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Secular Nationalism and Incorporation of Religion by the State: Foundations of Civil Religion in Turkey

Talip Kucukcan

Professor of Sociology and Religion

Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey

tkucukcan@gmail.com

Objectives of this paper are twofold. First, it will illustrate how secular nationalism has been introduced as a source of collective identity and founding ideology of the Turkish state vis-à-vis Islamic legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Second, it will locate religion in the process of laying the foundations of civil religion and examine how it is sidelined, marginalized and reconfigured by the state ideology. Then, in the context of Turkey-EU relations, the paper will analyze how the Turkish state repositions itself as far Islam, non-Muslims and freedom of religion are concerned.

Secular nationalism (sacralization of the secular)

Secular reforms

Following collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a new nation was established on secular grounds which have, over the years, created its own myths, symbols, rituals, shared memories and objectives through several means and methods. The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 after a war of liberation against the Western occupying forces which have literally carved up the Ottoman Empire and which led to its disintegration. The war of liberation is an important constitutive element, indeed it is the starting point of civil religion though during the war it described not only as a national duty but also as a religious obligation against the infidel enemies. This war is led by Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) who would later be named as Ataturk, literally means the Father of Turk. Modern Turkey was established on western political model as a secular nation state. Although westernization and secularization, though on a much smaller scale, began during the late period of the Ottoman Empire, founding fathers of Turkey deemed it necessary to disconnect the new state and the nation from the imperial legacy, which was thought to be heavily influenced by Islamic symbols and cultural values. Therefore, the ruling elite has launched a large scale and sweeping reforms to build a new nation state.

All reforms during the formative period of the Republic aimed at undermining the legacy of the Ottoman social, political and cultural influence with a view to establish a modern and a secular framework to define the new Turkish nation. Earlier reforms included change of the alphabet from Arabic to Latin (1928) which meant a complete disconnection from cultural and literary products of the past. The Turkish language, for the state elite, should have been cleansed from the Arabic and Islamic influences. With the introduction of Latin alphabet, books, magazines, newspapers, official documents have all become objects that would remain in the archives for the years to come. Other reforms included acceptance of the Western styles of clothing, the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, the introduction of Western music in schools, and the change of the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday, adoption of law pertaining to the unification of education which all facilitated the emergence of secular myths, symbols and rituals. Until the transition from single party period to the multi party system in 1946, (in 1950 the government changed) secular nation building process actively continued. The state during this period is attributed a status of a father (devlet baba). In a sense sacralization of state took place. Several institutions such the Turkish Historical Institution and the Turkish Language Institution were established to provide a narrative to justify sacralization of the state.

Cult of Kemalism

During the single party period grounds of a civil religion was laid down. In the name of building a nation state, through a nationalist ideology and its inculcation in all sites dominated by the state, new cults, myths, symbols and rituals were created. One striking example is what one might call is the Cult of Ataturk and Kemalism. Until his death in 1938, Ataturk played a major role in redefining the Turkish state and the Turkish nation. Today, he enjoys a great respect as a leader of the war of liberation and founder of the Republic. However, after his death, he was turned into an infallible figure by his close associates who also created an ideology, called as Kemalism, which also became a state ideology during the single party period. Views, policies and actions of Kemalists turned Ataturk into a cult figure.

Should nations protect their important leaders by law from their opponents? Do any past national figures enjoy a protection by law in USA or in Europe? Ataturk does, not because he wanted it during his lifetime but because his Kemalist followers chose to do so. There is a special law in Turkey which is literally called 'the Law pertaining to the protection of

Ataturk` which is claimed to protect his legacy and personality from being disrespected, ridiculed and despised. Here a question rises as far as attributing a national leader an infallible status to be everlasting leader of civil religion. The Cult of Kemalism has been fortified in several other ways. Today, his photographs are hung in all public offices, school classrooms, court rooms and military establishments. Special Ataturk Corners were established in schools where his photographs, posters and books about him are displayed. His statues can be found in all towns and cities in Turkey as a constant reminder of his reforms and leadership. His speeches and addresses were published as books which became a major source of ideological inspiration for Kemalists who distributed thousands of copies to all schools in the country. He is buried in an impressively constructed mausoleum in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. During national holidays and at the opening of the Turkish Parliament each year statesmen, politician, members of the Constitutional and other courts and the military visit his mausoleum. Moreover, students from all over Turkey are brought to Ankara to pay their respect to him.

