in this context, that I was able to speak at length with Talip prior to his conversion during my fieldwork in the summer of 2002 and, even more extensively, during my dissertation fieldwork in the years 2000-2001. At this time, prior to his conversion, Talip and I had spoken repeatedly about his secular orientation. On no occasion had he indicated that he was interested in Islam or that he was even considering becoming a practicing Muslim. He had merely told me about his respect for the "religion of his forefathers" and that he considered himself a "nominal Muslim." Beyond these very vague and general statements of a relation to Islam, Talip was not interested at all.

However, there were also many occasions on which Talip expressed his dissatisfaction with how his life was going. Though he was somewhat popular with women, by his mid-20s he had not yet found a stable partner even though he longed for such a stable relationship. One reason he gave was that his parents were eager to marry him off to a woman from Turkey – something that they considered a more proper match but that he outright refused to partake in. Talip repeatedly stated that one reason for his lack of success with long-term relationships was the pressure exerted on him by his parents to find a more proper mate in Turkey. As Talip explained, his parents did not consider a German woman "a good fit" for their eldest son. Perhaps these problems with his family played a role in Talip's decision to embrace Islam.

What was undoubtedly far more important for Talip's decision to become a faithful Muslim was his sense that his life was lacking direction in a more general sense. In a series of conversations in 2000, Talip had told me that he was unhappy





Photo: AA, Cüneyd Karadag

*Finding reconciliation between Western and Islamic values will not always be easy but it is possible.*

with the lack of meaning in his life. At the time, I had indeed attributed these complaints in large parts to his unhappiness with not having a partner but now, in hindsight, I was far more ready to attribute this unhappiness to a more general search for meaning – in other words to take Talip and his statements of 2000 far more seriously. At the time, I had still believed that Talip was merely complaining about specific issues in his life – like not having a partner, sometimes about his job situation, problems with friends, etc. In hindsight, it became clear that Talip was, even then, searching for the meaning in his life that he felt was fundamentally lacking. Take, for instance, the following statement from Talip, made in 2000 about his love life when we were discussing his mother's repeated attempts to offer to Talip marriage to a Turkish girl that he simply was not interested in:

[My mother] absolutely wants me to meet this girl from Bursa. But I have no interest in her, I know how it's going to be again: she will be all dotting to me and wanting to come to Germany to live with me and her family and my family will pressure us to accept the deal. But I'm not interested in this girl – I want to choose by myself. [Pause] I don't know...maybe I should agree to all of this and then it would be over...

Following my question about how he would get out of having to travel to Turkey and meet this woman, Talip stated:

Ah, I've done it before. I'll just not talk to my parents for a while, not contact them and after a few weeks the people in Turkey will be mad and give up. That's easy. The bad thing is: my mother won't give up, she will find me new girls in the families of her friends back home and it will never stop...until I'm married. So, maybe it would be best to just tell her that I agree...

At the time, my understanding of these statements had focused largely on the issue itself. I felt sympathy for Talip in his attempts to ward off the seemingly never-ending attempts of his parents and especially his mother to get him married to a proper partner in Turkey. Now, after the fact of his conversion, these statements appear to me in a different light: I now focus more on their ending. For, in both statements, Talip displays a distinct fatigue with the issue and seems to ponder giving in to his parents' demands. At the time, I simply saw this as a momentary, passing sentiment of frustration. But in 2007, after his conversion, I went through all the tapes with our prior conversations again. This made me realize that they were full of examples of Talip's exhaustion in many respects: he was tired of his parents and frequently expressed anxiety about his relationship to them; he was frustrated that he had to end his soccer career at a local club due to injury; he didn't like the colleagues at his job even though he was known as a very amicable and flexible person concerning his social contacts; he had hoped to get a better position initially with his university degree and was frustrated that this hadn't happened; he increasingly – over the 14 months of our conversations in 2000/2001 – expressed frustration about his life in general.

