

# Responding to Religious Claims in a Secular Democracy: The Turkish Case<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *This article examines state responses to claims made by religious groups, unorthodox communities and minority religions in Turkey and argues that paradigmatic changes have taken place, especially under the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) governments since 2002. Under the AK Party governments, the conventional meaning attached to secularism gradually changed from a restrictive one to a relatively inclusive and libertarian one, as evidenced by the lifting of the headscarf ban in the public sphere. Currently, responding to the claims of unorthodox and non-Muslim communities has become part of the social fabric of Turkey, although room for improvement remains.*

**D**espite the homogenizing of ideology and policy implementation since the formation of a secular nation in Turkey, the multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural societal legacy that the country inherited from the Ottoman Empire has continued to survive. The state ideology has permeated art, culture, education and the media, in addition to Turkish bureaucracy and the military, especially under the single party regime and within the political landscape following military interventions. Prior to the rise of the AK Party, the state either remained indifferent, or denied claims inspired by religious groups. In cases where the

state showed some interest in such claims, only small progress was made, and no fundamental issues regarding the freedom of religion and representation were resolved for many years. Against this background this article has two objectives. First it will follow the trajectory of the development of secularism in Turkey as a Muslim majority society where there are also a meaningful number of unorthodox Muslims and other religious minorities. To this end, I will try to analyze the challenges that the modern Turkish state faces in the context of claims made by religious minorities. Second, I will demonstrate how the state has generally responded to demands

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## India, Turkey, Israel and the U.S., for example, went through a process of modernization and secularization in contrast to that of Europe

and claims coming from its minority group citizens.

Now, let us try to put Turkey into a context in terms of secularization, which has received increasing attention in sociology and political science. This will allow us to see how far the dominant secularization theory can explain what Turkey has been experiencing. Classical secularization theory is based on the hypothesis that modernization would lead to a decline in traditional forms of religious life. It also predicts that religion would lose its influence on social and individual consciousness and eventually disappear.<sup>2</sup> However, not all of the predictions of this theory have come through, especially outside of Europe, which is seen as an exception when it comes to the social and political effects of secularization. What should also be noticed in this context is the fact that religion in Turkey actually became *more* visible in the process of the country's modernization, largely due to the opening of a new window of opportunity to raise claims for religious rights and the freedom of religion amidst the process of becoming a democratic soci-

ety and state. As such, the presence of religious groups in Turkey's public and political spheres, and the wish of such groups to be represented and treated equally, has led to a reconsideration of the relations between the state and its citizens.

Although there are different definitions and interpretations of secularism, broadly speaking there are two basic dimensions of this concept, as developed by Bryan Turner, Veit Bader, Jose Casanova, Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure.<sup>3</sup> The first dimension refers to the *principle* of secularization, which means political secularization referring to the separation of state and religion. We can also refer to this aspect of secularization as a normative (i.e. legal and administrative) dimension (as a political system). Political secularization as such includes not only the separation of religion and state, but also the equal application of political authority to all religions. Protection of the freedom of religion is a fundamental principle of political secularization. The second dimension of secularization refers to a *process*, which means a decline of religious beliefs and practices in society. Sociologists and political scientists consider this process as one of social secularization, which leads to the erosion of the influence of religion on social practices.

Although the ideal denoted by the classical understanding of secularization raises some expectations with regard to state neutrality toward all religions on the one hand, and the inevitable decline of individual and col-

lective religiosity on the other hand, the social reality on the ground tells us that some of these expectations remained unfulfilled. It is true that Northern European countries in particular have felt the impact of social and political secularization to a large extent. However, when it comes to some non-Western societies, such as those found in Middle Eastern, Asian and South American countries, modernization and secularization have taken different forms. India, Turkey, Israel and the U.S., for example, went through a process of modernization and secularization in contrast to that of Europe. One might argue that in those non-European countries, religious beliefs and institutions are still influential.<sup>4</sup>

The persistence of religions and the claims of religious people in modern societies or nation-states forces us to re-think how we can address questions regarding state-religion relations on the one hand, and religion in the public sphere on the other hand, especially in countries like Turkey where there has been a constant tension between secular and religious forces. As the ongoing political developments in Turkey indicate, a new situation is emerging, characterized by complex relations regarding state, religion, secularism and the presence of faith groups with different claims in the public sphere. I believe that the case of Turkey can shed some light on the process of non-European secularization occurring globally.