A recent film about Ataturk's life caused a huge controversy and disturbed the Kemalists who heavily criticized its script writer and the director. The film, entitled as "Mustafa" portrays Ataturk from his childhood until his death. It features Ataturk not only as a national leader and a hero but also as a human being with his emotional ups and downs, his relations with women, his smoking and drinking habits. Kemalists strongly rejected the claims in the film arguing that Ataturk was portrayed as having interest in women and fond of smoking and drinking. In their opinion, such a narrative was damaging the memory of Ataturk.

Flag painted with the blood of martyrs

I mentioned earlier that the war of liberation was a significant constitutive moment as a foundation of civil religion, producing myths, symbols and narratives. The Turkish state adopted the current flag as one of the fundamental symbols of independence. The color of Turkish flag is red which represents the blood of Turkish fighters who lost their lives against the infidel occupying forces and became martyrs. In the middle of the flag, there is a crescent and a star. The popular narrative is widely circulated and shared which tells the story behind the color and symbols on the Turkish flag. It is narrated that Turkish soldiers lost so much blood during the fighting and their blood was spread all over. Crescent and star were reflected on the blood pool. Then this fascinating and miraculously emerged view became the symbolic

basis of Turkish flag. The blood of Turkish soldiers on the soil also sacralized the land that is re-captured from the enemies.

Turkish flag is not only respected but also publicly displayed during national days. In fact in all shops and office buildings, whether public or private it is required to display or hang the flag on their windows or doors by law. Although there is no legal requirement, many people hang the Turkish flag on their apartment flats and houses as a sign of solidarity and belonging. The flags can be seen in most often and widely on national days, during national soccer team's matches and at times when terror attack claims lives in Turkey. Due to its symbolic significance that symbolizes freedom and national unity, the Turkish flag is considered to be almost sacred. Here one sees sacralization of a national symbol which is protected by law. As such, symbols of the Turkish flag cannot be used for any other purposes. In the United States, one might see the sale of underwear or a t-shirt with US flag design. This is not only unthinkable and unacceptable, but also a punishable crime in Turkey. In recent years, under the pressure of Kemalist journalists, the Directorate of Religious Affairs felt obliged to hang Turkish flags at some mosques.

Liberation Days

The war of liberation as a constitutive moment remains in the collective memory of Turks as the beginning of a new era for the nation. Each and every town which was occupied by European allied forces has a "Liberation Day" to celebrate. Celebrations are official moments that all state officials, notables and people of that particular city or town attend. All schools are closed on the Liberation Day and students are taken to the celebrations where patriotic talks are made, poems about the bravery of soldiers and fighters are read by young students, in a theatrical fashion the war and victory of Turks are performed by students with military costumes and rifles. The national days are celebrated all over Turkey and ceremonies are broadcast live on state and private televisions.

The Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic, multi-religious and multilingual state. There were Turks, Kurds, Greeks and many other ethnic groups and Muslims, Christians and Jews as far as religious diversity is concerned. Modern Turkey was established on the ideals of a secular nation state which by its nature is a homogenizing political entity or construction. It was a challenging task for the founding leaders of Turkey to build a nation in the face of such diversity. Myths, symbols, ceremonies and rhetoric some of which have already been

explained and several reforms in the areas of culture, language, education, law, bureaucracy and religious institutors aimed at building a homogenous nation state.

Incorporation of Religion in the State

Religion in the state bureaucracy

Although the Turkish state is defined as secular, it has incorporated religion in its bureaucracy by the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (The Diyanet), which is a constitutional public body with a mandate to administer religious affairs for Muslims. The Directorate was established in 1924 when the Ministry of Shar'iyah and Foundations was abolished in the same year. The 1961 Constitution organized the Directorate of Religious Affairs as a constitutional institution and gave it a constitutional mandate, a set of duties and responsibilities. The 1982 Constitution which is accepted following the 1980 military coup has also recognized the constitutional status of the Directorate. Article 136 of the current constitution states that:

“The Directorate of Religious Affairs, which is within the general administration, shall exercise its duties prescribed in its particular law, in accordance with the principles of secularism, removed from all political views and ideas, and aiming at national solidarity and integrity.”

