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## **Chapter Four**

### **Education policies with respect to religion education (1980-2009)**

This chapter provides a detailed examination of the development of religion courses in Turkey between 1980 and 2009. As the material in this chapter is highly complicated and nuanced, it is useful to set out my main arguments that will be elaborated on in the coming sections.

Firstly, I argue that the main motive behind the introduction of compulsory religion courses by the military junta in 1982 was very much related to the presumption that teaching religion would mitigate the leftist, communist movements and thinking that were prevalent at the time. The promotion of Sunni-Islam in the textbooks and the omission of information about Alevism were legitimized by the larger aim to foster social unity and prevent denominational fights within Islam. After 1982, when the military government gave the course the new title of “Religion Culture and Morals Course” (Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi)<sup>1</sup>, and declared it compulsory for all Turkish students, the course faced opposition from different quarters at different times, along with various curriculum and textbook revisions. Nonetheless, it was during this period that the course evolved into the one we know today and became an integral part of the Turkish school curriculum.

Secondly, by 1997, when the perceived threat of communism had receded and the course had further consolidated, the military considered Islamists to be the greater threat to state order. In 1997, the ‘postmodern *coup d’etat*’<sup>2</sup> saw military and secularist leaders targeting a recent growth in Islamist fundamentalism. The army increasingly identified the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” (at first promoted by the army following the coup) as a principal cause of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, after 1997, military leaders made concerted efforts to minimize Islamic elements in the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”. This shift in ideology, or the endeavour to restore Kemalist secular ideals, soon became evident in state education policies. For instance, in 1997, the army ordered that primary school education be increased from five to eight years, in a policy which aimed, more or less covertly, to abolish the Pastor and

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<sup>1</sup> I have translated Turkish word ‘Ahlak Bilgisi’ as ‘Morals’ although it can also be translated as ‘Ethics’.

<sup>2</sup> The name ‘postmodern coup’ was given to the clash between the army and the political leadership on Feb. 28, 1997 in which the military overthrew the coalition government led by Necmettin Erbakan of the now-defunct RP (Refah Partisi/Welfare Party). The military again helped engineer the ouster—popularly dubbed a “postmodern coup”—of the then Islamic-oriented government. The military demanded that Erbakan stop or reverse policies seen as promoting Islam in government affairs. It applied increasing pressure on Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan of the conservative Islamic RP. At a meeting of the MGK (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu/National Security Council) on 28 February 1997, top commanders issued an 18-point declaration, asking the government to take measures to curb the growing Islamist activities.

Preacher schools (*İmam-Hatip lises/schools*).<sup>3</sup> This change entailed the restructuring of all primary and secondary school curricula, including religion courses. In this process, however, neither the existence nor the content of the course was questioned from a minority rights perspective. This episode indicated that although the tension between “Secularists” and “Islamists”<sup>4</sup> was once more on the rise, religion courses had already ceased to be a contentious issue between militarist/secularist circles and religiously conservative ones. This was a notable change from the situation of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, here one sees a clear example of how, regardless of political differences, the course was ‘normalized’ in Turkish society over the course of fifteen years. Moreover, this demonstrates a particular interpretation of “secularism” in Turkey, whereby state neutrality on religious issues is not always required.

As a third argument I assert that the postmodern *coup d’etat*, somewhat contrary to its own aims, opened an era in which Islamic elements in the education system became more palpable. This political breakthrough, which aimed at sidelining Islamists, received a strong backlash when the more conservative AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / Justice and Development Party), came to power in the 2002 and 2007 elections. Despite being a conservative party, the AKP has preached a message of religious freedom as a means of expanding liberties for believers in the officially secular country. By adopting the language of human rights and democracy, the AKP sought legitimacy in Europe as well as the approval of Turkish people who were discontented with the Party’s Islamic profile. This was the context that allowed for various developments with regards to religion education, many of which were triggered by the EU accession process and by Alevi NGOs. However, not all the developments that looked favourable on paper were actually put into practice and to date there have been no satisfactory solutions in terms of resolving the tensions and discussions about the course.

In light of this framework, the material in this chapter is treated in two sections: 1980-

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<sup>3</sup> In Turkey, an İmam Hatip school is a secondary education institution (İmam Hatip Lisesi, ‘hatip’ coming from Arabic khatib, meaning *the one who delivers the “khatba”* (Friday sermon)). As the name suggests, they were originally founded in lieu of vocational schools to train government employed *imams*. The idea was to put the schools for preachers and prayer leaders (İmam Hatip schools) at middle school level out of business.

<sup>4</sup> These terms have specific connotations in Turkish political culture, and have different meanings than in other, especially Western contexts. In Turkey, the terms “secularist” or “laicist” are used to designate people who follow the ideals of Atatürk, people who generally dislike the existence of Islamic elements in the public sphere and who want strict separation of religious and state affairs. In this sense, the term “secularist” refers more to people who advocate “ideological secularism” rather than a legal one. The term “Islamists”, on the other hand, is generally used by the “secularists” to differentiate between themselves and the more conservative religious population of Turkey which opposes the tenets of ideological secularism. The Muslim members of this religiously more conservative population can be best defined as advocates of a form of identity politics which supports Muslim identity and the revitalization of community (*cemaat*) values. They generally refrain from commenting on Atatürk’s modernist reforms.

1997 and 1997-2009. The main reason for this periodization is that the year 1997 saw a sharp change in the policy of the state and military towards religion that later translated into education policies. In addition this year marked the increasing importance of the EU in Turkish politics which began to monitor the state of minority rights in Turkey and produced EU minority reports. These reports put pressure on Turkey to revise its education policies especially with regards to religion education and bring about newer approaches to religion education in 2000s.

#### **4.1. Religious minorities and the political environment between 1980 and 1997**

In this section, I outline the Turkish political environment between 1980 and 1997 in order to inspect the state's relations with its religious minorities. I focus on important ideologies and discourses that have affected perceptions of minorities in Turkey. Among these discourses, the most influential have been the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” of the 1980s and the influence of globalization on ethnic identities in the 1990s.