In political debates as well as academic and media discourses, Turkey

is frequently referred to as a source of inspiration for movements and countries seeking to establish democratic and civil regimes, because of Turkey's experience with secularism and democracy coupled with economic progress, political stability and the co-existence of different ethnic, sectarian and religious groups. For sociologists and political scientists, Turkey provides rich material to engage in a debate over state-religion relations and the presence of religious claims in the public sphere. Turkey offers a unique opportunity to examine the question of religion in the public sphere as a case study for several reasons. First, it is a secular country with a dominant Muslim population; second, Turkey seeks to become a full member of the European Union, and at the same time, is part of the larger Middle East, where Islamic culture is the prevailing force. Third, questions of democratization, such as the freedom of religion for unorthodox believers and non-Muslim minorities, are still not fully resolved in Turkey although some progress has been made. Lastly, secularism is still being debated and seems likely to remain a source of social and political tension for the foreseeable future, mainly because secularism is interpreted as a lifestyle by some, and the rise of conservative politics is interpreted as a threat especially by the secular elites.

Turkish political culture has produced varying approaches to analyze the experience of Turkish secularization. While some strongly defend the secularization policies of the State,



For the first time in the Turkish political history, a member of parliament wearing a headscarf, Lütfiye Selva Çam, taking oath in the National Assembly.

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HAYDAR AKTAŞ

some argue that in the process of EU membership accession, and the rising tide of democratization, Turkish secularism should be redefined to reflect the greater sociology of the country.

Although the founding ideology of the Turkish state was intended to construct a homogeneous society as noted above, ethnic and religious pluralism survived. Despite the fact that the main political parties turned a blind eye to their complaints and demands for many years, today many minority groups utilize modern methods and language to present their views to the public and the state. Among the faith groups having a significant demographic presence in Turkey one can mention the following: Shia (Twelvers\Jafari School) (500,000), Armenian Orthodox Christians (65,000), Jews

(23,000), Syrian Orthodox Christians (15,000), Baha'is (10,000), Yazidis (5,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (3,300), Protestants (3,000), Greek Orthodox Christians (3,000), Chaldean Christians (3,000) and Alevis.

Insofar as challenges to secularism are concerned, the headscarf issue has been the main focus of discussion in Turkey. However, it is important to take a view that goes beyond the headscarf problem in the public sphere, simply because questions regarding democracy and secularism should also include wider discussions about religious minorities and non-orthodox faith groups as well. Since the headscarf issue was widely debated and finally resolved by the AK Party government, such developments seem to encourage many non-orthodox and minority religious groups increasingly to claim their

rights from the state as citizens, I will first focus on a popular issue which is currently at the center of discussions on state-religion relations, that is, the

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scope of representation and recognition of claims by the Alevi community. Before looking at this issue in detail, however, we need to contextualize the debate about religious freedom, which requires an understanding of the ideological constructions of state and society in Turkey.

The Turkish Republic was established in 1923 as a secular and democratic state based on the rule of law. Initially, in the first Constitution, Islam was mentioned as the religion of the state. This specification was later deleted, and instead, the secular nature of the state was underlined. The four characteristics of the new Turkish state which distinguish its form from the Ottoman state system may be summarized as follows: a transition to the concept of administration based on rules and laws instead of the authority of individuals; a transition from a religious worldview to the concept of

scientific knowledge (positivism) as a means of understanding the universe; a transition from a class-based society shaped by the ruling and the ruled, towards a concept of democratic community; a transition from a religious community towards a nation state.<sup>5</sup>