The particular law pertaining to the Directorate, which was passed back in 1965, explains aims and scope of activities and responsibilities as follows:

“to execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, enlighten the public about their religion, and administer the sacred worshipping places.”¹

Constitutional mandate and duties have empowered the Directorate over the years as a public institution which receives its entire operation budget from the state, employing some 80 thousands staff all over Turkey. The Directorate administers all mosques in Turkey, train Imams, and organize religious courses for young people and adults in summer holidays. Status of the Directorate which only serves the Muslim population of the country, as a secular state, raises questions as to whether its presence is compatible with secularism. Moreover, the dominantly orthodox Sunni interpretation of Islam which informs the Directorate's main

¹ “The law about the Presidency of Religious Affairs, its Establishment and Obligations”, 633 dated 22.06.1965.

activities, that excludes non-orthodox communities, mainly the Alevi community is another point of fierce discussion in Turkey. There are mainly three contradicting positions as far as secular nature of the state and the status of the Directorate are concerned in Turkey.

1) Some secularists, liberals and religious groups argue, albeit for different reasons, that the presence of the Directorate as a public institution is against the very principles of secularism which is understood as neutrality before all religious and faith communities. Some religious groups would like to see the dissolution of the Directorate in order to have more freedom and autonomy without a state control. They argue that civil organizations should carry out religious activities, not a state department. Some secularists contend that the state should not fund the Directorate because it is funded by the taxes of not only Muslims but also of non-Muslims, atheists and un-orthodox Muslim communities. The Alevi community falls into this category which strongly opposes the existence of the Directorate and its funding by the state. They argue that the Directorate is dominated by the Sunni Orthodox Islam and does not serve the needs of the Alexis. The Alevi community would like to be recognized by the state and some Alevi groups would like to receive funding from the state for their Comedies (Houses of gathering for ritual purposes).

(2) The second group strongly supports constitutional presence of the Directorate because they see it as a mechanism of controlling the religious activities. In their opinion, religious activities should be monitored and the scope of religious liberty should be drawn by the state in order to protect and preserve the secular nature of the state. This view is shared largely shared by Kemalists, assertive secularists and the military.

(3) The third group however does not see any contradiction between the ideals of secular state and existence of the Directorate, yet they would like to see more broad based activity of the Directorate marked by pluralism and diversity on the one hand and less state control on religious affairs on the other hand.

As far as the Alevi community and their claims are concerned, there are some good signs of positive developments. First, Deputy Head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs has publicly declared that his institution neglected the Alevis up until the present day. After this public declaration, representatives of some Alevi organizations met with officials of the Directorate to discuss their views and air expectations. Their expectations center on the

recognition² of Cemevis as houses of worships like the Mosques, getting public funds and enjoying other privileges that Mosques have. It should be underlined here that the Alevi community is very diverse and their definition of Alevism as well as its connection with Islam differ considerably³. Some Alevi groups claim that Alevism represents liberal and progressive interpretation of Islam, some argue that it is marked by humanism while some Alevi groups reject any Islamic connections and argue that Alevism is a world view with its own philosophy and rituals. These groups find the existence of the Directorate against secularism and therefore reject any cooperation with it. Yet, Alevi groups which see Alevism under the umbrella of Islam are engaging in a dialogue with the state in general and with the Directorate in particular in an attempt to get full recognition and equal representation. As it will be argued later, almost all Alevi groups are against compulsory religious education which they see as indoctrination along the lines of Sunni Islam. The current government started, for the first time, a direct engagement with the Alevi community. The Prime Minister Erdogan appointed an Alevi member of the parliament from the Justice and Development Party (JDP) as an envoy to bring both sides around a table. In a gesture of recognition of Alevi claims Prime Minister Erdogan participated at dinners with the Alevi leaders, organized on ritually important days for the community.