In September 1980, the Turkish military mobilized to prevent the erosion of state authority. There was fear of a breakdown in law and order due to widespread political violence between leftist and rightist groups, particularly in high schools and on university campuses.<sup>5</sup> The state imposed a number of harsh measures including strict control of the media, universities and bureaucracy. Power was centred in the military, specifically in the MGK (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu/National Security Council) headed by the chief of staff, General Kenan Evren. The military was determined to de-politicize the urban youth, which since the 1960's had played an important role in the riots against state power. To that end, they sought to crush every manifestation of dissent from the left, including revolutionaries, social democrats and trade unionists. “The extreme right too, represented by the MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi/Nationalist Action Party), was crushed although its ideology was adopted in the form of the so-called ‘Turkish Islamic Synthesis’ (Türk İslam Sentezi) and designed by a group known as the “Intellectuals' Hearth” (*Aydınlar Ocağı*).”<sup>6</sup> This ideology held that Turkishness and Islamism were complimentary aspects of Turkish culture and that religious

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<sup>5</sup> Sam Kaplan, “Religious Nationalism: A Textbook Case from Turkey.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.3 (2005), p. 666.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 184. (The “Intellectuals' Hearth” was an organization founded in 1970 by influential people from the business world, universities and politics. The aim was to break the monopoly of left-wing intellectuals on social, political and cultural debate in Turkey. It held seminars and sponsored publications, proposing solutions to all kinds of questions in the realms of culture, education, social life and economics. Its leading ideologue and chairman, Ibrahim Kafesoglu, proposed the system known as the “Turkish Islamic Synthesis” (*Türk İslam Sentezi*)).

values should be emphasized in Turkish nationalism.<sup>7</sup> In the late 1970s, this ideology became very popular on the political right. Despite the secularist culture of Turkish military officers, the “Turkish Islamic Synthesis” also appealed to prominent military leaders. Subsequently, this ideology characterized the 1980s and was highly influential on the political mindset of those in power, even after the military withdrew from politics.

During the late 1980s and into the 1990s, various coalitions involving a number of political parties formed and then dissolved. Importantly, these numerous parties and coalitions did not substantively alter policies on religious minorities or the character of national education. More than any other phenomenon, globalization marked the post-1980 period and the perception of minorities in Turkey. Analyzing the effects of globalization illustrates the internal dynamics of emerging Islamist movements in this period and serves to illuminate other related social movements. In the post-1980 period, globalization further intertwined politics and economics, creating dynamic international networks that moved beyond the traditional nation-state.<sup>8</sup> Globalization brought a degree of homogenization, but fragmentation also occurred, both across and within societies. This led to a rise in nationalist movements and ethnic conflicts, as well as trans-national movements such as feminism, environmentalism and Islamist fundamentalism. These struggles, often collectively known as ‘identity politics’, appeared in Turkey as elsewhere. Turkey also experienced a sharp rise in Islamist movements<sup>9</sup> alongside Kurdish nationalism. These movements sometimes took the form of terrorism or extreme, reactionary Turkish nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Thus it can be argued that due to these developments the function of the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” as a unificatory factor became insufficient to secure national unity even among Turkish Muslims. It was precisely in this context that the imagined unity of the Turkish nation entered a process of disintegration along the lines of ethno-cultural cleavages. Particularistic claims emanating from Kurds, sectarian Alevi and fundamentalist Muslim groups came to occupy Turkey's political agenda.<sup>11</sup>

During the early 1990s, there were renewed discussions of the issue of constitutional

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<sup>7</sup> Şule Toktaş, “Citizenship and Minorities: A Historical Overview of Turkey’s Jewish Minority.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 18.4 (Dec. 2005), p. 412.

<sup>8</sup> Ziya Öniş, “The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare Party in Perspective.” *Third World Quarterly* 18.4 (1997), p. 746.

<sup>9</sup> Hence the RP with its Islamist worldview, gained prominence in various national and local elections during this period.

<sup>10</sup> Şule Toktaş, “Citizenship and Minorities: A Historical Overview of Turkey’s Jewish Minority.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 18.4 (Dec. 2005), p. 413.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmet İcduygu, Şule Toktaş, B.Ali Soner, “The politics of population in a nation-building process: emigration of non-Muslims from Turkey.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31.2 (Feb. 2008), p. 377.

citizenship.<sup>12</sup> Concerned by the rise of identity politics, multiculturalism, and demands from particular segments of society (Islamists, Kurds, etc.), most political parties agreed to consider proposals for constitutional citizenship.<sup>13</sup> In constitutional citizenship, the constitution represents a kind of social contract safeguarding the recognition of different ethnic and religious groups whose loyalty to the state would supersede the principle of loyalty to the nation. These discussions in Turkey on constitutional citizenship helped enlarge the domain of belonging to the nation and curb down exclusion via the definition of a Turk.<sup>14</sup> The idea of constitutional citizenship, which had been suggested primarily as a possible solution to the Kurdish problem or the Islamic question, also had implications for non-Muslim minorities. After 1980, non-Muslims produced growing numbers of journals and community newspapers in which they addressed their communal identities. Today, the most widely known of these publications are *Agos* (Armenian), *Ogni* (Lazes) and *Şalom* (Jews). Other publications were also produced, together with scholarly research and websites that addressed a mixed audience of academics and lay people. Although there had always been a number of non-Muslim newspapers and journals in Turkey, the post-1980 publications tended to place greater emphasis on communal identity and the preservation and promotion of ethno-religious cultures.<sup>15</sup>

The surge in writings by and about non-Muslim minorities helped to generate public interest in discussions relating to identity, equality and difference. Throughout the 1990s, such discussions informed the larger debates on loyalty to the nation/state and Turkish citizenship. It was no coincidence that the debates on constitutional citizenship and the status of non-Muslims surfaced simultaneously. As differences within society became more visible, there was more open discussion of how ethnic, linguistic and religious differences should be handled, and how they might influence ongoing attempts to determine the fundamentals of Turkish citizenship.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1990s, there were critical discussions, often led by non-Muslims or intellectuals, about the history of discrimination against non-Muslims.<sup>17</sup> The most important discussions addressed the Capital Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*).<sup>18</sup> The debate was ignited by “Salkım Hanımın Taneleri” (The Jewellery of Ms. Salkım), a historical film based on a novel by Yılmaz

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<sup>12</sup> Şule Toktaş, “Citizenship and Minorities: A Historical Overview of Turkey’s Jewish Minority.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 18.4 (Dec. 2005), p. 413.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415-416.

<sup>18</sup> See previous chapter for the discriminatory application of Capital Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*)

Karakoyunlu and released in 1999. The film concerned the impact of the Capital Tax on an Armenian family; some family members were forced to sell off their property in order to pay the tax, while others were sent to Aşkale Work Camp. Following the movie's release, there appeared a number of articles casting light on this hitherto hidden subject. Many contributors to these discussions addressed the question of minorities' loyalty to states other than Turkey; others sought to outline criteria that might be invoked to resolve conflicting identities and loyalties. There were also attempts to identify the 'breaking point' for minority loyalty, in relation to different groups. For the Greek minority, this was the Cyprus issue; for the Jews it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and for the Armenians, it was the Armenian genocide.