In sum, the frustration in Talip's life was, even at the time, very real. But it appears to me today that Talip and I were engaged in a collective effort to cover over these tensions and frustrations, to make everything seem like he was a textbook case of a successful migrant. Looking back on our relationship at the time I am relatively certain that I did not intend to make Talip into the model-case of the socially upward mobile Turkish immigrant in Germany. This was not the reason why I clearly helped him to downplay his frustration with his life. Rather, it seems that I simply had gotten to like him over the years, that I had befriended him and that I was trying to help a friend in need deal with his problems by "putting things in perspective." Indeed, the tapes regularly report me using precisely this expression in response to Talip's statements of frustration. In short, the frustration that had been building in Talip's life and that eventually lead to his embrace of Islam as the solution to his troubles had been building for quite some time. But it was only in retrospect, after the event of his conversion had taken place, that his frustration could be meaningfully inserted in this specific context. Talip's conversion was the quilting point at which all the heterogeneous elements in Talip's

life were brought together and, finally, made sense. Of course, if they had not been brought together in this fashion, in a quilting point, their heterogeneity would not have posed a problem for, as we saw, this is how I interpreted some of Talip's behavior patterns before without seeing a problem in it. Still, the question remains about the role Islam has played in all this. To put it more concretely: Why did Islam figure as the quilting point? Why did Talip's choice to embrace Islam inject, in hindsight or retrospect, all this sense into his prior life? Why did it, my initial surprise notwithstanding, make so much sense for Talip to be a Muslim? We will pursue these questions in what follows.

Islam offers a space that Muslims can inhabit, even if it is ambiguously and sometimes paradoxically constructed in transnational, late modern forms of existence

### Force of Islam

If we want to understand the role that Islam has come to play in Talip's life, it will be useful to first analyze in more detail the metaphysical and ontological structures of his life prior to becoming a practicing Muslim. When he turned 26, Talip had made enough money to afford the ultimate symbol of his social upward mobility: he could afford for himself one of the new versions of the Austin Mini that BMW had thrown on the market a few years earlier. It was the status symbol that perhaps reflected best his values in life, together, maybe, with the spacious and airy loft in a newly built apartment complex that he inhabited all by himself. When I encountered Talip in the summer of 2007 all these status symbols of his early yuppie life had vanished. He was living with two other young Muslim men in a shabby apartment a few streets away from the *Masjid*, he no longer had a car and he was living off unemployment benefits. When I confronted him with what seemed to me a stark decline in his living situation, he responded with admirable equanimity: "These material things no longer mean anything to me. I've found my faith." In a later interview, he added to this statement a critique of Western consumerism:

When I was still working, I was so hung up on material possessions. I had this cool car, the apartment, I was so proud when I had a woman. And all this was so empty. When I had this car [the Mini], I wanted a better one. When I got the apartment, it was soon too small for me and I wanted a bigger one, one in a better location, too. All this search for getting better things was so fake, so empty. Now I am so happy I don't have to do this anymore, I'm so happy I found my faith.

The very lifestyle that had made Talip quite proud earlier in his life and that he had been pursuing with such determination is disavowed as "empty" and

In this temporal roundedness or completeness, Islam furnishes the believer with what the modern agnostic or atheist lacks: the assurance of truth but not just of any truth – a truth that is firmly rooted in a specific space and time

“fake” in this statement. This emptiness Talip attributes to the never-ending tasks with which he was obsessed during his times as a socially upward mobile German-Turkish immigrant – as he was proudly driving his Mini and living in his bachelor pad. But this obsession with his lifestyle seems to have left Talip feeling increasingly empty and that he was leading a life without clear purpose.

It appears that a particular purpose or meaningful goal was lacking in Talip’s life and that he felt this lack with increasing urgency. In the summer 2007, he stated it thus:

Sure I was happy with my life, with all the things that I had or that I could buy or the vacations. That was nice. But somehow, I didn’t feel that anything, that any of this, meant much to me after a while. It was nice for a few years after I had grown up in such poverty but then it was all so empty. It really left me without any goal in my life...

Just prior to finding Islam, Talip was clearly in search of a more meaningful life. It is admittedly difficult to discern, in retrospect, how much this increasing urgency of having to find a meaning in life did really contribute to the event of Talip’s conversion. This is difficult because the most lucid statements that I could find about this where post factum accounts by Talip himself from the summer of 2007. In hindsight, however, Talip might have felt an additional pressure to justify the radical change in his life brought on by his embrace of Islam. It is therefore not easy to discern to what degree Talip really was in search of a radical change in his life before this change actually occurred and to what degree this was a later justification of something in need of justifying for a variety of reasons. It is impossible to find a definitive answer to this question since we must remain in our analyses of his statements – both those before and after the event of Talip’s conversion – within the contextual horizon in which they were made. This means that no statement made before the event can be understood as “proving,” or “justifying,” or “necessarily leading up to” the event, as making it valid in retrospect, as making it necessary in its coming about. Likewise, no statement made after the fact can be taken to verify a necessary development towards the cathartic event of Talip’s conversion. Both kinds of statements must be viewed within their context: from before and after the event, without and with(in) the knowledge of the event. In asserting this contextual reading, I deliberately go against the commonplace view that conversion (or a re-conversion such as in Talip’s case) follows