Religious Education by the state

Another contested issue in Turkey is the constitutional arrangement of compulsory religious education in primary and secondary schools. Until 1980 religious education was an elective-optional course. In the 1982 Constitution, drafted after the 1980 military coup, instruction of religious culture and morality became a compulsory subject for Muslim children regardless of their sectarian affiliation. Non-Muslim children however, were exempted from taking these courses. It is ironic to see that generals of the military coup who are strictly committed to secular ideals and consider themselves as guardians of the state have introduced compulsory religion education. It may be argued that they wanted to control the curriculum and observe religious inculcation closely instead of leaving such an activity to independent religious groups, or pushing religious education underground. Yet another reason, one might argue, is instrumentalizing religion to educate young people in such a fashion that religion can play a

² re Erman and Emrah Göker, "Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), p. 102

³ See Ibid pp.100-112F.: Karin Vorhoff, "Let's Reclaim Our History and Culture!": Imagining Alevi Community in Contemporary Turkey" *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 38, Issue 2 (Jul., 1998), p. 240

unifying role following a period of political fragmentation that led to street fighting prior to the military coup. Generally speaking there is an overall approval of compulsory religious education as far as popular support is concerned, excluding the Alevi community and liberal organizations. However, when it comes to the nature of curriculum and content of the teaching material, a heated dispute emerges. Not only domestic factors but also external factors such as the EU membership negotiations and ECHR decisions led to fierce debates and court cases, which resulted in amendments in the curriculum to some extent though not fully satisfied its opponents.

Since complete rejection of compulsory religious education can bear no fruit, because new regulation requires a constitutional change, which is not possible in the current political configuration, the confessional content of the curricula became a target especially for the Alevi community, arguing that the curriculum represents only Sunni Islam and does not have any teaching on Alevi beliefs and doctrines. This is seen as discrimination by the Alevis who went to courts to challenge such this policy. In fact, about 4000 cases are pending at the Turkish courts filed by members of the Alevi community⁴. In an exemplary case, when the internal legal procedures were exhausted, parents of an Alevi student applied to the ECHR. In October 2007 the ECHR ruled that the content of the curricula, at the time of considering the case, dominantly represented the Sunni Islam, and thus urged the Turkish government to make necessary amendments to introduce a more diverse curriculum including the Alevi beliefs. It is noteworthy here that the ECHR did not rule against the compulsory status of religious education, its ruling pertained to the content of the course curriculum. The Court argued that Alevism is distinct from the Sunni interpretation of Islam and that the content of religious courses did not meet European Convention on Human Rights criteria of objectivity and plurality. Following this decision the Ministry of National Education made several changes. In March 2009, on the application Alevi parents demanding an exemption of their daughter from compulsory religious instruction, a local court in Antalya, a southern city, ruled in favor of parents.

Secularization of the Public Sphere and Headscarf ban

⁴ *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US.

Expression of religion and religiosity is not allowed in the public sphere in Turkey, because it is interpreted and defined as a domain of the state rather than that of various social, political, and religious actors that would like to make legitimate claims to it. Religion and religious groups are perceived by hard-line secularists as presenting a threat to the fundamental principles of the secular state. In the name of protecting secularism from “imagined enemies” the public domain is strictly closed to religion. Such an attitude has been inculcated in schools and public institutions since the establishment of the republic. In a sense a phobia emerged, mostly developed by the elite, as far as religion-state relations are concerned in Turkish society. The public sphere is still under the control of state ideology, rather than being an open domain for discussion regarding legitimacy and resources on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. As Professor Nilüfer Gole has noted:

The public sphere is institutionalized and imagined as a site for the implementation of a secular and progressive way of life. An authoritarian modernism—rather than bourgeois, individualist liberalism—underpins this public sphere. Religious signs and practices have been silenced as the modern public sphere has set itself against the Muslim social imaginary and segregated social organization; modern codes of conduct have entered public spaces ranging from Parliament and educational institutions to the street and public transportation.⁵

Headscarf ban should be analysed against this background. So far all attempts, including a constitutional change have failed to lift the ban. The banning of headscarves at universities started in 1989 by Constitutional Court ruling.