The post-1980 period witnessed a rise of civil society and growing public interest in citizenship, both as legal status and identity. This might seem paradoxical given the limitations of the 1982 Constitution and the shadow cast by the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis". On the one hand, non-Muslims became more visible in the public arena because of their own pursuit of identity politics *and* because of a larger public attention to differences within society. This trend was accompanied by discussions of citizenship as both a theoretical and practical problem. Yet on the other hand, Islam achieved greater political and cultural hegemony during this period. According to Toktaş, these conflicting trends can be understood by examining globalization and its impact upon both global and local conditions:<sup>19</sup>

The global endorses a universal concept of citizenship with its attendant basic rights and freedoms and calls attention to the legal aspect of citizenship. The local, however, substantiates an understanding of citizenship based upon differences and therefore reinforces the identity aspect of citizenship. The local lacks uniform characteristics and so in the process of celebrating and authenticating differences, multiple identities of the local come into view.<sup>20</sup>

Without a doubt, the post-1980 developments removed many of the factors promoting the emigration of non-Muslim minorities. However, as many non-Muslims had already left, the efforts to create a Turkish nation of Turkish-Muslim citizens began to show results. There was a gradual homogenization of the population, especially in terms of religious affiliation. By the 1990s, the proportion of non-Muslim citizens in the general population had declined to 0.2 percent. According to estimates from the three decades before 1990, some 20,000 Armenians, 23,000 Jews and 55,000 Greeks had emigrated from Turkey. By 1995, the size of these

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<sup>19</sup> Şule Toktaş, "Citizenship and Minorities: A Historical Overview of Turkey's Jewish Minority." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 18.4 (Dec. 2005), pp. 415-416.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

populations had decreased substantially, with the Christians numbering just under 140,000<sup>21</sup> and the Jews about 20,000.<sup>22</sup>

After 1980, contrary to the more or less stabilized position of non-Muslims in Turkish society, the Alevis entered a period of “Alevi Renaissance”, where the Alevi community re-politicized and revived.<sup>23</sup> Poyraz found three main factors behind this phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> The first one was the collapse of the socialist block in Eastern Europe. As a result of this development, socialism, which in the previous two decades had stood as an ideological alternative for the young and middle generations of Alevis, lost its former importance. Politically frustrated by these changes, many in the community began to redefine themselves, first and foremost, as ‘Alevis’. They began to look at Alevism as an ideology, regarding it as even more just, egalitarian and libertarian than socialism. Their return to the community to which they had previously belonged led to a rapid introduction of modern terms and methods into Alevism. Confronting the neo-liberalism, urbanization and market economy of contemporary Turkey, the Alevi communities increasingly saw their identities as defined by cultural and religious factors. This was in sharp contrast with the situation before the 1980s, when Alevi politicization was part of a socialist movement and where class was the key component of Alevi identity.

According to Poyraz, the second factor behind the revival of Alevism was the rise of Islamic fundamentalism or, better put, political Islam in Turkey. The National Security Council thought that the promotion of moderate Islam might counteract leftist tendencies in society and more importantly, in the Kurdish separatist movement. In the governments following the coup, there were numerous policies in support of moderate Islam. Contrary to expectations, these policies led to an increase in votes for Islamic fundamentalists. The

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<sup>21</sup> The Syrian Orthodox, or Jacobite, community, which numbered about 50,000 in 1995, ranks as the largest Christian denomination in Turkey. The Armenian Orthodox (or Gregorian) community, with some 35,000 members in 1995, ranks as the second largest Christian denomination in Turkey. In addition, an estimated 7,000 other Armenians belong to an autonomous Orthodox church, to an Armenian Catholic church in union with Rome, or to various Protestant denominations. The Greek Orthodox Church, the largest Christian church in Turkey had fewer than 20,000 members as of 1995. Other Christian communities present in Turkey include several small groups affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. Melchites (Greek Catholics) and Maronites live among the Arabs in southeast Hatay Province. Although accepted by the Vatican as part of the Roman Catholic Church, Melchites and Maronite Catholics retain separate liturgies. Chaldean-rite Catholics live in the Diyarbakir region, while Bulgarian, Greek, and Latin-rite Catholics live in Istanbul and Izmir. The total number of Catholics of various persuasions (in early 1995) has been estimated at 25,000. In 1995, the Jewish community, estimated at 18,000 to 20,000, consisted primarily of Sephardic Jews. At least 90 percent of Turkey's Jews live in Istanbul, where a chief rabbi presides.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Chapin Metz, ed. “Non-Muslim Minorities.” *Turkey: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Bedriye Poyraz, “The Turkish State and Alevis: Changing Parameters of an Uneasy Relationship.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 41.4 (July 2005), p. 503.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



Islamist Refah Partisi (RP) won the most votes in 1995, at which point state bureaucrats and politicians understood that secularism could not be compromised. The situation was viewed as serious, not only by the secular camp in Turkey, but by the EU and the US. According to Çamuroğlu, the most important motive for the establishment and rapid extension of Alevi organizations resided in Alevi efforts to unite and defend the community against the rise of Islamism.<sup>25</sup>

The third political factor responsible for the Alevi revival, according to Poyraz, was the Kurdish problem. Although the majority of Alevis are ethnic and linguistic Turks, a significant number (about 20 per cent) of Alevis are Kurds, comprising about 25 percent of the total Kurdish population of Turkey. Alevis quickly became aware that the Kurdish problem produced nationalist tensions that directly affected their community. Therefore, when confronted with Islamism, the Alevis tended towards the political choice of secularism and expressed their identity in political terms. When confronted with Kurdish nationalism, however, they tended towards the principle of sovereignty of the national state and stress their religious identity and affiliation as Alevi.

In the late 1980s, the first popular and academic works treating this issue began to appear.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, between 1985 and 1990, politicians began to take note of the voting potential of the previously ignored Alevis.<sup>27</sup> The ‘Hacı Bektaş’ Festivals, important to Alevi culture, were visited by politicians and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. After 1990, in Europe and in Turkey, Alevi (Turkish-Kurdish) *cemevleri*,<sup>28</sup> organizations, associations and federations began to flourish, most having sub-branches of literary or other specific societies. The Alevi Manifesto, which was written in March 1990, can be considered as a significant landmark in the re-politicization of Alevism in post-coup Turkey. It was written collectively and signed by numerous intellectuals (Alevis and Social Democratic Sunnis), academics, authors, and journalists. The manifesto's aim was to make the problems of Alevism known and to set out a series of Alevi demands. It also called for an acceptance of Alevi faith and culture, equal representation and opportunities in education and media, and access to Alevi religious services. With this text, Alevi identity made its first influential public appearance. Although the manifesto somewhat papered over differences within the Alevi community by

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<sup>25</sup> Reha Çamuroğlu, “Alevi Revivalism in Turkey.” *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*. Eds. T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, and C. Raudvere. Istanbul: Swedish Inst, 1998, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Tahire Erman & Emrah Göker, “Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 36.4 (Oct. 2000), p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> Bedriye Poyraz, “The Turkish State and Alevis: Changing Parameters of an Uneasy Relationship.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 41.4 (July 2005), p. 508.

