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Televangelism and the Case of Yasar Nuri Öztürk

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Turkey
NEŞE İHTİYAR

Today mass media, especially the audio-visual media, exert an immense influence on nearly every society, and Turkey is no exception. The television appearances of the Turkish Islamic theologian and author Yaşar Nuri Öztürk is striking in this context of rising mediatic hegemony. The development of televangelism in the USA, which has lead to nation-wide religious movements, is not without parallels in Turkey, where the television has virtually become a religious medium – for some, even a 'tele-mosque' of sorts.

With the appearance of private broadcasting stations since the early 1990s Turkish television has experienced a steady increase in importance for Turkish society, not only within the country but also for the Turks living in the diasporas. This is due to the fact that nearly every Turkish household, wherever it may be, receives Turkish programmes via satellite. In some of these households, the television is on almost all of the time. The broadcasting stations are mostly secular and loyal to the state (e.g. Show TV, ATV, Star, BRT, Kanal D, to name but a few) but one can also find broadcasting stations with a more religious touch (Kanal 7, TGRT). All offer millions of viewers innumerable soap operas, and game and music shows. Regarding political programmes, Islam is undoubtedly one of most widely discussed topics. In roundtable discussions popular academics from the theological, sociological and legal fields debate, sometimes in a very emotionally charged manner, about Islam.

A leading and outstanding figure in this context is Yaşar Nuri Öztürk, born in Bayburt in 1945 into a family of the Naqshibandi order. He acquired his deep religious knowledge from his father. Having obtained degrees in Law and Theology, he is currently the dean of the college of Theology at Istanbul University. So far Öztürk has published more than thirty books, some of which are translated into English and German. Since the 1970s he writes articles for the popular press such as *Hürriyet* and *Star Gazetesi* every Friday.

But apart from his books, newspaper articles and conferences around the world, Öztürk attained popularity first and foremost through his continuous presence on

television. His aim is to present to the masses his main thesis, namely the return to the Qur'an and the elimination of superstitious beliefs, in other words, *tagdid* – the reconstruction of religious life.

He follows the ideas of ideologues such as Muhammad Iqbal, whom he admires most, Jamal ad-din al-Afghani, and Muhammed Abduh. But he often also mentions Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati. He regards them as the intellectuals that the Islamic world with its many conflicts needs today, even if their ideas are quite varied.

As an opponent of *taqlid* (following of a legal school) he considers *ijtihad* (personal reasoning) as an absolute must for Muslim society. He is firmly opposed to the authority of the imams and *hocas*, accusing them of ignorance. With these approaches he directs himself to a more secular audience, even ironically using the term 'high society *hoca*' (*sosyatikhocası*).

Secular programmes as a platform

The spectrum of television shows on which Öztürk appears ranges from roundtable discussions to a talk show, and even a one-man show. Öztürk's television debut began with his speeches aired on the official state television programme on religion, prepared and supervised by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. After the flourishing of commercial television stations he began to appear on private television channels and participated in programmes on Islam as an expert and discussant. As mentioned before, the channels are mostly secular in orientation and can be described as mainstream media. It can be said that since the mid-1990s almost every television viewer

has become familiar with Öztürk's face and style.

The concept of a roundtable discussion is quite straightforward: Öztürk and other experts are invited for a special occasion to discuss a particular issue. However, Öztürk is not the centre of attention in these discussions. This is contrary to his own talk show, where he personally and directly turns towards the 'masses' which need to 'be awakened', to use Öztürk's own terms.

Every year in the month of Ramadan, Öztürk has his own programme called *Yaşar Nuri ile sohbet* (Talk with Yaşar Nuri). In this programme he talks about a special topic for about ten to fifteen minutes before the breaking of the fast (*iftar*). He is alone, without guests or other discussants. Sufi music plays in the background, thus creating a didactic and sermon-like atmosphere. He gives the impression of being very serious; no emotions are shown. He is presented as an enlightened man giving his beloved viewers, as he calls them, some good advice in this holy month. The topics are quite general. He discusses questions like 'What are good acts?', or 'What is the meaning of Ramadan?' But he also touches upon topics related to Islam and democracy.

