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Citation

Altan, Ö. (2003). Sanctifying the Nation Teaching Religion in Secular Turkey. *Isim Newsletter*, 12(1), 52-53. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16869>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Sanctifying the Nation

Teaching Religion in Secular Turkey

ÖZLEM ALTAN

Universal religious education, which every Turkish citizen receives in school for five to eight years, is a relatively under-researched aspect of studies on the state and Islam in Turkey. Literature on the topic usually discusses classes on religion in the contemporary context in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the introduction of religion classes into the curricula is seen as a major compromise from Kemalist secularism – that is to say, it is dis-

ussed as an important representation of the radical shift from the secular ideals of the early republican period, which the notion of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, overtly adopted in the 1980s, brought about. On the other hand, several writers explicitly argue that compulsory religion classes, together with other legal and institutional practices such as those of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, reveal that secularism in Turkey has not necessarily been about the separation of sacred and secular spheres, but rather a state control over acceptable definitions and practices of religion (Parla 1992, Tarhanlı 1993).

However, describing the secular practice in Turkey as state control over the religious sphere – and universal schooling in religion as a manifestation of this phenomenon – is a correct but insufficient explanation. The textbooks for classes on religion and morality take up ideas of nationhood, homeland, Atatürk, militarism, secularism, economic and political solidarity, and orderliness as much as, and sometimes more than, pillars of Islam and religious belief in general. The state functionalizes religion and attempts to use it as a terrain to legitimize other ideologies. Ultimately it involves a larger process of socialization, reaffirming some of the basic premises of the republic.

Secularizing religion

A publication of the Ministry of Education, *Din Öğretiminde Yeni Yaklaşımlar* (2000), which addresses teachers, gives instructions for the ‘new approaches’ in religious training through several articles written by ‘specialists’ designated by the ministry. The preface self-appoints the book as the guide that teachers should consult both in their general practices of teaching and also in understanding what religious instruction involves. It is said that if this aspect of education is neglected, there is the danger of ‘others’ ‘brainwashing’ the students. These implicit ‘others’ are in fact pervasive beliefs in society that religious education ‘enables students to contemplate about’ through its provision of the ‘correct’ information about religion and its ability to raise the consciousness of students. As a result, precisely because religious instruction is transformed into ordered knowledge that requires specialization, it becomes the state’s responsibility to undertake its teaching as ‘not all parents, not all families, can do this, or know enough themselves about religion’.

Naturally, it is not much of a new discovery to say that Islam and its rituals are rationalized extensively in these books. For example, in this context ablution helps keep one sufficiently clean; daily prayers disci-

In the debates on the issue of secularism and Islam the Turkish Republic is often mentioned as an example of how a Muslim society can be governed by secular principles. Secularism implies the separation of religion and state.

A careful reading of textbooks used in universal religious education reveal that Turkish secularism does not only entail state control over the meaning of religion, but that religion is also used to promote nationalism, militarism, and the existing economic order.

pline one into being organized; and fasting is good for one’s health (Yılmaz et al. 1997–9). Not only does rationalizing religion bring the classes into line with the more conventionally secular subjects, such as chemistry and nature study (Starret 1998); it also paves the way for the interpretation that secularism and Islam complement each other. Because secularism is not atheism, it cannot be against Islam and because Islam is a rational religion with com-

mitment to freedom, it embodies the principles of secularism anyway. Because it does not mean atheism, it is a principle that guarantees the protection of pure piety in the face of bigotry (ibid.).

Furthermore, secularism is repeatedly explained as separation of religious affairs from state affairs, the state’s equal distance from all belief systems, protection of people’s religious and moral freedoms, prevention of abuse of religion in political affairs, and a prerequisite of modernization/westernization (ibid.). Yet the same texts avoid dealing with the existence of a directorate of religious affairs within the state or the *obligation* to attend the religion classes. Kaplan (1996) concludes that children are not ‘expected to question the incongruity between freedom of conscience and mandatory religion lessons in primary and secondary school’.

Sanctifying the modern nation

Textbooks for religion classes in Turkey can also be said to have become a medium in which nationalism and militarism are inculcated. To give a very crude numeric example, the one-hundred-page fifth grade primer has twenty pages on love of homeland in addition to six pages on Atatürk, laicism, and Islam; whereas the second longest chapter is on belief in prophets, with twelve pages. This is a feature repeated in all textbooks with varying degrees of emphasis.