<sup>28</sup> Alevi place of worship

implying that there was a single Alevism and a unified Alevi people, the text was nonetheless hugely important. The intellectual community positively received it, and it later attracted non-religious or even Sunni sympathizers, many of whom contributed to the growing Alevi literature.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, these developments in the politicization of the Alevis did not translate into a mass sympathy for this suppressed minority by people of Sunni origin. In the end, it was the violent attacks on Alevis in the 1990s that boosted Alevi politicization and generated a sharp increase in the number of Alevi associations in Turkey and abroad. During the 1990s, the Alevis had openly declared themselves to be against radical Sunni Islam. Thus, the already existing polarization between the Sunni majority and the Alevi minority now increased. Feeling increasingly threatened by the militant Sunni movements, some Alevis decided to make a stand for secularism and the rights of non-believers. The occasion was the Alevi Pir Sultan Abdal festival, held in Sivas on 2 July 1993. Writer Aziz Nesin (who helped translate parts of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* into Turkish) made a speech announcing that he did not believe in the Koran. Nesin's announcement was used by local fundamentalists to inflame the feelings of the Sunni community. Spurred on by the Islamist mayor of Sivas, a crowd set fire to a hotel, burning to death thirty-six Alevi singers and writers, as well as a Dutch female anthropology student.

Under threat from Sunni extremists, the Alevis increasingly identified themselves along religious, rather than political lines. This showed in the number and strength of Alevi organizations, whose growth coincided with the erosion of the traditionally Alevi-supported parties, notably the CHP. There was further evidence of Alevi-Sunni tensions in late 1994, when Alevis attacked a commercial television station after a quizmaster made some derogatory remarks. More seriously, on 12 March 1995, an attack on a teahouse in the Alevi district of Gaziosmanpasa in Istanbul led to widespread rioting.<sup>30</sup> Thus as can be seen, for Alevis the years between 1980 and 1997 saw a series of political events and new developments that hinted that their voices were going to be heard more loudly in the coming decades.

In sum, the period began under the ideological shadow of the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis", which worked to contain cultural and religious differences on the grounds that they compromised national unity. However, the processes of globalization (in the 1990s)

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<sup>29</sup> Tahire Erman & Emrah Göker, "Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey." *Middle Eastern Studies* 36.4 (Oct. 2000), p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 290.

enabled non-Muslims and Alevites to become visible social actors. The next section examines the development of new legislative changes with regards to religion education. These changes would completely alter the scope of the course and its influence on Turkish students.

#### **4.1.1 Religion education, 1980-1997**

In this section, I look at discussions of religion education in various quarters, including military, bureaucratic and scholarly circles. By tracking these various discourses, it is possible to see the cultural and political shifts that eventually led to the course being made compulsory. Moreover, the move to compulsory religion education was indicative of wider policy shifts in the realm of education and the ideological dominance of the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”.

In the months following the coup, the junta generals made their views on education fairly clear. Within two years, the military endorsed a new constitution that mandated compulsory religion education in all primary and secondary schools. All school children from fourth grade until graduation from high school must take the “Religion Culture and Morals Course” (*Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi*). The new course combined two previously separated subjects: the compulsory civics course and the optional religion courses. The military thought that if people accepted this new curriculum, a greater social cohesion among the different populations in Turkey could be reached. The 1982 ministerial directive states, “Just as we cherish our national values, customs and traditions, we acknowledge that one of the important components of a nation is religion.”<sup>31</sup> More than any other school subject, the state now viewed religion education as the means to introduce students to the topics of tradition, modernity and nationalism.<sup>32</sup>

In this emerging political culture, the 1980 coup provided an opportune moment to reinvent a more religious Turkish polity.<sup>33</sup> After 12 September 1980, the generals considerably tightened the institutional links between the armed forces and the national education system. Before power was returned to civilian politicians approximately three years later, the military passed a series of education reforms that “sought to prevent at all costs the consolidation of identities that threatened to fragment nation into a politics of differences”.<sup>34</sup>

As we have already seen, by the time religion courses became compulsory in 1982,

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<sup>31</sup> “Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Programı” [Religion and Morals Program], *Tebliğler Dergisi*, 29 March 1982, p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> Sam Kaplan, “Religious Nationalism: A Textbook Case from Turkey.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.3 (2005), p. 669.

<sup>33</sup> Sam Kaplan, “Din-u Devlet All over again? The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey following the 1980 Coup.” *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34.1 (Feb. 2002), p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

religion education had already established a clear foothold in the state education system. Although the Ministry of Education showed some interest in structuring these courses according to pedagogical concerns, religion education was not yet regarded as a social scientific field. Apart from the work of Beyza Bilgin, no academic studies had been conducted on the topic of religion education in Turkey. Bilgin conducted her doctoral research at the Ankara University Theology Faculty in 1971; her topic was “Love as the basis of education in Islam”. But her best-known work dealt with the issue of religion education in the Turkish formal education system and was titled “*Religion Education in Turkey and Religion courses at High Schools.*”<sup>35</sup> This research was conducted between 1973 and 1976; Bilgin’s objective was to identify current problems in religion education, the situation of the courses, and what improvements might be made. She contacted various actors within religion education, including teachers, students and parents, all of whom were invited to discuss their thoughts and expectations of the courses. Bilgin’s findings were based mainly on the surveys she distributed to 1255 high schools in Turkey, out of which 873 high schools were evaluated in her research.<sup>36</sup> Her principal conclusion was that religion education courses should be made compulsory and given a proper place in the school curricula. She argued that if the courses remained voluntary, they would eventually become less effective and various pedagogical problems would follow:

Voluntary religion lessons, in application, turned into lessons whose existence was based on arbitrary will of the teacher, student or the school administration. In some schools the courses were totally omitted arguing that no student wanted to take this course. The situation was like this in the 97 schools that participated to my survey not counting the ones that did not participate to the course. Again according to the survey results in 30% of the schools the participation to the course was 100%. In these schools the overall problems were less when compared with other schools where the participation rate was less than 50%. In the latter schools religion courses could not be seen in the school curricula due to the fact that these courses were either offered very early in the morning before the actual school day started or after the school day was over. This inevitably diminished the incentive for the student to take this course because children did not want to come or leave the school at times different than their friends. In schools where the number of children who take this course exceeded the ones who do not, another problem arose as to where accommodate the latter. The parents who had the say on whether their children were going to take the course or not were also not conscious in their decisions just like their children. There were even worse situations where students threatened the religion course teachers with not taking the course with his/her other friends, if the teacher did not guarantee to give the highest grade to them.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Beyza Bilgin, *Türkiye’de Din Eğitimi ve Liselerde Din Dersleri [Religion Education in Turkey and Religion Courses at High Schools]*. Ankara: Emel, 1980.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> *New Methodological Approaches in Religious Education, International Symposium, Papers and Discussions.*

Bilgin also argued that if certain legalislative changes were made, religion education could be reconciled with the Constitution. A young assistant professor at the time, Beyza Bilgin had immense influence on the process of making the religion courses compulsory. Her controversial thesis was published in 1980. The dean of the university, Professor Hüseyin Atay, read the book and determined that Bilgin's ideas should be put before the MGK (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu/ National). Atay's written proposal received little support from other scholars who, although in agreement with Bilgin's ideas, feared taking them to the military junta. The report was sent to the MGK on 19 November 1980 and contrary to expectations, Atay was invited to explain his proposal in detail. In addition, Atay offered his own ideas about why religion education was important for Turkish youth and how to conduct it without violating any freedoms.

