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***STATE AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN TURKEY.
AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW FROM THE OTTOMANS
TO THE REPUBLIC PERIOD***

Abstract: State's position from religion and faith groups in Turkey has several historical dynamics. Ottomans treated non-Muslims within a semi-autonomous so-called *Millet System* derived from the Islamic Law until 1856 when *The Imperial Reform Edict* granted all faith groups without distinction a set of rights and totally abolished the *Millet system*. However religious authorities did not welcome this change due to the fact that the extension of the citizens' rights meant a decline in religious authorities' dominion over their own communities. Consequently, non-Muslim communities gained a more prominent and political characteristic which resulted in developing an ethnic nationalism within the religious communities.

In the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923, a very important reference concerning the issue of minorities in the Republic of Turkey, the minority concept was based on the Muslim/non-Muslim distinction. On the other hand, the new regime's political design and its religion policies had deep effects on the political, social and religious life. Many of the contemporary problems connecting relationship between the state and faith groups in Modern Turkey date from the last two centuries and are highly associated with the transition from the Ottoman Period to the Republic one.

Keywords: *Religious Pluralism, Diversity, Turkey, Muslim, Non-Muslim, Islamic Law, Ottoman*

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The Religious Demography of Turkey

Today, about 76 million people live in Turkey. 99 percent of the population is Muslim¹, which can be confirmed by official resources given the fact that each citizen's religion is recorded in their identity card. The rest consists primarily of Christians and Jews. Though there are no precise surveys, and the estimates of numbers are influenced by political claims and counterclaims,² according to a statistical survey carried out in 2007 by KONDA, an independent research and consultancy agency, 82 percent of the Muslims in Turkey are Sunnī. Those defining themselves as Alevī or Sh'īī make 5.73 percent of the Muslim population.³ However figures alone do not reveal the complex interplay between the majority and the minority as well as between the state and the religious communities.

The Ottoman Experience with Religious Diversity

What we see in the broad scene of religious pluralism in modern Turkey has come about as a result of several historical dynamics. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Modern Turkey encountered lots of political and cultural challenges, one of which was managing diverse faith groups within a new political regime. The Ottoman rule had spanned over ages and across different cultures to acquire a fully-fledged pluralistic experience. Basing their tolerant and accepting policy with non-Muslims on a Qur'anic verse which is "let there be no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error",⁴ Ottomans treated them within a so-called *Millet System* which was intended to protect non-Muslims' rights. Derived from Arabic, the word *millet* in Ottoman usage commonly refers to a non-Muslim religious community such as Christians or Jews. According to this semi-autonomous system, every religious community was able to elect their highest leaders and to have religious and legal authorities with regard to their interior issues including marriage, divorce and inheritance. They had their own courts with jurisdiction over their members in religious matters. Judgments were executed by

¹ Kevin Boyle, Juliet Sheen, eds., *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report*, 1st ed. (Routledge: London: 1997), 386.

² David Shankland, "Islam", in *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Turkey*, ed. M. Heper and S. Sayın (Routledge: New York, 2012), 107.

³ "Aleviyim' diyenlerin sayısı 4.5 milyon," accessed October 13, 2013, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/03/21/guncel/agun.html>. The percentage of Sunnī population is given as 80% by Boyle and Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, 387.

⁴ 2. Baqara, 256 (Abdullaah Yusuf Ali's Translation).

the Ottoman government and some patriarchates had their own prisons.⁵ Additionally every *millet* had the right to speak its own language and to receive education in its own schools. But there were some restrictions on their freedom; for instance they were not allowed to ring the bells outside the church or during the prayer time of the Muslims. When the Ottoman Empire declined in the nineteenth century, 14 *millets* were recognized by the Ottoman state.⁶

This system gained an institutional characteristic shortly after the conquest of Constantinople. Mehmed II ordered the orthodox Greeks to elect a religious leader for themselves and he named the elected Patriarch Gennadius II (Georgios Scholarios) as *millet başı* which means “the head of the community”.⁷ With its new name, Istanbul preserved its Orthodox population and became the center of the other Orthodox Churches (Serbian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Ukrainian and Albanian).

Mehmed II invited Hovakim, the catholic Armenian Bishop of Bursa, and wanted him to be the patriarch of the Armenian Church located in Istanbul.⁸ He also appointed Moses Capsali as the Chief Rabbī of all Ottoman Jews.⁹ After the Alhambra Decree issued on the 31st of March 1492 a lot of Sephardic Jews emigrated from the Iberian Peninsula to Ottoman Lands and settled in major cities.