certain stages that can be easily discerned or identified.<sup>9</sup> The problem with such a stage-oriented understanding of conversion is that it largely negates the subjective and highly volatile character of individual decisions that lead to a break with one's old life and an embrace of a wholly new life (even if this 'new' life is often not so novel after all). A stage-centered understanding of individual conversion processes over determines the socio-cultural factors and neglects the individual motives.<sup>10</sup>

It is thus necessary to bring these two elements together in this case. On the one hand, it is impossible to find contextual evidence that would prove the necessity of the event, of its coming to pass as a necessary consequence of a process culminating in its passage. It is, on the other hand, however, very much possible to develop an understanding of Talip's actions from the perspective of the meaning of the event itself. In other words, it is the event that organizes both its 'before' and 'after.' The event is necessary in the sense that only from its own horizon of meaning can we establish an understanding of Talip's actions both before and after the event itself happened.

In turning to Islam, Talip did not perform an action that was a necessary result of his unhappiness with his prior life. To be sure: there are many people who are unhappy with their present lives but who do not embrace Islam or, for that matter, generally act in such a radical manner to change their lives and to make them more meaningful. Rather, Talip's choice to embrace Islam at a specific point was an assertion, not grounded within anything but its own gesture. There had, certainly, been many indicators (for example, his family roots within Islam, the alternative of Islam to a German way of life, etc.) that could partially explain Talip's agency in the event but none of these indicators was strong enough to make this a necessary conclusion of a process of unhappiness on Talip's part. In the event of claiming Islam as his own faith, Talip asserted that he wanted to radically change his life, to fill it with meaning.<sup>11</sup> The question that remains for us, however, is the following: why would Talip be so sure that Islam could indeed fill the void in his life? What, specifically, was this lack or void in Talip's life prior to the event?

To answer these questions we must, once more, return to his statements of unhappiness made before the conversion. There we find, as we saw in the two examples given above, frequent expressions of frustration fueled by Talip's feeling that his life had no direction, no goal, and no purpose. In other words, while Talip apparently felt sufficiently rooted in his past, he had no goal for the future; everything appeared to him to revolve around the same issues that would not

change – cars, flats, women, etc. as status symbols. It is thus a gesture of temporalization that we find in Talip's turn to Islam. More concretely, Talip's turn to Islam was an assertion for a meaningful future for his own life. In Islam, Talip found the meaning that was lacking in his prior life – not in his past or origin, but in his future trajectory as a person, a subject. Islam, it seems, was able to provide him with this futural sense of direction and purpose. Talip himself pointed that out in the summer of 2007:

Now my life has meaning. I know how to orient myself, I know how to structure my day, I know what to do and not to do. I have a purpose again in my life: I can pray, I fast, I observe the five principles, I study the sources. All this gives my life a purpose that it did not have before [my conversion]...

In a sense, it appears in this statement as if his turn to Islam would have completed Talip as a person. Before, he was searching and restless – now he was resting within himself because Islam gave him the purpose that his prior life had lacked so profoundly. About this specific change, Talip was not reluctant to speak – he freely shared his sense of relief with me on many occasions. It appears that he himself was, perhaps unconsciously, aware that his life had not lacked in origin but in a meaningful future before and this was his way of expressing it.

(Before we can move on with our analysis of this case, I need to open a parenthesis. It concerns the impression that my analysis of Talip's case about the compatibility of Islam and a capitalist lifestyle might give to readers. In my account of Talip's case, it seems that I move towards a position where Islam and a lifestyle that enjoys capitalist commodity fetishism are mutually exclusive. This is certainly not incorrect in relation to my analysis of Talip's specific case. In Talip's case, the turn to Islam did indeed replace his earlier unbridled commodity fetishism. In his case, then, commodity fetishism and Islamic practice do indeed seem to be at loggerheads with each other and antagonistically opposed. I would like to caution though that Talip's case is rather specific in this and constitutes the exception to the rule. By and large, I have found commodity fetishism and Islamic ways of life to be largely compatible in a wide range of contexts – in Western contexts such as in Germany, France, Spain as well as the US, and in non-Western context such as in Turkey, Jordan, and Syria. In all these cases, the large majority of practicing Muslims of many different denominations have not spelled out a clear-cut opposition to commodity fetishism nor have they, as Talip did, justified their turn to Islam with a gesture of renunciation of capitalist practices of consumption. In sum, it would be my analysis that contemporary Islamic practices are largely very much conducive to the logic of late consumerist capitalism – indeed, I would ar-