As a consequence of Atay's report, Bilgin was appointed as a consultant to the "Ministry of Education Religion Instruction Working Committee" (*MEB Din Öğretimi Çalışma Grubu*) a committee which was also working on the improvement of religion education. In the committee, she repeated her arguments in favour of compulsory religion education. In February 1981, the committee produced a report that in its "Suggestions" section, explained how the courses might be conducted.<sup>38</sup> Although favouring "compulsory" religion education, the report argued that in religion courses, children should not be compelled to practice their own religion. The report also stated that where there were sufficient numbers of non-Muslims to make up a class, their religion should be taught. However, this number remained unspecified in the report. This suggestion shows an implicit awareness that if courses did not address non-Muslims, they risked compromising the secularism clause in the Constitution. On this same topic, again in February 1981, the Minister of Religious Affairs produced a fifty-page report titled "A report about Religion Education in Turkey". For the first time, there was a clear statement that said: "as a requirement of freedom of religion and conscience, non-Muslims must have the right to opt out from the course given that they submit a petition to the school administration at the beginning of the school years. If numbers of non-Muslims in a classroom exceed ten, then a special class for them could be opened where they could learn their religion."<sup>39</sup> However, no further research or work followed from that proposal.

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Ankara: MEB Yay, 2004, p. 686.

<sup>38</sup> *Din Eğitimi Çalışma Grubu Raporu [Religion Instruction Working Committee]*. Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 6 Feb. 1981, pp. 7-21.

<sup>39</sup> Turkey. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı. *Türkiye'de Din Eğitim ve Öğretimi Hakkında Rapor [Report about religion education and instruction in Turkey]*. Ankara: Devlet Basımevi, 1981, p. 4.

There were other committees that proposed ideas similar to those suggested by Bilgin. The Ministry of Education Religion Education Consultation Committee (*Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Din Eğitimi Danışma Kurulu*) was one of them. The members of this committee included deans and chairs of various theology faculties, people from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, inspectors and advisors from Ministries, people from the Board of Education and Discipline and finally, teachers from Gazi Öğretmen Okulu (Gazi Teacher School). They were headed by Osman Feyzoğlu, who was the minister of the educational branch of the General Staff (*Genel Kurmay*). The purpose of the Committee was to research the feasibility of the transition to compulsory religion education from the previous voluntary course. The committee met on 28 May 1981 and after two days of intense debate, agreed (with only two members opposing the idea) that religion education should be compulsory during primary and secondary education. These two members who voted against the proposal, İbrahim Agah Çubukçu and Neda Armaner, thought that the course was not compatible with the *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* (Law of Unification of Instruction) ideals and the principle of secularism. Moreover, they believed the course would create problems for Alevis and non-Muslims. Other members opposed this argument, claiming that to teach religion from a cultural perspective would not create problems for minority groups.

Another committee was established by the Ministry of State responsible for religious affairs. It was called “The Science Committee with respect to Atatürk's Ideas about Religion and Secularism” (*Atatürk'ün Din ve Laiklik Konusundaki Görüşleri Hakkında Bilim Kurulu*).<sup>40</sup> The aim of this committee was to investigate whether compulsory religion courses were compatible with Atatürk's idea of secularism, and to evaluate the issue in the context of contemporary needs. The committee was headed by a constitutional law professor and included three academics from the Ankara Theology Faculty, as well as representatives from other universities. The group conducted extensive work on the topics of Islam and secularism. However, the final report did not state clearly whether the courses should be compulsory. Its somewhat limited finding was that the courses should be offered in schools, and they must stay under state supervision and monitoring. Bilgin notes that with the way the report was written, one could easily get the impression that legally it was not all right to make further changes about the nature of the course and thus make it compulsory.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the report did not reflect the views of three academics from the Ankara Theology Faculty who explained

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<sup>40</sup> *New Methodological Approaches in Religious Education, International Symposium, Papers and Discussions*. Ankara: MEB Yay, 2004, p. 686.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 683.

their dissenting opinions in a separate report. They believed that the committee report should have stated that Atatürk did not oppose religion *per se*, and that in order to raise Atatürkist children, there was a need for religion education based upon Turkish-Islamic ideas. These views of the theologians were reflected in the religion textbooks printed soon after. The textbooks depicted Atatürk as successfully integrating dedication to the state and good citizenship with a strong adherence to Islam—an interpretation that would ring untrue with some.<sup>42</sup> Years after his death, Atatürk remained still as *the* ‘reference point’, the accepted authority whose ideas were always referred to when it came to the issue of religion education. Yet Atatürk’s ideas had not been crystal clear during his lifetime or beyond. Indeed, as the disagreements on this committee show, his views were appropriated and interpreted by opponents of religion education *and* by those in favour of it.

A final committee, the Religion Education Committee (*Din Eğitimi Komitesi*), was formed by the General Secretary of the National Security Committee. In this group, there were representatives of the previous committees as well as new representatives. According to Bilgin, the most important discussions of the *pedagogical* transition to compulsory religion education took place in this committee. Bilgin was present in all of the committees.<sup>43</sup>

There were two other important academic gatherings that preceded and informed the work of the committees.<sup>44</sup> In April 1981, the Ankara University Theology Faculty hosted the “First Religion Education Seminar”. And in May that same year, the ‘Intellectuals’ Hearth’ (Aydınlar Ocağı) held a “National Education and Religion Education Science Seminar” (*Milli Eğitim ve Din Eğitimi İlmi Semineri*). In both of these seminars, the main focus of the papers was on the need for compulsory religion education. As in previous decades, the question of the course’s ‘legitimacy’ received the greatest attention. This meant that other important issues, such as the content and actual program of the course, were not given much thought. Moreover, there was no discussion of the possible problems that the course might create or how those problems might be solved. There was a consensus among participating scholars that compulsory religion education would unite the polarized Turkish youth, especially along *mezhep*<sup>45</sup> lines.

The Constitution of 1982 was not arranged by an assembly that had legal

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<sup>42</sup> Sam Kaplan, “Religious Nationalism”: A Textbook Case from Turkey, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 25 No.3, 2005, p. 673.

<sup>43</sup> *New Methodological Approaches in Religious Education, International Symposium, Papers and Discussions*. Ankara: MEB Yay, 2004, p. 672.