The Jews who lived in Istanbul worked mainly in business and government. One of the turning-point for the Ottoman Jews was that in 1648, a young Sephardic rabbī, Sabbatai Zevi, claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah in Izmir, which was a center of Levantine trade. His claims were at first rejected by the other rabbīs and scholars; however he continued to proclaim his mission and cabbalistic teachings for over twenty years. His fame reached all over the Jewish world. Many of the Jews and some rabbīs believed in his messianic mission and followed him. The Jewish community was divided into two groups. Since he proclaimed his own kingship and called himself the king of the kings, some prominent rabbīs from opposing group took action against him and he was arrested and imprisoned. According to some accounts, as there was such a high possibility of being executed by the Sultan, he declared his conversion to Islam on 16 September 1666 and took a Muslim name, Mehmed. Many of his followers did the same thing becoming

⁵ Boyle, Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, 387.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁷ See Franz Babinger, *Mehmed The Conqueror*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1959), 104-5; Gilles Veinstein, “Religious Institutions, Policies and Lives,” in ed. Suraiya N. Farokhi, Kate Fleet, *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. II (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2013), 322.

⁸ Salahi R. Sonyel, *Minorities and Destruction of the Ottoman Empire* (Ankara, 1993), 38 ff.

⁹ Veinstein, “Religious Institutions,” 322.

known as *dönme*, which means convert. Their conversion, however, has been considered by others as insincere and outwardly. Consequently, as an esoteric group Sabbataism has had deep effects on a set of political and religious debates.

Designating two types of citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims, the *Millet system* was gradually changed by the Ottoman Sultans to keep the diverse nations living under their sovereignty away from the overwhelming political influences that the French Revolution brought about.

First, the Imperial Edict of Reorganization (*Imperial Edict of the Rose House*), a very important milestone in this change process, was proclaimed in 1839 by Sultan Abdulmecid I. Bringing a new legal perspective concerning religious and political rights, the Edict expressly stated that “These imperial concessions extend to all our subjects, whatever religion or sect they may belong to; and they will enjoy them without any exception.”¹⁰

Second, a more detailed Code, *The Imperial Reform Edict* issued in 1856 granted all those faith groups without distinction a set of rights, and totally abolished the *Millet system* which had worked over centuries throughout the Ottoman history.

However, the religious authorities did not welcome the redefinition of the civil rights and of the legal status that this change brought about due to the fact that the extension of the citizens’ rights meant a decline in religious authorities’ dominion over their own communities. Consequently, non-Muslim citizens began to get involved in public life and politics much more. Thus, non-Muslim communities gained a more prominent and political characteristic which resulted in developing an ethnic nationalism within the religious communities introducing a new complexity into Ottoman culture.¹¹

We should point out that according to the *Millet system* which was based on the rights given to the diverse faith-believers in the Islamic Law,¹² *millets* should not be seen as minorities only; but all the Muslims were considered as a *millet* also regardless of their racial ethnicity.¹³ The word “minority” began to be used much more in the Ottoman politic life in the very late times of The Ottoman Empire bringing with itself two new concepts; “minority issues” to express their problems

¹⁰ See: Carter Vaughn Findley, “The Tanzimat”, in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 4 (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2013), 28-30.

¹¹ D. A. Rustow, “Turkey: The Modernity of Tradition”, in *Political Culture and Political Development*, ed. L. W. Pye and S. Verba (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1965), 177.

¹² Veinstein, “Religious Institutions,” 323.

¹³ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford University Press: London, 1961), 329.

and “issue of minorities” to express the problems they caused . This conceptual break was felt in the following period too.

The Republic against the Challenge of the Diverse Faith Groups

During the negotiations of the Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, a very important reference concerning the issue of minorities in Modern Turkey was brought up: the Turkish Delegation insisted on recognizing a minority concept based on religion. After that time, the word minority in Turkey has been applied to non-Turkish and non-Muslim citizens only, in particular to Greek Orthodox people, Armenians and Jews, excluding many others, such as Roman Catholics, Syrians and Protestants, which implies that they would not be able to enjoy the rights secured by the Treaty of Lausanne and they would face problems with regard to obtaining a legal personality, education and places for religious worship.

Non-Muslim minorities encountered a few political and cultural problems many of which were dating from the last two centuries of Ottomans when the issue of the minorities had been one of the major politic crises. The Ottomans suffered much from the nationalist influences of the French revolution, and they lost their sovereignty in many places. In addition, after the World War I, the Turkish delegations who participated in a series of treaty negotiations saw the minority file on the table. That made them believe that the issue of the minorities was to be politically misused. In other words, the problems emanated from the fact that the issue of the minorities was perceived as a part of the foreign relationships with other countries rather than a profound religious hatred.

