Televangelism and the Case of Yaşa Nuri Oztürk

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 televangelist 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, TGIRT). All offer millions of viewers interviews with celebrities, 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 mass his main thesis, namely the return to the Qur’an and the elimination of superstitions and beliefs, in other words, tagiud – the reconstruction of religious life. He follows the ideas of ideologues such as Muhammad Iqbal, whom he admires most, Jamal ad-din al-Alfghani, and Muhammad 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 different. As an opponent of rapid (following of a legal school) he considers (personal reasoning) as an absolute must for Muslim society. He is firmly opposed to the authorship of the imams and hocs, accusing them of ignorance. With these approaches he directs himself to a more secular audience, even ironically using the term ‘high society hoca’ (hoçayıkkolin).

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 program 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.

Öztürk’s 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’s programme, as his eight shows “Yaşa Nuri İle Sohbet” (Talk with Yaşar Nuri) in this programme he talks about a special topic for about ten to fifteen minutes before the beginning of the talk. He is alone, with no guests or other discussants. Soft music plays in the background, thus creating a dictactic 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 the goods?’, or ‘What is the role of Radmadan?’ 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 has appeared on the daily talk show Ayes Özgün. The concept of this talk show is an adaptation of the programme to be listened to in a mosque. There is one host, the audience and some guests, not prominent figures but ‘normal’ people talking about everyday problems, such as: ‘What do we have to do in this holy month?’, or ‘What means of prayer does one use?’. When guests appear on his 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 televangelism as Pat Robertson even established their programme in 1987. Both were highly successful financial empires. Nowadays they are a very common feature – even becoming the subject of satirical songs (for instance, the song ‘Gençiniz! 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 rapid. In spite of the difference, 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 Ayes Özgün’s talk show demonstrate the typical embodiment of a Kemalist approach to religion. Secondly, both the television preachers are absolute authorities. Their ideas, opinions and solutions are regarded as many as definitive. What Öztürk can 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.

Case in point.

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 the Friday prayer. However until now I have not heard anything satisfying me except from Dr Öztürk’s sermons. I am very thankful for you for your generosity. I am a mother of two children and I have some problems as: ‘Are there any examples of prayer according to my religion or should I pray in the same way as my family?’, or ‘What do I need to do in this holy month?’. In Turkey it is hardly conceivable that the mosque will ever be replaced by television. You are very kind to help us with your programmes and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Yours sincerely,

Nüse Ihtiyar