<sup>44</sup> Nurullah Altaş, “Türkiye’de Zorunlu Din Öğretimini Yapılandırma Süreci, Hedefler ve Yeni Yöntem Arayışları” [“The Process, Aims and the Search for New Methods that Structure Compulsory Religion Education in Turkey”]. *Dini Araştırmalar Dergisi* (Jan.-Apr. 2002), p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> See footnote 91 of Chapter 3 for the meaning of *Mezhep* in this context.

representation or authority. The draft Constitution was prepared by the Assembly of Consultation that consisted of appointed members as opposed to elected ones. The MGK had control of the overall project. The Assembly of Consultation consisted of 160 members and was formed in June, 1981. “The Commission on Constitution” (a working party within the Assembly of Consultation) produced a proposal of 200 articles. Between 4 August and 23 September 1981, the proposal was the subject of fierce debates prior to its submission to the National Security Council. Article 24 of the draft Constitution came under particular scrutiny. It dealt with religion education, but in terms that remained unchanged from the 1961 Constitution.<sup>46</sup> This ran counter to previous decisions by both the government and the Council of National Security to render religion education compulsory. As a result of public debates on this specific issue, the draft Constitution was revised and 18 different amendments were made. Finally, on 1 September 1982, the following wording was agreed for article 24:

Religion and Morals (Ethics) education and instruction is compulsory during primary and secondary education and is done under the surveillance of the state. The participation to the course by people who do not belong to Islam depends on their volition; the international treaty clauses regarding minorities are reserved.<sup>47</sup>

There were many reactions to this proposed article. Some members of the Assembly of Consultation believed that the religion courses must be compulsory. Others thought that this would be very detrimental to social cohesion. Kamer Genç, an Alevi member, thought that the course must remain voluntary; a compulsory course would constitute a breach of the principle of secularism. But his biggest concern was that there was no information in the article as to which *mezhep* (denomination) the proposed courses were going to be taught. Therefore, he believed that the course would aggravate relations between Alevis and Sunnis.<sup>48</sup> Another objection was that teaching religion alongside other sciences could confuse the minds of young children. As can be seen, these were more or less the same arguments that occurred every time religion education was discussed, from the beginning of the Republic.

After further discussion and rewriting, article 24 took final shape:<sup>49</sup> The fourth clause

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<sup>46</sup> In the draft Constitution the clause about religion education was mentioned as; “Religious education and teaching shall be subjected to the individual's own will and volition, and in the case of minors, to their legally appointed guardians.”

<sup>47</sup> Halis Ayhan, *Türkiye’de Din Eğitimi [Religion Education in Turkey]*. Istanbul: Dem, 2004, p. 300.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>49</sup> Article 24: Freedom of Religion and Conscience reads:

*c1.* Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religious belief and conviction.

*c2.* Acts of worship, religious services, and ceremonies shall be conducted freely, provided that they do not violate the provisions of Article 14.

*c3.* No one shall be compelled to worship, or to participate in religious ceremonies and rites, to reveal religious beliefs and convictions, or be blamed or accused because of his religious beliefs and convictions.



of the article was changed like this:

Education and instruction of religion and morals (ethics) shall be conducted under state supervision and control. Instruction of “Religion Culture and Morals” course shall be compulsory in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Other religious education and instruction shall be subject to the individual’s own desire, and in the case of minors, to the request of their legal representatives.

In the 1961 Constitution, non-Muslim student’s situation with regards to the course was more obvious because there was a statement that “the international treaty clauses regarding minorities are reserved”. However in this newly proposed Constitution, this last premise, together with the statement that non-Muslims must have the right to opt out of the course, was removed. The reasoning was explained by M.Fevku Uyguner, a Member of Parliament. In the Assembly, he argued that the term ‘minority’ was not referred to in any other statutes.<sup>50</sup> To introduce the term would be to conflict with the main principles of the Constitution that proclaimed all individuals equal before the law irrespective of language, race, sex, political opinion, philosophical views, religion or religious sect. Clearly, some MPs did not see that the needs of non-Muslims might differ and therefore require specific regulations.

As a consequence of these various commissions and reports, the content of the religion course was being renewed and rethought. It seemed that in the new Constitution, the courses would be made compulsory. At the same time, some of Evren’s advisors informed him that the new religion course contained much repetitive information that could prove boring to children. Evren called a brief meeting with representatives of the commissions, in order to clarify the issue. After presentations by the Ministry of Education and the Board of Education and Discipline (*Talim Terbiye Kurulu*), a general took the floor and argued that there was no need to teach the course from fourth grade to the end of high school, and that religion could be learned in a period of three months. Bilgin, who was at the meeting, later explained that she and other members were hesitant to enter into discussion with the general but at the same time, very eager to present their counter arguments. Finally, Bilgin stood up and was granted permission to speak on the matter. She explained that religion courses should not be seen only

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c4. Education and instruction in religion and ethics shall be conducted under state supervision and control. Instruction in religious culture and moral education shall be compulsory in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Other religious education and instruction shall be subject to the individual’s own desire, and in the case of minors, to the request of their legal representatives.

c5. No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political influence, or for even partially basing the fundamental, social, economic, political, and legal order of the state on religious tenets.

<sup>50</sup> Halis Ayhan, *Türkiye’de Din Eğitimi [Religion Education in Turkey]*. Istanbul: Dem, 2004, p. 313.

as a means to teach Islam, but as an opportunity for children to study their culture. This, according to Bilgin, could not be achieved in three months. She also asserted that not only Islam, but other religions and cultures must be included in the courses for students to gain a more thorough understanding of religion.

The next day, the Constitution (as endorsed by the military) was voted upon and accepted by a large majority of the public. This meant that article 24 was approved; Bilgin and all those who supported religion education in schools were content with the outcome. In one of her articles, Bilgin notes that many people at the time thought that the religion courses became compulsory as a consequence of military imposition. By explaining the process in a detailed manner, she tries to show that it was, in fact, initiated by theology scholars. The importance of the scholars' involvement is undeniable, but it is also important to note that the generals approved many of the ideas emanating from the Intellectuals' Hearth (*Aydınlar Ocağı*). This gave added force to the process of making the course compulsory.

In my interview with Beyza Bilgin, she raised a number of important points. First of all, many theologians, including Bilgin, pushed for compulsory religion education to be included in the education system. However, once the course was accepted by constitutional amendment, the theologians' ideas about its content were not strictly followed. Thus, the course developed along different lines. For instance, Bilgin wanted the different *mezheps* of Islam, including Alevism, to be included in the curriculum. This was strongly opposed on the grounds that the issue was highly political and that it was preferable not to mention terms relating to Alevism or any other *mezhep*. Secondly, she argued that it was better to teach religious concepts that could be agreed upon by the different religions, or in the case of Islam, by every *mezhep*. But again, this did not materialize and according to Bilgin, the scholars did not have sufficient editorial control over the content of the textbooks. They were able to set topic headings, but not the material that appeared under those headings. She cited the example of books that illustrated *namaz*<sup>51</sup> (ritual prayer). Illustrations were selected according to Sunni faith and did not contain the Alevi version of *namaz*. Although this was inaccurate, it was allowed to pass, as most of the teachers and textbook authors were Sunnis.

This evidence suggests that the views of Bilgin and other scholars were overlooked in the planning of the course. As such, the dominant Sunni-Hanefi branch of Islam played a strong role in the evolution of the course and its textbooks. In addition, the plan to teach non-Muslims their own religion was never put into force, on the grounds that there were

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<sup>51</sup> *Namaz* is the word for prayer used by Muslims speaking Indo-Iranian, South Slavic and Turkic languages; it comes from an Indo-European root meaning 'to bow, or prostrate'.

insufficient numbers of non-Muslims in the classrooms. There was a clear contradiction between the 'ideal' of offering religion courses to non-Muslims and what actually occurred. Arguably, this constituted a failure on the part of the state to treat all citizens equally. Finally, despite proposals that the course content should consist of ethics, it is apparent that the final design was primarily intended for Sunni Muslims.

