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Turkey

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The New Garments of Alevism

In the past decade, Turkey's official image as a country of Sunni Muslims has been vigorously challenged by the 'coming out' of the Alevi, a large heterodox Islamic minority, which consists of approximately 15 million Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking members. Until that time, due to the official definition of Turkey as an ethnically and religiously homogenous nation, public expressions of deviating collective identities had been banned by law. However, a shift in government policy in the early 1990s enabled the Alevi to come to the fore and to inaugurate an ethno-political movement to achieve official acknowledgement.

The politicization of Alevi identity is accompanied by a religious revivalism which – regarding the nature of traditional Alevism – appears to result in a re-construction of community structures, beliefs and rituals.

Concealment and secrecy

Expelled by the larger society as heretics and afflicted with the stigma of immorality, the Alevi practised for centuries *taqiyya*, the concealment of one's own religious identity. They guarded their doctrines as mystery (*sir*), not to be disclosed to anyone but those born into the community. The esoteric knowledge was handed down orally in a number of holy lineages (*ocak*) – which claim descent from the Prophet – and passed on to the laymen (*talip*) in special initiation rites. Though a kind of hierarchy existed among the *ocak*, none of them exercised the role of a central religious authority. This segmented organization along with the lack of a binding script forestalled the development of a single and uniquely valid religious tradition among the Alevi.

Aside from strong Shi'i (and extreme-Shi'i) influences, the Alevi preserved several non-Islamic religious traditions. What brings them into sharpest contrast with Islamic orthodoxy is the rejection of the shari'a. Rather, the Alevi claim that as they possess the esoteric (*battini*) meaning of the faith, they are exempt from the observance of its external (*zahiri*) laws. The 'hidden truth' appears to be the doctrine of *vahdet-i mevcut*, which denies the separateness between Creator and creatures. The Alevi express this by saying that there is no man without God and no God without man. An outstanding feature of Alevism is the veneration of the fourth caliph Ali, who, along with Allah and Mohammed, forms part of a trinity. Ali and Muhammad are regarded as pre-existent, the former of the two often believed to be God himself. Further beliefs refer to metempsychosis (*tenasüh*) and the incarnation of God in man (*hulul*). The Alevi fast 12 days in Muharrem, in memory of the murder of Ali's son al-Husain at Kerbala. In addition, there exists a wide range of local beliefs and customs in accordance to the various sub-groups or a given region.¹

Secularization and politicization

The manifold transformations of republican Turkey put an end to the spatial and social marginality of the Alevi. However, their gradual integration into the majority society – migration to the towns, school attendance, state employment and the involvement in the national economy – led in the long run to a secularization of the community. As a result, the social-religious system collapsed and religion as a whole lost its previous importance. This development reached its peak in the 1970s, when the overwhelming majority of the Alevi devoted itself to leftist and universal ideologies. In this period a whole generation had grown up without being initiated into the secret doctrines and the Holy Men (*dede*) lost their function and authority. The oral transmission of knowledge was interrupted and mostly fell into oblivion.

Back to the roots or toward a new Alevism?

Local and global developments in the 1980s – disintegration of the Left, Islamism and the world-wide collapse of socialism – led to a re-discovering of Alevism as a main source of collective identity, accompanied by a reawakened interest in its cultural and religious traditions. Manifold efforts have been made to adapt Alevism – which is actually a village phenomenon – to the conditions of urbanity and modernity, the most significant among them being the scripturalization of the oral traditions, the abandonment of concealment and secrecy, and the transition of authority from the Holy Men to members of a new middle-class elite, who in majority belong to the traditional 'laity'. They take over leading functions in the community-based associations, which since 1990 have been established all over the country and carry out manifold political activities in the name of Alevism. Under the motto 'We have nothing to hide', educated members of this new elite openly discuss beliefs and rituals of the community in the print media, on TV, and in hundreds(!) of book publications.² The renewed interest in religion becomes apparent in the rapidly growing number of houses of worship (*cem evi*), being erected in the towns. After an interruption of nearly 30 years, religious ceremonies (*cem*) are observed again.