gue that Islamism, in its many guises, is very much furthering its own capitalist appropriation thus making both seemingly antagonistic ideologies compatible with each other in daily co-existence and co-enactment by practicing Muslims. There is no need to propagate a clash of civilizations between a capitalist, Western world and a non-capitalist, spiritual Islamic world. Parenthesis closed.)

We can state, with a view to contemporary processes of a return to religion, that both Freud and Weber were far too optimistic in affording modernity the power to crush religious sentiment once and for all

In a sense, then, his identification with Islam completed Talip as a person. It gave his life the futural trajectory that it had lacked before his conversion. To put this the other way around: in Islam, Talip found himself fully and completely inserted in such a way that his whole life and his surrounding lifeworld made complete sense. In this insertion, we can also find the reasons for his self-confidence. Since his life made complete sense, Talip did no longer need to question either his own life at present or its past or its future trajectory. He was in possession of truth and that truth would guide him to the right places in the future.

Talip's world, then, had become complete, despite the radical changes in it brought on by his unreserved embrace of Islam. In ushering in and remaining faithful to the event of Islam, to its origins as well as its futures, Talip aimed for and achieved living in a world that was ideologically complete. I say ideological in the traditional sense of the word: in the sense that he had a set of logically ordered ideas at his disposal that made sense of his world and that were able to produce meaning in and out of this world. It is not all that surprising, then, that Talip struck me as very self-confident after his conversion, that the pensive, unhappily searching Talip had been replaced by a confident, self-assured one that had almost nothing in common with his earlier counter-part.

The transformation of Talip in the wake of his embrace of Islam was brought on by the complete ideological care that the latter was able to provide for him. It answered all his questions about the future; it did not keep them in abeyance, in suspense. But his turn to Islam also solved other problems: his family's insistence on marriage to a proper girl from Turkey, for instance, could no longer be maintained since Talip was now in possession of a more primordial truth. His immigrant parents nurtured their melancholic desires about a possible return to Turkey, secular, laicist, and Western-oriented.<sup>12</sup> Talip had even surpassed this melancholic claim for a pristine and pure origin. He had far surpassed his parents'

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petty attachments to the Turkish Republic of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. He had found his own claim for origin in the deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad, striving to live the pious life of one of his companions in the primordial *umma*, this first of the Muslim communities. He was striving to become as proximate in his lifestyle to a *salaf*, a companion of the prophet, as possible. This was his task: a return to the pristine moment of origin of Islam, of a primordial community so pure that it could never have been rees-

tablished in the many centuries that had passed since its existence. This was perhaps an idealistic as well as impossible task that Talip had set for himself. But in the process of striving for this impossible goal, Talip was able to live a meaningful life – no matter what his former friends, his family, or this anthropologist might think about it.

It is important here that we recognize the importance of Islam offering itself as a complete ideology. This importance derives from the very fact that its completeness lies precisely in its difference to late modern capitalism. While Islam was able, for Talip, to provide a meaningful future, late modern capitalism seems to have failed him in precisely this aspect if we seriously consider both his statements before and after the conversion. Islam filled the void left in Talip's life by the radical openness of late modern capitalism concerning the future. While this openness might be celebrated as the latter's greatest achievement precisely because it affords those who follow this ideology with much freedom, this was not desirable for Talip. He preferred to be embedded within and part of an ideological edifice that understood itself as ontologically complete – i.e. that afforded him with a convincing narrative structuring both his past *and* his future.