In the 1982-83 school year, the newly organized course finally appeared in the curriculum and was taught at every level. Nonetheless, various issues relating to the course continued to be debated. On 7 March 1986, Şeyhmus Bahçeci, an MP from the SHP (Sosyaldemokrat Halk Partisi /Social Democratic People's Party), put three written questions to the Minister of Education, Metin Emiroğlu.<sup>52</sup> Of these, the third question cast particular light on how the state viewed the relation between religion education and non-Muslims. Bahçeci asked, "How are the religion courses carried out in schools where non-Muslims are going?" The answer he received was:

"In line with the aims of the course, the 'Religion Culture and Morals Course' gives information about religion culture and ethics. Among the aims of the course are; to always bear in mind and protect our state's secularism principle; not to cause any breach of freedom of thought and conscience; not to force anybody to practice religious teachings."<sup>53</sup> This was a summary response which can only be interpreted as a failure by the government to seriously engage with the needs and rights of non-Muslims in the context of religion education.

The fact that compulsory religion education included non-Muslims was again put on the parliamentary agenda during the 1987 budget discussions. The Minister of Education said at this time that the Ministry would send out a directive to school administrators, reminding them that non-Muslims had the right to opt out of the religion course, but must still take the ethics course. The Minister then repeated his previous assertions that the course, in his view, offered general ethical and cultural dimensions of religion, making it relevant to non-Muslims.

Thus, between the years 1982 and 1987, when the religion course was first introduced in a compulsory manner, non-Muslims were forced to take the course. During this period, the Ministry received a number of letters from non-Muslims demanding an end to this practice. In 1987, the Board of Education and Discipline (*Talim Terbiye Kurulu*) finally agreed to that

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<sup>52</sup> Yasemin Gümüş, "TBMM Tutanaklarında Milli Eğitim Bakanlarının Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi Hakkındaki Görüşleri 1980-2003" ["The views of Ministers of National Education about religion education as reflected in the parliamentary reports"]. MA thesis Marmara U. Soc. Sci. Inst, 2007, p. 32. ; Turkey. T.B.M.M. *Tutanak Dergisi* 27 (17 Mar. 1986), p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> Turkey. T.B.M.M. *Tutanak Dergisi* 27 (17 Mar. 1986), p. 94.

demand.<sup>54</sup> The same decision was repeated in a decree passed in 1990 and signed by Minister of Education Avni Akyol, Minister of Culture Namık Kemal Zeybek, Minister of National Defense Sefa Giray, and Minister of Labor and Social Security İmren Aykut. The decree ordered that Christians and Jews would be exempt from religion courses, provided they gave proof of their religious status. However, if they wished to attend the courses, they were to provide a petition from their parents.<sup>55</sup> As can be seen, there was an ambiguity, especially between 1982 and 1990, about how to handle non-Muslims who attended state schools.

In 1988, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ankara University Theology Faculty, and the Turkish Diyanet Foundation (*Türk Diyanet Vakfı*) put together a seminar.<sup>56</sup> Along with other topics, the plan was to discuss the quality of compulsory religion education in Turkey. Mualla Selçuk gave a presentation detailing the current problems in religion education.<sup>57</sup> According to her field evidence, the courses did not take into consideration individual and cultural differences among students. Although it did not result in a reconsideration of the course structure, this was an important piece of research. It is arguable that state confidence in the educational model/approach known as the “non-confessional approach” (*mezhepler üstü yaklaşım*), allowed these problems to continue without further scrutiny. This model had been developed in England by Ninian Smart during the 1970s, but was applied rather erroneously in its Turkish version.<sup>58</sup> In his studies, Ninian Smart distanced religious studies from traditional theology. He argued that evaluating truth claims and apology had no role, but that investigation into the ‘truth’ and ‘worth’ of religion *per se* was a valid academic enterprise in the public arena of state funded education.<sup>59</sup> Thus the key point was that religious education should be non-confessional. Moreover, according to Smart, religious education should transcend the informative “and engage in dialogue with the para-historical claims of religions and anti-religious outlooks.”<sup>60</sup> He argued that it need not be hostile to the type of committed approach pursued in theology, “provided it is open, and do not artificially restrict understanding and choice.” This understanding’s basic premise was that religious education

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<sup>54</sup> “Bakanlık’tan ‘seçmeli’ din dersi uyarısı” [“‘Voluntary’ religion education warning of the minister”]. *Zaman Gazetesi* 28 Sept. 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Hacer Yıldırım Foggo, “Çocuğa Zorunlu Ayrımcılık” [“Compulsory discrimination to the child”]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 24 Oct. 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Nurullah Altaş, “Türkiye’de Zorunlu Din Öğretimini Yapılandırın Süreç, Hedefler ve Yeni Yöntem Arayışları” [“The Process, Aims and the Search for New Methods that Structure Compulsory Religion Education in Turkey”]. *Dini Araştırmalar Dergisi* (Jan.-Apr. 2002), p. 147.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>58</sup> John Shepherd, “İslam ve Din Eğitimi: Mezhebe/dine Dayalı Olmayan Yaklaşım” [“Islam and religious education: a non-confessional approach”]. Trans. Bekir Demirkol. *Din Öğretimi ve Din Hizmetleri Semineri*. Ankara: DIB, 1988, pp. 370-378.

<sup>59</sup> Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*. New York: Humanities, 1968, p. 105.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

should not be concerned with evangelizing, but with elucidating understanding, or meaning.

In its Turkish version, although the intentions of theologians such as Bilgin were in line with Smart's ideas, the application of the course was far from Smart's model. In Turkey, it became a model that effectively 'Sunnified' the course, under cover of this term 'non-confessional' (*mezhepler üstü*- which can literally translated to English as 'supra-sectarian') that was originally intended to safeguard students against the imposition of a single religion or *mezhep*. In other words, the model was used to foreground Islamic teaching and maintain the unity of Islam. In sum, the application of Smart's model to the Turkish context proved to be highly problematic for non-Sunnis. Since the presence of non-Sunni students in classrooms was an undeniable fact, in 1992, the Ministry of Education added non-Islamic religions to the framework of the course. This decision was explained in the *Tebliğler Dergisi*, a decree that was sent to all schools nation-wide:

...During the preparation of the religion education curriculum the possibility of the existence of a small number of pupils who belong to Christianity, Judaism and other religions was taken into consideration. In line with this view, to support the national and general culture, commensurate with the proportion assigned to each religion, knowledge has been provided about Islam, Judaism, Christianity and other religions respectively. This knowledge will undoubtedly extend the world of pupil's faith and culture and it will enable them to behave more tolerantly and sensitively (sympathetically) towards followers of other religions.<sup>61</sup>

The decree also stated that Jewish and Christian students should not be taught or made to recite the prayers and topics of *Kelime-i Şahadet*, *Kelime-i Tevhid*, *Besmele*, *Amentü*, *Ayet, Sure* and *Namaz*. Therefore, they must not be held responsible for these topics in determining their grades.<sup>62</sup> This decree marks a clear departure from the previous (1990) decree, which stated that Christians and Jews were to be exempted from the course. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to show why this change was introduced. It certainly added to the ambiguity about how to handle non-Muslims in religion courses, even if the larger state intention was to make the course more egalitarian.