The manner in which the *cem* are currently carried out marks a gradual transition of Alevism into an open community of belief with more or less formalized forms of ritual. *Cem* ceremonies are offered weekly by the worship houses as a religious service and last



One of the new erected houses of worship (*cemevi*), Ankara.

about 2 hours (in contrast to the past, where they went on the whole night). They are now open to the public, not only because an exclusion of non-Alevi would be politically unwise, but given the anonymity of urban life, it could not be controlled anyway. Also, secrecy would contradict the new self-image of the Alevi, which represents a universally valid and modern form of faith. In addition, the *cem* in the towns have lost their former function as a social regulative and controlling trial and even as an instrument of religious education. Thus they lack former indispensable elements such as initiation (*ikrar*) and the ritual of *görüme*, a kind of 'trial' in which quarrels among the disciples were settled and those who committed an offence called to account. If they are carried out at all, they appear to be merely a symbol of belonging. (In a case recently witnessed in Istanbul, more than 70 men were questioned and initiated within 4 hours.) Under such conditions, the function of the Holy Men – a part of them becoming active again – is limited to the observance of ceremonies which consist of special prayers (*gülbenk*, *dua*), hymns (*nefes*), music, and ritual dance (*sema*).

The Holy Men are no longer the only – and not even the most important – transmitters of knowledge. Often uneducated and unable (or reluctant) to speak on religious matters in a way accessible to the new urban generation, they can hardly gain back their previous authority. The post-Marxist generation does not consider descent as a value in its own right and demands scientifically trained and 'enlightened' *dedes*. 'Acquired' knowledge is increasingly taking precedence over 'inherited' knowledge and written sources over orality. However, the demand for a textbook on Alevism with a clear explanation of its essentials is out of sight at the present. Competitions among the new community leaders and among the Holy Lineages, as well as ideological divergences forestalled, until now, serious attempts to develop a coherent belief system out of the components of Alevi syncretism. In this situation the books of Alevi intellectuals become the main source of information.

However, the more books are published the more confusion increases. Most of the authors are 'laymen' and belong to the generation which had no access to the sacred knowledge. Their books are generally based on second-hand information and strongly reflect ideological and political orientations. Thus the authors make a selective use of

Alevi beliefs and rituals: they stress elements which underline their position and neglect others. Some emphasize the Islamic features while others bring the mystical elements to the fore. While the majority of the authors declare Alevism as part of Islam, some define it as a religion in its own right. Again others divest Alevism of its religious dimension, defining it as a social movement, humanism or even atheism. Authors affected by Turkish or Kurdish nationalism interpret Alevism as being based on Shamanism or on Zoroastrianism. Thus scripturalization has not yet resulted in fixed and unified doctrines.

For different reasons, however, the lay authors as well as the Holy Men avoid treating some of the most heterodox elements in public. Themes such as the deification of Ali, incarnation or metempsychosis are equally not touched in the *cem* held in public, which are rather dominated by the Shi'i components of the faith (although without paying any reference to the shari'a). And there are strong hints that certain essentials, today known only to some Holy Men and their close adherents, are still hidden. Alevism as it is presently offered to the public (Alevi and non-Alevi), appears to be filtrated of most of its gnostic and extreme Shi'i elements. It is improbable that the esoteric teachings will completely disappear. Alevism is more likely to become divided into two parts: the one being a public religion, purified of its extreme elements and exercised by the majority, the other being hidden from the masses and limited to a smaller number of initiated members. Thus Alevism could bring out a *tarikât* from itself, analogue to Bektashism. ◆

Notes

1. See, for a detailed description of Alevi history and religion, Kehl-Bodrogi, K. (1988). *Die Kızılbaş/Aleviten: Untersuchungen über eine esoterische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Anatolien*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.
2. For an analysis of the new Alevi group-literature, see Vorhoff, K. (1995). *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft: Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.

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Singing *nefes* in a *cem* in Istanbul (February 2000).

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