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Studying Secularism: Modern Turkey and the Alevis

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Debate
DAVID SHANKLAND

Any researcher interested in modern Turkey can hardly escape the controversy that has surrounded religion in the last decade. The rise and fall of Erbakan and the Welfare Party, the National Security Council's secular 'recommendations' in February 1997, the partial closure of the İmam-Hatip (religiously-oriented) schools, and the formation of 'Western Working Groups' to investigate alleged infiltration into the civil service by religious activists, are just a few instances of how prominent these issues have been. How, as observers, are we to attempt to understand the significance of these and similar events in today's Republic?

There is no simple answer, but it seems possible to suggest, at least as a starting point for discussion, two simultaneous but contradictory trends. First, there appears to be a rapidly growing heterogeneity, particularly in the large urban centres such as Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara. The precise reasons for this are unclear, but certainly linked to Turkey's growing integration with the outside world, and encouraged by the highly successful (if uneven) economic transformation of recent decades. At the same time, it seems that Turkey is tending to bifurcate sharply between pro- and anti-secular movements. On the anti-secular side, there are the popular Islamist political movements, the Islamic brotherhoods, the followers of Said-i Nursi, a constellation of Islamic business, media, charities and associations, and the extremely violent Hizbullah. On the secular side, there are the followers of the original Republican People's Party, moderate believers (such as those who might find themselves holding the central ground in the True Path Party), parts of the senior bureaucracy (particularly the judiciary), much of an increasingly consumerist oriented youth, the military (led by the army), and not least, almost the entirety of the unorthodox minority, the Alevis.¹ It can be argued that this split is profound. Even taking into account the fact that people may change their perspective, that movements may sometimes blur into one another, and that there is a vast difference between rhetoric and action, the side that an individual takes in this ideological divide may lead them into quite different social contexts in their daily lives: the one likely to include a combination of religious rituals, mosque-going, *tariikat* membership, Koran courses, right-wing or religious political parties, Islamic discussion groups, Islamic foundations (both economic and pious), the Islamic media and a personal rejection of revelry, ostentation, and overt displays of emotion; the other leading to a less structured life, but likely to include broad acceptance of the republican state, its secular ceremony and ritual, alcoholic drink, dance, and if also politically committed – usually though certainly not exclusively – involvement in left-wing groups. Indeed, it is this tendency to 'bunch' along the two sides of the secular-/anti-secular split that explains much of this divide's volatility, and its potential to harm Turkey in the coming decades.

Studying secularism
We often remind each other, both at conferences and in our writings, that we should be as sensitive as possible to diversity within Islamic societies. In spite of this healthy discussion, it seems that the emergence of overtly secular movements in Turkey has not attracted the same attention as the more actively Islamist trends, whether that latter study be to stress the Islamist movements' rise or, conversely, their supposed decline. There is, for example, a persistent tendency to give more weight to the pro-

nouncements of the Islamifying movements, such as the Nurus and their related groups, and discount the more moderate voice of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, perhaps assuming that since it is government-led, the people with whom it is associated must in some way be less 'Islamic'. Yet, many of the thousands of people who work for the Directorate, along with those who worship in its mosques and participate in its wider activities, certainly regard themselves as genuine Muslims and accept the secular state.² Likewise, we have a far greater knowledge of the inner workings of the Süleymanîs than we do of the increasingly visible *jeunesse dorée* who spend great parts of their lives in clubs, restaurants, pop concerts and summer-houses. Yet these people are still capable of taking vows at a shrine outside Bosphorus University in an attempt to pass their university degrees, or of planting a rose bush at the time of Hıdırllez in early May with a little wrapped image of their desired goal suspended from one of its branches. Many of these people would reject with anger any imputation that they are not 'Islamic', though they are not in the slightest interested in Islamist politics or in opposing the secular state.

'Culturalism'
It can be suggested that this imbalance is partly a question of the language that we use, and the categories that we employ to label Islamic societies. To give an immediate example, within the immense amount of journalistic (and therefore prominent if not in itself powerful) coverage that is attendant upon Turkey and the European Union, there is a core of writers, such as Hugh Pope of the *International Herald Tribune* or the sepulchral anonymous scribes for *The Economist*, who maintain that the secular state is in some way by definition illegitimate, that the correct course for Turkey would be to re-introduce some form of more overtly Islamic central state.³ This, bluntly, is part of an expanding curse in sociological writings that might be deemed 'culturalism': an implication that just because people are from one particular group they have to behave in the presumed standard fashion for that community.

