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Compulsory religion education and religious minorities in Turkey

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Citation for published version (APA):

Müftügil, A. S. (2011). Compulsory religion education and religious minorities in Turkey.

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Preface

Over the past four years, I have often been asked by Turkish friends and colleagues how I came up with my PhD topic. It did not take long to realize that they were not really interested in my answer. What they wanted to hear was my opinion on compulsory religion education, in a nutshell, so that they might evaluate the research, and by extension, the researcher. In other words, whose ‘side’ was I on? However, I was not discouraged by the confused looks on their faces, or by their apparent desire that immediately wanted to tear apart my research to its core. My interviewees, quite understandably, viewed me with some suspicion as they tried to determine the nature of the project and their own participation in it. These various reactions made me acutely aware of how controversial and politically charged my topic was; at the same time, I saw deep and genuine Turkish interest in the project and its eventual outcome.

I have also encountered frank attitudes toward my choice of topic, or perhaps specifically, to what *motivated* my choice. At various stages of the thesis, I have been asked if I am an anti-religious person critiquing the existence of religion courses in the Turkish education system *per se* or if I belong to a new generation of scholars/people who argue that Turkey is not a ‘secular’ state, and therefore call for “a real separation of state and religion that would energize the social role of Islam”.¹ These suppositions show the state of debates on compulsory religion education to be polarized, unproductive and poorly conceived. The debates take place within a conceptual framework informed by the exhausted arguments about Turkish principle of secularism. In brief, there has been a tug-of-war between the “Kemalists”/“assertive secularists” and the “Islamists”/“passive secularists” whose core issue concerns the concept of religious freedom.² The phenomenon of ‘state neutrality’ so crucial to this study, is largely missing from Turkish debates about secularism. In principle, all secular states constitutionally declare neutrality towards religions; they establish neither an official religion nor atheism. However, in practice, this is never adhered to strictly or consistently. In

¹ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Turkish Secularism*. London: C. Hurst, 1998, p. 502.

² The terms “assertive secularists” and “passive secularists” were coined by Ahmet T. Kuru. On this issue he states that: “in secular states, ideological struggles to shape state policies generally take place between two different notions of secularism-what I call “assertive secularism” and “passive secularism” (Kuru, Ahmet T. *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009, p. 11) Assertive secularism requires the state to play an “assertive” role to exclude religion from the public sphere and confine it to the private domain. Passive secularism demands that the state play a “passive” role, by allowing the public visibility of religion. Assertive secularism is a “comprehensive doctrine”, whereas passive secularism mainly advocates state neutrality toward religion. Although these terms provide a means to analyze the polarization on this issue, I have some reservations with regards to the author’s praise of pro-Islamic conservatives (passive secularists). For more information on the terms see: Kuru, Ahmet T. *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

my view, religious neutrality is the *sine qua non* of a secular state. Hence, this study does not stem from an ideological perspective informed by the aforementioned polarized views on secularism but rather from a sole curiosity in the history of the compulsory religion education and its relation with religious minorities in the Turkish context. The study unravels the consequences of the state's failure to establish a homogenous relationship between state and religion across different groups.

During these last four years of research and writing, I have also had to deal with an accusation frequently leveled at public intellectuals in Turkey, that it has become fashionable and sometimes even advantageous to criticize the Turkish state. More specifically, the charge is that such criticism will gain sympathy and recognition from the European Union and from Europeans in general. For these accusers, Orhan Pamuk personifies this charge. It is regularly argued that the 2006 Nobel Prize was an award for his political remarks about the exclusion of the Armenian and Kurdish massacres from official state versions of Turkish history.

It is possible that this whole area of criticism is motivated by a desire to resist the phenomenon of 'self-orientalisation' that sometimes seems to drive young Turkish intellectuals. While this is a complex problem, I have made every effort in this study to keep such processes out of my research and conclusions.

During this research, I have sometimes felt the pressure of writing about an issue so directly related to religious minorities an issue that in Turkey, would be described as a 'red line' topic, one that strays into territories that *can* be politically dangerous. However, I have been motivated by a sincere desire to contribute to a more open Turkey, where difference is not just 'tolerated', but is welcomed with enthusiasm. Therefore I firmly believe in the need to dismiss and resist those discourses that work to create an "obligatory consensus"³, one that haunts individual ambitions and turns scholars into either enemies of the state or apologists for Europe. In my view, it is only then that it becomes possible to generate new discourses that may show the way forward to a better, and more harmonious Turkey.

³ "Obligatory consensus" is a term that Etienne Copeaux has coined to express the phenomenon of constant referral to all those national references considered as sacred, like National Unity, the Turkish flag, and the figure of Atatürk, by movements who make demands for recognition (i.e., Alevism). He argues that those who make demands have to protect themselves from possible accusations of separatism, which may come from state institutions, but also from political enemies. In order to legitimize himself and his demands, each political actor therefore has to express himself in the name of unity against those whom he frames as the enemies of unity which are most frequently stigmatized as separatists and declared traitors or internal enemies without further ado. (Massicard, Elise. "Claiming difference in a unitarist frame: the case of Alevism." *Turkey beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*. Ed. Hans Lukas Kieser. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p.79) I think that this term can also be used to explain the dominant and judgmental values that tend to dominate concepts such as state loyalty and that impact Turkish intellectuals challenging state policy and practice. For more information on the term, see: Copeaux, Etienne. 'Le consensus obligatoire', in Isabella Rigoni (eds), *Turquie, les mille visages. Politique, Religion, Femmes, Immigration*, Paris: Syllepse, 2000, pp. 89-104.