The Turkish state, for the purpose of controlling religion and for the protection of its citizens against the intervention and influence of all kinds of religious authority, aimed at structural and institutional Westernization.<sup>6</sup> Following the removal of the Sultanate on 1 November 1922, and the abolition of the Caliphate, the Office of Sheikh-al-Islam on 3 March 1924, a Presidency of Religious Affairs affiliated with the Prime Ministry and General Directorate of Foundations was established. The foundation of the Presidency of Religious Affairs was arguably the most important reform to shape the Republic's relation with religion on an institutional level. As a matter of fact, the Presidency of Religious Affairs is seen as the unique institution of the Republic, enabling the state to keep religion under its supervision. It is possible to summarize the duties of Presidency of Religious Affairs as follows: it functions to determine religious hierarchy, provides a framework of religious education and defines heterodox Islam as "services related to prayers and functions related to enlightening the society on religious matters; services related to religious education; foreign relations and services related to foundations which are relevant with the organization itself".<sup>7</sup>

## Controversial Issues and the Unorthodox Groups

In Turkey, the Presidency of Religious Affairs is accepted the single, official authority in relation to Islam, although there are a variety of different Muslim groups, including unorthodox groups such as Alevi, Nurcus, and Suleymancis. As such, the presence and functions of this institution are subject to controversy. In this context, two primary issues have emerged: The first controversy is whether such an institution can be present in a secular state, which is supposed to be neutral to all religions and religious groups. The second controversy revolves around the fact that the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey adopts only the Sunni interpretation of Islam and the Hanafi legal school, but does not consider the beliefs of other sectarian groups such as the Alevi, Shafii and Caferi.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, it is claimed that the institution provides religious services based on Sunni Islam, and that it is a part of state's ideology and identity to restrict freedom of religion by excluding non-Sunni groups. One can argue that the mandate given to the institution indicates that the state is not impartial, and that, therefore, state policies seem to provide privileges to some groups (Sunnis) over others (such as Alevi). As the human rights discourse emerged more effectively in the last decades, minorities such as the Alevi began to question state policies, which brought the position of the Presidency of Religious Affairs under the spotlight. Although Alevi groups

had voiced their concerns and their demands for some kind of representation and equal treatment prior to the hegemony of the AK Party governments, their claims largely remained unheard. In other words, the state did not respond properly to the demands of the Alevi until Turkish political culture became more democratic and open to pluralist views and perspectives. This shift provided new opportunity spaces for previously underrepresented or excluded communities to voice their concerns.

Alevi groups differ from the Sunnis in their approach to the Presidency of Religious Affairs and in their use of the services it provides, such as praying in mosques, and performing religious marriage ceremonies and funeral rituals, etc. What makes Alevi groups different from the majority Sunnis can be observed in different areas. For example, Alevi generally do not go to mosques regularly, do not pray five times a day and do not fully fast in the month of Ramadan. Nevertheless, the Presidency of Religious Affairs has stated that there are no differences in basic religious matters between Sunnis and Alevi, except issues around some local customs and beliefs. The Presidency argues that the difference people talk about is political in nature. Generally speaking, Alevi villages do not have mosques; instead, they have houses of ritual ceremony known as Cemevi for their religious and spiritual practices. Given this reality, Alevi claim that mosques were constructed in Alevi villages by the Presidency of Religious Affairs on purpose, to

propagate the Sunni interpretation of Islam.<sup>9</sup>

Although Alevi groups differ in their opinions on the question of their representation in the Presidency of Religious Affairs, there is a consensus among the Alevi groups that the current status of this institution is in conflict with the principle of laicism. Moreover, in their opinion, this institution largely subscribes to the Sunni interpretation of Islam and thus discriminates against other religious faiths in its activities. Making the matter more complicated is the fact that the Alevis also have differences among themselves as far as the relations between Islam and Alevism are concerned. Some Alevis in Turkey considers Alevism to be part of Islam, whereas others argue that Alevism is a different religion altogether. Further, some other Alevis define Alevism as a specific philosophy and lifestyle belonging to the Anatolian people, which has nothing to do with religion at all. According to this interpretation, Alevism is a secular faith enriched by folkloric elements. Sometimes Alevism is also defined as a struggle for democratization, modernization and secularization and a social opposition and focus of resistance.