After Turkey was declared a republic in 1923, the Turkish National Assembly, led by Ataturk, the First President, realized a dozen of so-called *Ataturk's revolutions*, which had deep effects on the political, social and religious life.¹⁴ The new regime wanted to transform the society and create a new type of citizen by means of some strictly applied secular policies and top-down changes. According to the new design, the transformation of the Turkish society had to be total and fast, both in essence and outer appearance.¹⁵ This standardization was especially carried out on the Muslim population. We can mention few of these changes as follows:

- The Law on the unification of education in 1924, which was aimed at taking control over the entire education system. In accordance with this law, non-

¹⁴ D. Shankland, “Islam,” 107.

¹⁵ Metin Heper, “Kemalism/Atatürkism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Turkey*, ed. M. Heper and S. Sayin (Routledge: New York, 2012), 140.

governmental religious schools were closed down and teaching religions and religious education were both removed from state schools' curricula.¹⁶

- The law on compulsory hat wearing issued in 1925, which is still in force and proposing its change is forbidden by the constitution.
- The law on the closure of the Dervish lodges issued in 1925. These institutions were an integral part of the Ottoman social life. These lodges or fraternities stood equally for diverse sufi interpretations and practices of Islam and had a very broad base in the society.
- The law on the change of the alphabet issued in 1928, which prohibited the usage of the Arabic alphabet in all areas of the life, from education to publication. Since the Quran itself and almost all the religious literature had been written in the Arabic alphabet this change reflected very negatively on the religious life. Teaching the Quran, having old books or selling them were considered as an action against Ataturk's revolutions. The politic rationale of this change was, apparently, the cutting off the people from their traditional and religious memory.¹⁷
- The language of the Muslim call to prayer (Adhan) was changed in 1932 to Turkish from its original language which would have been recognized by any Muslim all around the Muslim world. This change was not pleasing for anybody.

These changes, some of which we mentioned, ostracized religious people to such a degree that they could not take office in the administrative system or army. Intervention in religious life has decreased to a great extent over the course of the time, yet there are some effects that continue to persist even today.

In 1946, the era of the single-party democracy ended. The Democrat Party, which took the power from the Republican Party in 1950, opened the way to more religious freedom; however they were removed from power by a coup in 1961. The public rationale for this coup and the others which occurred later on in 1971 and 1981, as well as the memorandum issued in 1997 by the National Security Council which compelled the prime minister to resign, was that suggesting the idea that the political leaders of the time were pursuing policies that violated the revolutions of the Republic.

Even though Turkey took very important steps in the field of religious freedom during the membership process to European Union, the old sentiments obstructing freedom still surface from time to time. The head covering known as the hijāb has remained one of the most symbolic facets of this debate between the fundamentalist secularism and the religious freedom. Until a few years ago,

¹⁶ Boyle, Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, 388.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; See, İsmet İnönü, *Hatıralar*, vol. 2 (Ankara, 1987), 223.

students who covered their head were not accepted into universities. Many of them had to leave their country to study in some western universities. Although today they can go to any university in Turkey as the result of a kind of makeshift solution, they do not yet have any legal guarantee that they will be able to continue their education in this manner because of the lack of a law specifying their right to study with the hijāb. Furthermore, the Turkish parliament, whose responsibility is to represent the people, has never had any woman parliamentarian who wore the hijāb, although 61% of the women in Turkey wear it, according a survey from 2007.¹⁸

Another important component of the spectrum of the religious diversity in Turkey is the Alevism, which appeared first as a Sufi interpretation of the Shi'ism. The Alevism was transmitted throughout generations through a mostly oral culture, and retains some elements from the Central Asian Turkish beliefs.¹⁹ A very dramatic historical trauma for the Alevīs was the Battle of Chaldiran which occurred in 1514 between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire, in other words between Selim I, known to be the first Ottoman caliph, and Shah Ismail, Turkish and Alevī leader of Safavids. The Ottoman Alevī population who lived in eastern Anatolia had very close relations with the Safavid State. In addition to having revolted against the Ottomans many times before the battle, they favored Shah Ismail in the battle. A lot of the Ottoman Alevīs who supported the Safavids were killed in both the rebellions and the battle that ended with Selim's victory. That is why the Alevī People were never able to recover from the effects of this trauma. They were also categorized later on as religious heretics and political outsiders. They simply had to keep their beliefs and rituals alive in their closed life-sphere.

For the Alevīs, the collapse of the Ottomans and the foundation of a Republic system instead offered a glimmer of hope. Although their status got better compared to before, their religious freedom remained limited. The Alevi people think that the double-standard policy of the state between different sects of Islam has been continuing. Some of the basic demands of Alevīs in Turkey could be summarized as follows:

- They want their *gathering house*, where the Alevi rituals take place, to be recognized officially as a place of worship just as the mosques are. If we have a look at the Alevī rituals we will clearly see that they bear a lot of the same features as those in the Sunnīte Sufic tradition. However the Alevī people's attendance at the mosques is much less than that of the Sunnīte people which makes the gathering house an alternative to the mosque. Alevīs' view of the

¹⁸ "A&G Araştırma Şirketi Verileri, 21.09.2007 - 23.09.2007," accessed October 13, 2013, http://www.agarastirma.com.tr/arastirmalar/ortusunu_nasil_tanim.pdf.