The Turkish parliament passed a constitutional amendment on February 9, 2008, by 411 votes to 103 votes, with the purpose of ending a long-running ban on Islamic headscarves at universities. On February 22, 2008, President Abdullah Gül approved the changes. Indeed, changes to the Constitution were concerned with the principle of equality and the right to education by all; lifting the ban on headscarves was not mentioned in the law at all. The JDP government was supported in this move by the Nationalist Action Party (“MHP”), which is the second largest opposition party. Under heavy pressure from the staunch secularist circles and the establishment, however, the Constitutional Court—described as “the stronghold of

⁵ Nilüfer Gölle, “Islam in Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries”, 14 *Public Culture* 173, 176–77 (2002).

secularists” by the *Times*⁶—annulled the amendments that would lift the ban at the universities the same year. The court ruled on June 5, 2008 that the Turkish parliament had violated the constitutionally-enshrined principle of secularism by making amendments to lift the ban. The main opposition party especially, the Republican People’s Party (“CHP”), maintained that the JDP had a secret agenda to Islamicize the county and therefore the party made such changes.

Non-Muslims

As far as freedom of religion and the role of state in its protection or restriction are concerned, the case of non-Muslim communities (all are Turkish citizens by constitutional right) is also a case under constant discussion. Approximately 98% of the population in Turkey is Muslim. There are also several non-Muslim religious groups in Turkey inherited from the Ottoman state, most of which are concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. Because census results do not contain any data on the religious affiliation of Turkish citizens, the exact membership figures to non-Muslim communities are not available. Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox adherents are recognized by the government as having special legal minority community status under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Baha’is; Syrian Orthodox (Syriac) Christians; Protestants; and Bulgarian, Chaldean, Nestorian, Georgian, and Maronite Christians do not have the same status, however.

In spite of these constitutional provisions, non-Muslim minorities in Turkey have faced property ownership restrictions.⁷ On January 3, 2003, the law pertaining to the property of community (non-Muslim minority) foundations was amended, lifting strict restrictions and enabling these foundations to have more freedom in keeping, maintaining, and purchasing new premises. Under the 2003 law passed by Parliament, community foundations became able to purchase new property for religious, social, cultural, and educational functions, as well as for providing health services by the permission of the Foundations Directorate under more

⁶ Suna Erdem, *Judges Defy Government to Uphold Turkey Headscarf Ban*, TIMES ONLINE, June 8, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4076180.ece>.

⁷ Currently, 161 "minority foundations" are recognized, including Greek Orthodox foundations with approximately 61 sites, Armenian Orthodox foundations with an estimated 48 sites, and Jewish foundations with 12 sites, as well as Syriac Christian, Chaldean, Bulgarian Orthodox, Georgian, and Maronite foundations, *Ibid*.

flexible conditions. The Parliament also voted in favor of new Foundation Law in 2008 that expands freedoms for minority foundations in Turkey.⁸

⁸ The changes that the law introduced can be summarized as follows: With the new law, property previously seized from non-Muslim foundations will be returned. Minority foundations have eighteen months to apply to the Foundations Council, which will decide on and manage the return of the assets. Foreigners can form new religious foundations; the directors of these foundations must, however, be residing in Turkey. New non-Muslim foundations will be allowed to open representative organizations and outlets so long as they explain their goals and aims in writing beforehand. Foreigners will be allowed to take up duties in these foundations. Non-Muslim foundations may, without specific permission, acquire land and use this land as they wish, but in the case of foundations wherein the majority of the founding board is foreign, there will be limitations set as specified by the land registry laws. Non-Muslim foundations will be allowed both to form companies and become partners in already-formed companies, provided that this helps them to carry out their stated goals, and as long as the foundation informs the authorities of the profits received from such companies. Profits from such companies are not to be used outside of any goals or targets held by the foundation itself. Non-Muslim foundations will be permitted to engage in international activities as long as such plans are included in writing in the foundation's charter and as long as the activities are along the lines of the foundation's general goals and targets. These foundations will be permitted to form outlets and representative organizations abroad and to become members of international organizations; this is a right only granted to newly formed foundations. Non-Muslim foundations will be permitted to receive financial assistance from people and organizations outside of Turkey and they will also be permitted to extend their own assistance to other foundations, both nationally and internationally. Such financial assistance will take place through bank transfers.