Alevi groups who underline secularism in their critique of the Presidency of Religious Affairs advocate for the following changes: Abolishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs; official recognition of their places of worship (Cemevi) where different rituals than the Sunni tradition are

## Several changes were made in the curriculum of religious education to reflect the Alevi interpretation of Islam

performed; the provision of financial support by the state; representation of Alevis in relevant state organizations; the removal of compulsory religious education.<sup>10</sup> To date, none of these demands have been met by the state, which creates a feeling among the Alevi community that they are not being treated as equal citizens. As far as recognition and the legal status of the community are concerned, the Alevi community argues that they do not enjoy the rights given to Christian churches: Cemevis, as Alevi houses of worships are not officially recognized as such, and even Alevism encounter several problems when they want to open a new Cemevi. Although they are taxpaying citizens of Turkey, Alevis are not eligible to receive financial support from the state.<sup>11</sup> Their long-running demand for legal status for Cemevis remains unfulfilled.

Compulsory religious education is a particularly controversial issue in regard to the Alevis' demands. With the institution of the Turkish Republic, religious education was rearranged following the Law on Unification of Education, dated 3 March 1924, in the earlier Republican period. Between 1924 and 1939, religious education was removed from the curric-

ulum gradually. Although religious education was optional between 1948 and 1983, following the 1980 Military Intervention, it was made compulsory (in primary school: 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades; secondary school: 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades; and high school: 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> classes). These compulsory classes, termed ‘Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge’ lessons, included elements predominantly reflecting the Sunni tradition, in line with the Ministry of National Education. Different Alevi opinions on the question of compulsory religious education

obliged to attend these classes while children of non-Muslim minority communities are exempt.

In response to the Alevis’ demands, several changes were made in the curriculum of religious education to reflect the Alevi interpretation of Islam. Although Turkish state authorities have stated that the compulsory religious education now includes enough material to satisfy members of the Alevi community, the Alevi organizations themselves continue to claim that the religious education textbooks used in the courses largely reflect the Sunni interpretation of Islam. As the above discussion on the claims of the Alevi community and the response of the state indicate, this controversy will likely continue for some time to come. Nevertheless, some positive changes should be noted. In fact, for the first time in Turkish political history, Alevi claims were taken seriously and once taboo issues were brought to the public sphere, a noteworthy change which also legitimized the making of demands that were unheard of before the AK Party came to power. The AK Party made a good and promising start with the Alevi demands, first by recognizing the problems, second by organizing seven workshops with Alevi leaders and organizations which openly and systematically enabled Alevis to sit together with government officials to voice their concern before the public. This exercise should be seen as the beginning of normalization within the context of larger democratization efforts in Turkey, as far as Alevis are concerned.

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may be classified as follows: (a) Some Alevi people argue that this course should be optional and that parents should be able to send their children to these lessons if they wish; (b) Some Alevi groups claim that the curriculum is one dimensional, i.e. that it has been prepared according to the Sunni faith, and does not provide information on the Alevi faith. Therefore, the religious policy should be revised accordingly.<sup>12</sup> Some Alevi parents do not wish their children to attend these courses because they believe that their own traditions are not reflected and taught. Additionally, children of Atheists and the Alevi community are

In order to understand Turkey's experience with regard to secularism and the freedom of religion, one should also look at the case of non-Muslim minorities who are also citizens of Turkey whose rights have been violated for many years. Some of their institutions were closed down and properties were confiscated by the state, especially during the formative period of the republic.

### **Non-Muslim Citizens of Turkey**

The Lausanne Treaty, which recognized the establishment of Turkey, contains some provisions for the non-Muslim citizens of the country. Articles 37-47 regulate the rights of minorities. According to these articles, all Turkish citizens have the right to practice their beliefs and religions. Non-Muslim minorities are equal before the law with other Turkish citizens. Religious and sectarian difference will not deprive anybody from citizenship rights such as state employment or private enterprise. Minorities have equal rights as far as teaching and learning their own religion and establishing social and religious institutions are concerned. Moreover, their temples and cemeteries will be protected by the state. And they will not be forced to do anything against their beliefs and rituals.