Öztürk uses different types of television programmes to spread his mission, and whether he appears on this or that programme he can be sure of reaching a wide audience. Since 1996 Öztürk also appears on the daily talk show *Ayşe Özgün*. The concept of this talk show is an adaptation of those that are common in the West. There is one host, the audience and some guests, not prominent figures but 'normal' people talking about everyday problems, for example the relations between men and women and family. But the host, Ayşe Özgün, has a very rational and scientific approach; she questions everything and can only be persuaded by reason, for example when a guest claims that he or she is a medium.

Öztürk appears on her show every Friday morning. For about one hour he gives speeches and answers the questions of the audience, comprised mostly of women, both veiled and Western-dressed. They pose all sorts of questions, including requests for advice on ritual practices such as: 'Are we allowed to read the Qur'an without covering our heads?' This show offers him a platform for his mission; namely to eliminate what he considers irrational and wrong beliefs. One of the means by which he tries to achieve this is the use of everyday language. When he cites a verse from the Qur'an in Arabic he translates it into very simple Turkish.

Pray TV in the USA as a model?

It is interesting to draw a parallel to the phenomenon of televangelism in the USA. First of all, it should be kept in mind that there are fundamental differences between religion and television in Turkey and in the USA. Of course in the Islamic tradition there is no real equivalent to the church. The 'television churches' in the USA replace, in many cases, church attendance all together. Pray

TV started in the 1950s and such televangelists as Pat Robertson even established their own education networks and built up powerful financial empires. Nowadays they are a very common feature – even becoming the subject of satirical songs (for instance, the song by Genesis 'Jesus, he knows me').

In Turkey it is hardly conceivable that the mosque will ever be replaced by television. Nonetheless, some have accused Öztürk of establishing his own school of religious thought by means of his appearances. But he rejects this arguing that he is an opponent of *taqlid*. In spite of the differences, Öztürk does have a great deal in common with the televangelists. Firstly, the US televangelists are predominantly republicans and they have a great influence on republican politics. Their main mission is to restore public morals and to protect young people from violence, drugs and sex. When Öztürk talks about non-political Islam he is in absolute agreement with the Turkish state's idea of religion. Particularly his comments on Ayşe Özgün's talk show demonstrate the typical embodiment of a Kemalist approach to religion. Secondly, in both cases the television preachers are absolute authorities. Their ideas, opinions and solutions are regarded by many as definitive. What they say can be much more important than what is written and more important than the opinions of the *hoca* or any other reverend of the local mosque or church. The following letter from a viewer illustrates the way Öztürk is perceived by – at least – part of his audience. It is addressed to the programme editor of a show on which Öztürk appeared.

Dear Programme Editor,
I am a woman graduated from the Italian High School and educated with Western culture. I have been working for years. My relation with my religion, to be honest, is almost restricted to watching your programme. Because of that I give utmost importance to it and await a lot of things from it. Forgive me, but throughout this year I have not heard anything satisfying me except from DrÖztürk's serial speeches on Islamic thinking. My hope is that the programme and speeches of this high level will be continued and detailed, including every possible topic.

Case in point.

CALL FOR PAPERS

After Orientalism

Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race, a book series published by Rodopi, aims to rigorously bring into encounter the crucial insights of black and ethnic studies, gender studies, and queer studies, and facilitate dialogue as well as confrontations between them. The series aims to think together place, sex and race, while realizing productive alliances in a radical, transnational community of scholars and activists.

In 2003, it will have been 25 years since Edward Said published his seminal work on Orientalism. For an issue on the aftermath of Orientalism, the Intersecting series seeks contributions on the myriad ways in which Said's book has stimulated research in the humanities. Contributions should be theoretically informed and take the intersecting axes of place, sex and race into account. Articles that extend into fields not covered in Orientalism and into novel, interdisciplinary approaches in

post-colonialism, transnational culture studies or cultural analysis are welcome. Articles may focus on visual culture, text-image relations, and popular culture and/or combine literature, film, photography, fashion, opera, architecture, advertising, travel, etc.

Publication of the issue is expected in April 2003. Articles should be in English and must not exceed 20 pages (8,000 words). Please send one-page proposals before 1 March 2002.

For information and proposals, contact:
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