The Alevis
The Alevis, the heterodox minority that make up perhaps slightly less than 20% of the population, are a further case in point. In the dozen years that I have been studying and conducting fieldwork among them, there is not the slightest doubt that they have been undergoing a transformation: a process of codification of their previously oral tradition, one that has been rapid and interesting to witness, resulting in a large number of publications, an increasingly strong public profile, and above all, a large part of its population becoming profoundly secular. This does not mean that Alevi people are all the same, far from it. Whilst it is necessary to make the caveat that the situation is extremely fluid, there are those who embrace secularism enthusiastically, so much so that they wish no longer to regard their culture

as a religion at all, rather as a moral ethic to help guide their everyday existence within the Republic. These may regard 'Aleviness' as being henceforth unnecessary as a separate or distinct category. There are those who, whilst accepting the Republic, wish to maintain closer contact with their traditions within a sharply secular nation: these people are likely to be active members of the political left. It is perhaps the smallest distinct group that seeks more explicit recognition. For instance, Cem Vakfı, led by an Alevi religious figure, wishes to make the government teach 'Aleviness' explicitly, basing its argument on the political principle 'no taxation without representation'. These people are likely to regret the social change that has been forced on to their communities, and wish for something that they might refer to as 'traditional' Alevi values, though as their leaders have rarely spent much time in Alevi villages, they are unlikely to be so at all.⁴

Varying belief
As researchers, what sort of language should we use to discuss this diverse social change? To imply that social change among the Alevi is predominantly a religious reformulation is mistaken. This is not meant to imply that the Alevis have become 'unbelievers' – something which would distress and irritate many of their members. Nevertheless, the shift undergone by the majority appears rather akin to that which Christianity has undergone in Europe: most Alevis predominantly experience their music and dance as a cultural rather than a religious experience; roughly akin, for example, to attending a Mozart requiem or a Bach cantata in a cathedral, an event not primarily motivated by religion, regardless of the music's original social function.

In spite of this emergence of what appears to be a secular moral humanism, there is an increasing sense among those who study the Alevis that their 'predicament' should be linked with that of the Kurds in the east; casting them as a deprived minority that are being deprived of their religious rights within the Republic.⁵ This is precisely the 'culturalism' against which I am attempting to warn in the study of Turkey. Precisely who is being 'deprived' of their rights? It is worth re-iterating that, first, within the anti-secular/secular divide, described above as being so important and so significant, yet overlooked, the Alevis have almost in their entirety come out in favour of the founding Kemalist reforms. They have conspicuously resisted open calls from the Welfare and now the Virtue Party to re-identify themselves primarily a religious minority. Secondly, when the immense and growing heterogeneity of the Alevi population is taken on board, it is only the minority who are seeking reaffirmation of their traditions through explicit acknowledgement from the state. Of course, they wish to be free to act as they wish: this goes for any population, but the majority have no desire whatsoever to be recast a millet either by their traditional religious figures or by well-wishing advisers in international academic and institutional politics. It would be a tragedy

if, the Republic having escaped much of the bloody conflict between sectarian movements that was prevalent in the Ottoman Empire, we as researchers were to contribute to it now through misplaced wholesale attribution of characteristics where, in fact, no such unanimity exists. ♦

Notes
1. For a fuller discussion of the issues set out here, see my recent *Islam and Society in Turkey* (1999). Huntingdon: Eothen Press.
2. A notable exception is the research of Tapper N. and Tapper, R. (1987). 'Thank God We're Secular! Aspects of Fundamentalism in a Turkish Town'. In *Aspects of Religious Fundamentalism*, edited by L. Caplan. London.
3. E.g. *The Economist*, 17 April 1999: editorial, or *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 May 1999: article by Hugh Pope.
4. See my 'Anthropology and Ethnicity: The place of Ethnography in the New Alevi Movement'. In *Alevi Identity*, edited by T. Olsson, E. Ozdalga, and C. Raudvere. Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, transactions, 8, pp. 15-23.
5. E.g. see Yavuz, M. (1999). 'Media Identities for Alevis and Kurds in Turkey'. In *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, edited by Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp.180-197.

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