This argument about Islam as an alternative to modern forms of ideology which derives its strength out of the completeness of its own ontological foundations has been convincingly made by others before me. Heiko Henkel, for instance, has recently argued with care and conviction that the spaces of Islam, as they are inhabited by Muslims in the contemporary world – in his example, in Istanbul – are in and of themselves complete.<sup>13</sup> Following, among other theorists, Bachelard's concept of a "poetics of space," Henkel argues that contemporary Muslim actors



have their religious practice largely determine the lifeworlds they inhabit. In this, however, they are not located in a particular place (Henkel gives the traditional Muslim quarter of Fatih in Istanbul as an example). Rather, they are engaged in a poesis of space where transnational, local, national, topical, and regional components are conjoined to form a whole that then constitutes what Henkel calls the “space of Islam”.<sup>14</sup> The Muslim or Islamic space that is produced in this context is, to be sure, fragmentary in its nature or, to put it better, it is of the character of an assemblage, a thrown together, idiosyncratic space that makes sense only to the person or group of people who consciously inhabit it. While Henkel focuses on the production and maintenance of such spaces, I would add to his analysis that these spaces are always perceived as complete. The Islamic community, the *umma*, is then no longer spatially or temporally bound. Yet, it conceives of itself as rooted in a particular space and time and it is this evental space and time, the moment of the inception of Islam that organizes this Islamoscape, to give Appadurai’s terms a slightly different twist.<sup>15</sup> It is in this sense that Henkel is able to identify a clearly homogenized “Islamic space.”

### **Resurgence: Contemporary Islam in Time and Space**

Likewise, the temporality of Islam is seen as complete: consciously assembled to make sense and to provide an exhaustive ontological foundation for a particular, individual or collective lifeworld. It is precisely in these complete spaces and temporalities that the force of Islam gathers and assembles its attractiveness for such a large number of people in the contemporary world. This force is able to capture those in search of stability precisely because it offers them a complete ontological foundation for, to use this Heideggerian phrase, their being-in-the-world. Islam offers a space that Muslims can inhabit, even if it is ambiguously and sometimes paradoxically constructed in transnational, late modern forms of existence. At the same time, it offers a temporality that provides a rootedness for individual Muslims in a particular narrative of origin and it provides a future, a goal towards which Muslims can collectively and individually strive, which they can aspire to achieve – the perfection of their own practice of faith. In this temporal roundedness or completeness, Islam furnishes the believer with what the modern agnostic or atheist lacks: the assurance of truth but not just of any truth – a truth that is firmly rooted in a specific space and time. The spaces of Muslim worship and life may be dispersed but they can be combined into a coherent, meaningful whole. The tool for this combination is, ultimately, the truth of origin and telos provided by the Islamic doctrine itself. In grounding its believers (those who submit to this law) in time, in a specific temporality that is enclosed upon itself, in achieving

such grounding, Islam offers a very attractive alternative to the futural openness, which is celebrated in modernity.

This analysis gains in analytic value when we consider the recent upsurge of religious sentiment.<sup>16</sup> Two of the most brilliant minds of high modern times, Freud and Weber, both predicted, in their own fashion, the gradual phasing out of religious sentiment as modernity progresses and as reason would triumph over belief.<sup>17</sup> Freud envisioned this process as the future of an illusion, namely religion, which would never come to pass precisely because it did not have a future in a rationalizing world. Weber, in turn, said that the steel-hardened shell of capitalism, developed in the context of the reformation movements, would persist but that it would do so without its religious core. We can state, in brief, that both these thinkers were placing their bets on the fact that modern people would choose the freedom to think rationally and to readily pay the price of not being able to fully be in possession of truth, to retain the Cartesian doubt as modern man's most precious achievement. In addition, we can state, with a view to contemporary processes of a return to religion, that both Freud and Weber were far too optimistic in affording modernity the power to crush religious sentiment once and for all. Especially in the case of Freud, this optimism seems surprising: Was he not, after all, the inventor of the unconscious? Should he not, as this inventor, have had some foresight that might have predicted the return of repressed religious sentiment? For this is what we witness today: the return of religion and religious ideologies with a vengeance despite the advances in modern processes of development, made (and claimed to be made) on a daily basis.

This, precisely, is the meaning of Talip's conversion. He was profoundly privileged in both his upbringing and education. Whatever disadvantages he might have had as the child of immigrants in Germany, he and his parents made up for with their steadfast dedication to live a modern life in Germany. Again: nothing would have indicated that Talip was about to convert to Islam in a mere three years. This event came about without warning, without foresight – perhaps with as little foresight as Freud once had about the resurgence of religious sentiment in our time.