Although the Lausanne Treaty contains such articles, in the course of Turkish history the rights of minorities have not always been recognized, and violations have taken place. From time to time, minorities were

forced to migrate, the properties of non-Muslim minority foundations were taken over by the government, and minority schools were closed. Following these violations, non-Muslim minorities demanded the return of their properties and the reopening of their schools on a number of occasions. But the state authorities did not respond positively to such claims. Although in recent years there has been a positive trend to engage in constructive discussions with representatives of minority religious groups in the context of Turkish-EU relations and the accompanying harmonization reforms, not all minority demands have been met. After the introduction of a new foundation law by the AK Party governments, some of the properties belonging to minority foundations were returned. However, this is far from what was expected by the minority foundations. Since 2003, minority foundations have applied for the return of 1,542 properties of which only 253 were returned. This example indicates that there is still a long way to go to establish equal treatment of Turkish citizens regardless of their religious affiliation.

In this context, the long-awaited opening of the Halki Seminary is yet another example that illustrates the challenges that Turkey faces in dealing with its non-Muslim citizens. The Halki Seminary was a center of training and education for the Greek Orthodox community. It was closed in the early 1970s as part of the ongoing centralization of the education system in Turkey. At that time, private

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schools such as the Halki Seminary faced the dilemma of coming under direct state control or being closed down. The Administration of the Halki Seminary rejected state control; therefore, the school was closed down. Since then, a number of applications were made by the Administration of the Halki Seminary to reopen the school, but to date the state has not responded positively.

With regard to the responses of the state to the claims and concerns of non-Muslims in Turkey, despite the distance that remains to be covered, one can see a gradual improvement, especially under the AK Party governments. The return of confiscated properties back to non-Muslim foundations took place under AK Party rule. Previous governments had never taken such issues on their agendas before. In addition to the return of properties, some old synagogues and churches were renovated and restored by the Turkish state with the use of public funds, and were reopened for visiting and prayers. These developments indicate that the state does not

see non-Muslims as a threat, and is prepared to consider their demands to resolve long-running issues that were never addressed by governments prior to AK Party rule.

## Conclusions

When we look at problem areas as far as the representation of religion, and the response of the state to the claims of minority religious groups (non-Sunnis and non-Muslims), we might argue that the majority Sunni Muslim population seems to enjoy freedom of religion and religious rights more than minority groups such as non-Muslims and unorthodox groups. Although there is a legal and constitutional recognition of religious freedom, when it comes to non-Muslim and unorthodox groups, their claims are not given the same credence as those of the majority Sunnis. By looking at state practices, one can conclude that since the Sunni interpretation of Islam is at the center of Turkish state identity, no matter how secular the system and its structure is, the 'others' (non-Sunnis and non-Muslims) feel and argue that they are somehow discriminated against when it comes to responding to their claims. At the same time, there have been some positive developments in recent years as the state began to address the claims, concerns and grievances of minority groups. In recent years, the claims of minorities as citizens are beginning to be effectively heard in the context of a much larger debate concerning human rights issues.

The current debates and developments indicate that in the Turkish case, there is a need for an approach that would embrace not only the protection of freedoms for religious people, but also ensure and institute the rights and freedoms of secular as well as unorthodox Muslim and non-Muslim groups. In Turkey, although there is a public discussion on liberties concerning religion, which is a positive development, the claims of unorthodox religious groups have not yet been fully addressed. Due to the influence of a particular religious orientation, rights of other Muslim groups as well as atheists continue to be neglected.

To conclude, a particular religious interpretation, and the preference of this interpretation over others, seems to have shaped the political and institutional structure of the state in Turkey. A concept of democracy based on a principle of rationality, where the public sphere is effectively functional has not taken root so far. Thus, despite the plural social and political reality, demands based on religious and sectarian diversity are not fully addressed because such demands are neither considered as basic citizenship rights nor fulfilled in a reasonable framework to a large extent. ■

## Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the "European Culture Wars?" ECPR General Conference, Bordeaux. I would like to thank Marmara University for the conference grant by BAPKO.

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5. Şerif Mardin, *Türkiye'de Toplum ve Siyaset*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002), p. 205.

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7. İştah B. Tarhanlı, *Müslüman Toplum, "Laik" Devlet, Türkiye'de Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, (İstanbul: Afa Yayınları, 1993), pp. 41, 73-89; İştah Gözaydın,

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