In fact, the sacredness of protecting the homeland is an overwhelming theme that finds its way into many seemingly irrelevant sections such as ‘nice habits’ or ‘social responsibilities’ as well as more overt topics such as homeland, patriotism, history of wars, etc. Homeland and the Turkish flag are frequently associated with the blood of soldiers who died in wars with enemies (Yılmaz et al. 1997–9). This, then, is tied into the sacredness of universal conscription. Because ‘protecting the homeland from all kinds of attacks is a sacred responsibility’, ‘it is improper for a Turkish man to evade conscription or avoid joining the army using various excuses’ (ibid.).

Yet the climax comes when the military and the army banners are listed among the ‘sacred values’ that require reverence. The military as an institution is given the venerable responsibility of protecting the homeland against enemies, who are elusively defined in terms of ‘internal and external’ threats. Yet the texts do not stop there. They go on to transform the army into a sacred value to be fought for: ‘the Turkish army is our most valuable wealth, composed of the sons of this homeland, enabling our nation to live in security. Our army is the insur-

mountable guard of our state, flag, independence' (ibid.). Hence an organization that would conventionally be seen as part of a secular nation-state framework is turned into a holy institution that protects venerable assets – and therefore is one itself. In his study of the eighth-grade civic book, Kaplan (1996) notes how the state is depicted as a sacred institution: 'the state from the religious point of view is an institution that Allah created for mankind's benefit.' The sacralization of the army reinforces this veneration with a militarized nuance.

Capitalizing social harmony

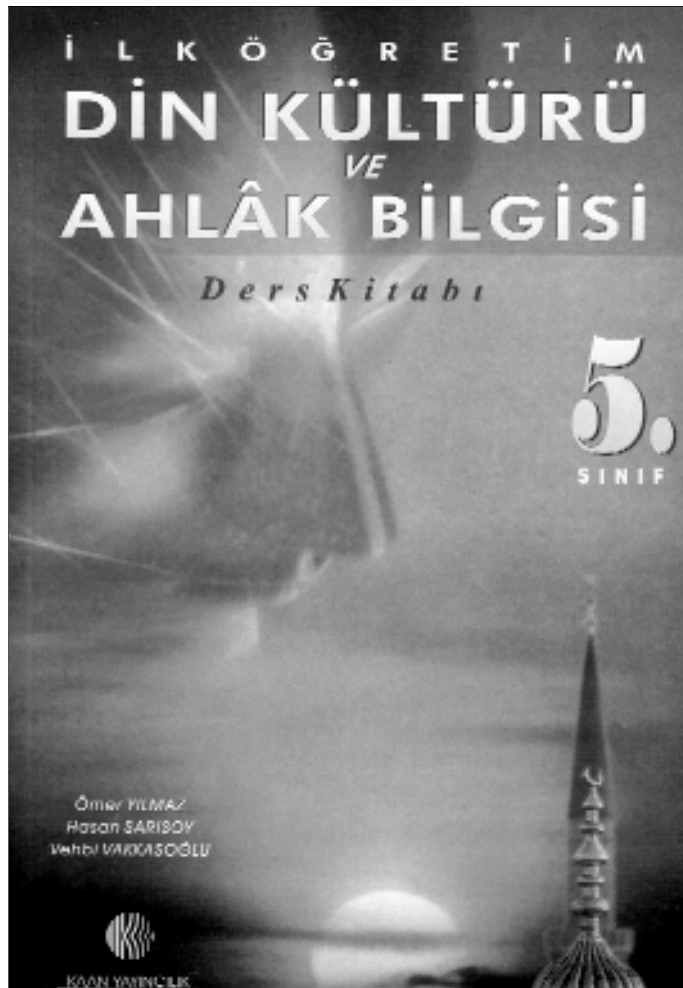
Just like the unquestioned premises of security and need for protection, societal peace is also a major preoccupation of these books. Stability and harmonious relations among people are naturalized by resembling this state of affairs to the way the rest of nature functions (Yılmaz et al. 1997–9). Kaplan (1996) argues that to the Turkish state pedagogue, education is the means to impress a national culture that can ensure social stability. The promotion of stability is especially significant in a context where ethnic and socio-economic conflicts are increasingly part of the agenda. Thus, any value that is promoted is somehow linked with the maintenance of social peace and stability.