There is then, after all, no rational explanation for this conversion. There is, in other words, no possibility for a logical deduction of the rationale that triggered Talip to do it. This is precisely the point: at the moment when rational agency hits its limits, there is no exhaustion of agency. Rather, the moment of truth has arrived at this instance – a truth that cannot be logically or rationally established as 'making sense.' Sense is produced through the assertion of a truth and in Talip's

case, this meant the assertion of the truth of Islam. This truth, however, had the power to completely annihilate his previous life, as he had lived it until the moment of truth. This is perhaps the most perplexing insight we can glean from interpreting Talip's conversion: there cannot be any warning signs and, moreover, there cannot be, even in hindsight, a process that aims at logically explaining this moment of truth that the event constitutes. The latter's radical exteriority to processes of logical reasoning preclude any such endeavor.

Yet, it will be my final argument that Talip's conversion – even though it cannot be explained rationally – had everything to do with the modern trope of all-exhaustive reason. Even though this is difficult to clearly discern in my interviews with him, in listening to all of them again over the past months, I had the distinct feeling that Talip converted in large parts precisely because *his life was far too much dominated by rationality*. In particular the tapes from before his conversion (prior to 2004) paint a picture of Talip as searching for something and even though he always conveyed this search to me as being in need of yet more rationality, Talip ultimately went the other way. He abandoned reason in favor of faith. For his conversion means only one thing: Talip staked his claim to a truth that is foundational to his future life and this truth lies, for him, in the force of Islam. This force lies precisely in that it cannot be rationally doubted – there either is belief or there is not. Which reminds us of an early modern, Pascal, who famously quipped: “If you want to believe, kneel down and pray!” The force of Islam then rests precisely in that it escapes the power of reason; there is no reason, ultimately, to legitimate it. As a domain that constitutes its own truth outside of reason, Islam offers itself as an attractive alternative to modern lives and lifestyles that over-emphasize rationality.

The work that needs to be done in the Islamic world – and especially within Muslim communities in the West – is to bring a modern, Western lifestyle in conjunction with an Islamic one. But as the example at hand and many others suggest, this work is already well underway – both in the Muslim diaspora in the West and in predominantly Muslim countries.<sup>18</sup> Finding such reconciliation between Western and Islamic values will not always be easy but it is possible and, more importantly, it is necessary because neither of these two value systems is expected

Finding reconciliation between Western and Islamic values will not always be easy but it is possible and, more importantly, it is necessary because neither of these two value systems is expected to disappear in the near future

to disappear in the near future.<sup>19</sup> Talip's choice might have been less traumatic and more easily undertaken if there were not this abyss between the modern and the Islamic worlds at present.

## Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer from *Insight Turkey* for the very generous yet insightful and productive suggestions in reading an earlier version of this article.

2. The notion of upward mobility was extensively developed by Caglar in several texts throughout the 1990s: Ayse Caglar, "German Turks in Berlin: Migration and Their Quest for Social Mobility" (unpublished, Ph.D. Dissertation, McGill University, 1994), Ayse Caglar, "German Turks in Berlin: Social Exclusion and Strategies for Social Mobility," *New Community*, Vol.21, No.3 (1995) pp. 309-323, Ayse Caglar, "Hyphenated Identities and the Limits of 'Culture,'" in Modood, Tariq/Werbner, Pnina (eds.): *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community* (London: Zed Books, 1997) pp. 169-185, Ayse Caglar, McDoener, "Doenerkebab und der Kampf der Deutsch-Tuerken um soziale Stellung," *Soziologus*, Vol.48, No.1 (1998a) pp. 17-41, Ayse Caglar, Die zwei Leben eines Couchtisches, "Die Deutsch-Tuerken und ihre Konsumpraktiken," *Historische Anthropologie*, Vol.6, No.2, (1998b) pp. 242-256.

3. For a thorough discussion of Kemalist attitudes towards the state, see: Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

4. Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002).

5. It could well be argued that Talip's religiosity is, in itself, a highly modernized version of religious practice. While I would not contest this, I maintain that the conventional narrative of modernity argues for the gradual phasing out of religious sentiments among its subjects; in this sense, Talip goes against the conventional narrative.

6. Indeed, it could be argued that the personal and the official versions are locked into a dialectical relation here – the one reinforcing the other.

7. This Hadith, as narrated by 'Umar bin Al-Khattab, is recorded as Volume 1, Number 51, Book 2, in the Sahih Bukhari collection. Bukhari, Sahih, *Complete Sahih Bukhari in English*, 9 vols. (Darul Ishaat 2006).

Talip's statements (this and the following as well) were given mostly in German, with some Turkish phrases interspersed. The translations are mine.