¹⁹ Mehmet Eröz, *Türkiye'de Alevilik ve Bektaşilik* (Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları: Ankara, 1990), 327.

mosque has such a crucial importance that equalizing the gathering house with the mosque and seeing it as an alternative for it complicates the solution, since the mosque is very central to the mainstream interpretation of Islam.²⁰

- They are not happy with the compulsory “religious culture and morality” lesson given in the elementary and secondary schools for two hours a week in accordance with the Constitution of 1982. Although this lesson was intended to cover general information about the definition of the religious beliefs and moral principles, its content has been changed to some extent in practice in order to become Sunnī-based, with a focus on Islamic prayers. However we should assert that it would not be very possible for many students to receive essential information about Islam, its faith and prayers without this lesson. This explains the reason why the content of the lesson has been changed.
- There are many non-governmental Alevī organizations and groups which have different perspectives in Turkey. That is why they cannot easily come to an agreement on many topics; which makes reaching a solution hard.

Diyamet: A Governmental Religious Authority in a So-Called Secular State

Said to be a secular state, Turkey has a governmental authority called the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) which is officially “responsible for conducting the affairs concerning the principles of Islamic faith, worship, and ethics and enlightening the people as to worship and morals and managing and supervising the worship places.”²¹ Diyamet is the most important part of the regime’s design concerning relations between state and religion. Isolated from temporal and civil characteristics and directed by the state, Diyamet was presumably established in order to place the Islam or the Sunnī Muslim community under the state’s control rather than to support them.

We see that there are different views in the public opinion on the existence of such a religious institution attached to the state. Most Sunnī Muslims have a positive view of the Diyamet, especially in respect to the coordination and administration of the mosques without any factional division. However, some of them are not happy and want an autonomous religious administration,²² especially when the state patronage reflects extensively on the content of preaching and *khutbas*. Complaining that the state aims to raise up “a good citizen” in the mosques, rather than “a good Muslim,” some Sunnī people propose a civil management of mosques.

²⁰ Shankland, “Islam,” 107.

²¹ *Law on the constitution of Presidency of Religious Affairs and it’s duties*, issued in 1965, Article 1.

²² Boyle, Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, 392.

Those who are secularists, republicans or statistes also see the Diyanet as a useful safety-valve for the regime because of the fear that “if the state doesn’t control them they can control it.” As for the liberal secular people who are the minority, they do not welcome a governmental religious institution at all.

We can say that there are two types of Alevī views on the Diyanet; while some of them believe that such governmental patronage in favor of a religion or sect should not exist in a secular state and view the Diyanet as just a part of a transformation and assimilation policy,²³ others do not oppose the patronage concept as a whole but they want the Alevī community to be represented within the Diyanet independently, rather than under a Sunnī administration. By obtaining official representation, they think that they would legitimate their belief and place it on par with the majority’s belief. On the other hand, they do not want to be officially recognized or funded via the Ministry of Culture on the basis of a cultural recognition because they do not want to be seen as a cultural tradition only, but as a religious faith system also.

Conclusion

Unlike what is often mentioned,²⁴ there is a third model of secularism other than the Anglo-Saxon model, which is distinguished by taking a passive position and keeping equal distance from all the faith groups on a basis of respect, and the assertive French model which ignores religious presence in the state sphere. Experienced in the iron curtain countries, the third model which we can call *militant secularism* tends to take a hostile standpoint toward religions and exclude them from both state and public life. Even though Turkish secularism was said to be highly inspired by the French model, its practice has borne comparison with the third model as well.

In 1928, as a first step to secularism the statement that “the religion of the state is Islam” was removed from the Turkish Constitution of 1924 and Secularism was added to the Constitution in 1937 as one of the unassailable structural principles of the state.²⁵ This emphasis was preserved without definition in both Constitutions which were prepared in 1961 and 1982 after two coups; however its implications concerning political, social and religious life have gone beyond being just an emphasis. Violating the principles of the Secularism has been a serious crime, because of which political parties were closed down and government

²³ Boyle, Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, 392.

²⁴ Ahmed Kuru, “Assertive and Passive Secularism State Neutrality, Religious Demography and the Muslim Minority in the United States”, in *The Feature of Religious Freedom*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke (Oxford University Press: 2013), 235.

²⁵ Article 2.

officials were fired. Nobody knew what the legal definition of Secularism was exactly, yet courts could rule on that kind of cases.

Even though Turkey, has witnessed normalization in its political stability to some extent in the last decade, it still needs to improve its democratic culture and create much more awareness of diversity in order to rescue it from being a source of conflict.

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