One way in which this is done is by the promotion of Platonic division of labour: 'the peace and safety of a society depends on the harmonious work of people – who serve in different institutions and organizations of the society – within the division of labour. If people do not undertake their share of the responsibilities in a consistent manner, the order of society will be disrupted' (Yılmaz et al. 1997–9). The groups cited as forming integral parts of this totality are women as mothers, men as fathers, children as helpers of mothers and fathers, factory workers who are to complete their work in the best way possible, state officials who have to work in a timely fashion and in harmony with their managers, entrepreneurs, and traders who are supposed to earn money and spend it through *hela* means, and soldiers and police forces that are given the responsibility to protect the country's 'indivisible wholeness' (ibid.).

Relevantly, a section in the sixth-grade textbook begins with a discussion of how one can attain happiness by believing in and exercising the pillars of Islam. Then students are introduced to the concept of happiness as something that is beyond material well-being: 'for example, a poor person may look for happiness in material wealth because he assumes his misery is a result of his material deficiency. This may be partially true, too. If a poor person reached material relief and if his/her material needs were met, he may be happy. Yet, this happiness eventually fades away' (ibid.). This is followed by a discussion on the vice of jealousy. Jealousy is described in terms of coveting the more prosperous, the more successful, and the more beautiful. The basic moral is that one has to try to imitate and learn from others instead of wrongly craving for the their belongings. In a context of incrementally increasing income inequalities, exacerbated by frequent economic and political crises, this can be taken to be timely moral advice – the internalization of which may be hoped to diminish chances of social uprising. If it is possible to instruct children into thinking 'one needs to work very hard to become rich' (ibid.), then it might also be possible to sustain the idea that 'anyone can make it' and that if you can not, it is your personal fault.

The books also have something to say if you are one of the lucky ones. Modest people are defined as those who 'do not descend to becoming spoiled because of their social position and prosperity.... God does not like people who are arrogant and haughty. He does not like people who make fun of those that are poor or without high social rank' (ibid.). Thus the circuit is closed: the impoverished are not to covet the riches of the affluent because jealousy is a major vice, while the latter should be modest enough to respect the less lucky ones.

In both cases, the roots of this inequality are not made the concern of religion or social morality. Instead practices that allow inequality to persist without the emergence of social crises or personal reservations are encouraged: '[g]iving of alms is the bridge that connects the rich and the poor with love' (ibid.). The same thing is true for the way justice is conceptualized: '[i]n the implementation of rights and justice, people should not be discriminated with respect to their religion, language, *mezheb*, race, richness, or poverty' (Yılmaz et al. 1997–9). Thus justice does not mean the eradication of wealth differentials but 'equal' treatment of people without reference to their level of material well-being.



Fifth grade religious studies textbook.

Conclusion

Universal religion classes in Turkey are a peculiar aspect of the alleged secular nature of the state. They have been offered in one form or another for most of the republican history, and made obligatory after the military coup in 1982. The study suggests that the generally held opinion that secularism in Turkey can be more accurately defined as state control of Islam is valid but can be further elaborated. One way in which this can be done is by looking at how these books become terrains for other ideologies. They are full of writings on secularism, nationalism, militarism, and a capitalist notion of societal peace. The reproduction of these ideologies in connection with Islamic premises provides them with a sanctity that may not be obtained so easily otherwise. In other words, Turkish secularism does not only mean state-exercised control over the meaning of right religion. On the pedagogical level, it also operates as a divine legitimization for various facets of the official ideology. Specifically by taking in the production of religious knowledge in its sphere, the educational system is able to make use of a sacred sphere in promoting nationalism, militarism, and corporatist capitalism.

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Özlem Altan is a Ph.D. candidate in the politics department of New York University. A full version of this paper will appear in a forthcoming edited volume based on a 2003 conference at Brown University on 'Religion and Identity: Formation in Middle Eastern School Curricula'.
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