Stage-centered approaches towards conversion have, for instance, been taken by: Farhadian, Charles E. and Lewis R. Rambo, "Converting: Stages of Religious Change," in Christopher Lamb, M. Darrol Bryant (eds.): *Religious Conversion*. (London: Cassell, 1999) pp. 23-34, Frank Wiesberger, *Bausteine zu einer soziologischen Theorie der Konversion: Soziokulturelle, interaktive und biographische Determinanten religiöser Konversionsprozesse* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1990), John Lofland and Norman Skonovd "Patterns of Conversion," in Eileen Barker (ed.), *Of Gods and Men: New Religious Movements in the West* (Macer, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1981), pp.1-24.

Here, I do not argue for exclusivity of individual factors. Rather, I emphasize that the socio-cultural factors might well be determined by long-term processes even at the individual level. However, there are also subjective components that are far more difficult to predict or to capture in terms of socio-cultural analysis. There is never 'normality' in any process of conversion. In this context, it is precisely the event that will help to illuminate the matter.

Using the term 'assertion' here to describe Talip's choice, I take my cue from Jacques Lacan who employed this term in precisely the sense that is meant here: an assertion is a gesture that claims something that can, ultimately, not be rationally explained. An

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11. Using the term 'assertion' here to describe Talip's choice, I take my cue from Jacques Lacan who employed this term in precisely the sense that is meant here: an assertion is a gesture that claims something that can, ultimately, not be rationally explained. An assertion is always in excess of reason even if it is derived largely by the latter (cf. Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," *Ecrits*. (New York/London: Norton, 2006))

12. Barbara Wolbert, *Der getoetete Pass. Rueckkehr in die Tuerkei. Eine ethnologische Migrationsstudie* (Berlin: Akademischer Verlag, 1995).

13. Heiko Henkel, "The Location of Islam: Inhabiting Istanbul in a Muslim Way," *American Ethnologist*, Vol.34, No.1 (2007) pp. 57-70, see also: Heiko Henkel, "Rethinking the dar al-harb: Social Change and Changing Perceptions of the West in Turkish Islam," *Journal for Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol.30, No.5, (2004) pp. 961-977.

14. Henkel, "The Locatoin of Islam..." p. 67.

15. Klein-Hessling, Ruth/Nökel, Sigrid/Werner, Karin "Weibliche Mikropolitiken und die Gloablisierung des Islam," in eds., *Der neue Islam der Frauen. Weibliche Lebenspraxis in der globalisierten Moderne – Fallstudien aus Afrika, Asien und Europa* (Bielefeld: transcript, 1999), pp. 11-34.

16. An upsurge that is also reflected in academic developments: the so-called religious turn over the past fifteen years clearly reflects the increasing importance of religion in people lives in general (see, for instance, John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); John D. Caputo, *The Religious*. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001); Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, "Epoche and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 46-47; Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, "Epoche and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 46-47.

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton&Company, 1989). See also: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London/New York: Harper and Collins, 1930).

17. While both Henkel and I resort, in proper anthropological fashion, to particular case studies to exemplify these processes, the work of Tariq Ramadan stands out as exemplary at a theoretically engaged level for how this process is unfolding at present (e.g. Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West, and the Challenges of Modernity* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2001); Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a further, very instructive reading on this important issue, see John Donahue and John Esposito's thoughtful and thorough collection of essays on the topic of the relations between modernity and Islam. John Donohue and John Esposito (eds.), *Islam in Transition. Muslim Perspectives*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

18. Here, I argue especially against ideologically purist positions of scholars like Samuel P. Huntington [Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, (Summer 1993)]; Bernard Lewis [Bernhard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam. Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003)] and Bassam Tibi [Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe* (Routledge: New York, 2008)]. Their position of an outright rejection of Islam as archaic, backward-minded and irreconcilable with modernity and Western values has recently been popularized by testimonial accounts of those who claim to have suffered under Islam and its supposedly archaic injunctions (e.g. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Necla Kelek, *Die fremde Braut. Ein Bericht aus dem Inneren des tuerkischen Lebens in Deutschland* (Muenchen: Goldmann, 2005). In both its academic and its popular versions, these Islamophobic positions are all-too reductive of the complex realities of Muslim life in the contemporary world. Could it be that in both cases modern people stand bewildered and simply afraid in the face of an inexplicable resurgence of the religious in the guise of Islamism?