Kaymakcan argues that the secondary school curriculum prepared in 1982 did allow for teaching non-Islamic religions, and accordingly, textbooks have included material on Christianity, Judaism and other non-Islamic religions.<sup>63</sup> In fact, these plans never amounted to

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<sup>61</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, "Christianity in Turkish Religious Education." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999), p. 283.

<sup>62</sup> Hacer Yıldırım Foggo, "Çocuğa Zorunlu Ayrımcılık" ["Compulsory discrimination to the child"]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 24 Oct. 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, "Christianity in Turkish Religious Education." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999), p. 281.

more than a couple of pages in only some of the textbooks. Alevism, on the other hand, was almost never mentioned in textbooks. Kaymakcan tries to explain the lack of interest in the question of how non-Islamic religions should be treated, and which method should be employed to present them in religion education. He gives three reasons. The first one is the “theological understanding of other religions”. According to Kaymakcan, the inherited *medrese* understanding of religion has remained prevalent in contemporary religious studies in Turkey. This inherited understanding of religion (Islam) defines non-Islamic religions as either corrupted divine religions or non-divine religions. And on the basis of this outlook, a confessional method has been adopted for the study of other religions. Thus the main purpose of this method has been to assert the superiority of Islam over other religions. Certainly it is true that course textbooks almost always stress the ‘fact’ that Islam is the only divine religion and that it has remained uncorrupted unlike other religions.

Secondly, Kaymakcan cites what he calls the ‘priorities in the study of religion education in Turkey’. He argues that as a result of many fluctuations in the role of religion, and the relatively late recognition of the importance of religion education in modern Turkey, the question of how to handle non-Islamic religions, particularly Christianity and Judaism, has received little attention from academic researchers.

The last factor, according to Kaymakcan, is the ‘Practical importance of the study of non-Islamic religions for Turks’. In this article, Kaymakcan argues that in comparison with Western Europe, Turkey cannot be considered a multi-faith society. He finds that because the majority of the Turkish population is Muslim and non-Muslims have their own community schools, Turkish theologians have felt little pressure to conduct research in this area.<sup>64</sup> Taken together, these three factors help to explain educators’ reluctance to develop religion education for religions other than Sunni Islam.

There are some scholarly writings that seek to justify the inclusion of other religions in the courses. In many of these works, a central argument is that if we hope to understand and respect other people, we need knowledge of their religions. Moreover, the Koran mentions non-Islamic religions, and the prophets and scriptures associated with other faiths. Lastly, it is important to know other religions in order ‘to defend’ one’s own religion (in the Turkish case, Islam) accurately.<sup>65</sup> Nowhere in this analysis can we see a perspective that takes into account the needs and rights of students who follow religions other than Sunni Islam. The arguments proposed here look only from the perspective of Sunni students and are aimed at improving

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

these students' educational capacities. Moreover, as it will be clear in the next chapter, due to various organizational problems, many Jews and Christians had to take these courses, thereby invalidating the claim that all non-Muslims attend minority schools. This perspective, which is internalized by the state and by scholars of religion education, shows how fragile the foundations are for the principle of secularism in Turkey.

The parliamentary debates during 1980-1997 revealed MPs' concerns about the religion course once it had come into full force. Many thought that the application of the course was not going as planned, and rumours surfaced that teachers were making the children learn the Koran in schools. There were MPs who thought that religious material should be kept to a minimum on the courses, but that parents who wanted their children to receive religion instruction had access to places outside school to do so.<sup>66</sup>

With time, it became obvious that the curriculum of the religion course developed by the Board of Education included the teaching of prayers and religious practices.<sup>67</sup> The curriculum required students in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade to memorize prayers and at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level, to perform daily prayers. Thus, it was clear that confessional religious instruction was being conducted within the compulsory courses.<sup>68</sup> However, as Education Reform Initiative (ERI) rightfully pointed out, article 2 of the 1982 and 1961 Constitutions clearly stated that the "Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state based on the rule of law." This meant that under Articles 2 and 24 of the 1982 Constitution, the teaching of Religion Culture and Morals by the secular state could not be oriented towards imposing particular religious beliefs or convictions.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the reference to "religious beliefs and convictions" in Article 24 asserted that religious *disbelief* was as acceptable as religious belief. Therefore, in constitutional terms, it was clear that Religion Culture and Morals course should take the form of 'teaching about religion' rather than 'teaching religion'. The statement 'culture of religion or religious culture' precluded the idea of imposing a religion or sect.<sup>70</sup> However, despite the improper application of the course, political parties and governments did not show much

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<sup>66</sup> Yasemin Gümüş, "TBMM Tutanaklarında Milli Eğitim Bakanlarının Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi Hakkındaki Görüşleri 1980-2003" ["The views of Ministers of National Education about religion education as reflected in the parliamentary reports"]. MA thesis Marmara U Soc. Sci. Inst, 2007, p. 32. ; Turkey. T.B.M.M. *Tutanak Dergisi* 27 (17 Mar. 1986), p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> In his memoirs, Kenan Evren wrote that there was a specific reason why the course was not called "Religion Education course" (*Din Dersi* in Turkish). He said that they did not call the course like that in order to prevent the exploitation of the course which could entail teaching of *suras*, memorizing of Koran and which could actually force students to practice *namaz*. It is seen all his fears were materialized in a short future which makes one question his sincerity given his strong commitment to Turkish- Islamic Synthesis. (Halis Ayhan, Türkiye'de *Din Eğitimi* [*Religion Education in Turkey*]. Istanbul: Dem, 2004 ,p. 316)

<sup>68</sup> "Religion and Schooling in Turkey: The Need for Reform." *Education Reform Initiative* Mar. 2005. PDF file.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

concern about this issue. The only exception was the 1997 party program of the CHP, where it was argued that religion education courses should be made voluntary again, although we do not know why this issue came up in the party program or what kind of a voluntary course the CHP had in mind.<sup>71</sup>

The courses have lasted to the present day and remained relatively unchallenged, due partly to a lack of civic interest or debates on the issue. Yet far from bringing peace to society and the different *mezheps*, the courses have seemed to create greater enmity, shaking public trust (especially that of the Alevis), in the impartiality of the state towards all religions.

#### **4.2 Religious minorities and the political environment between 1997-2009**

The period between 1997 and 2009 was in many ways shaped by the social and political gravity of the AKP. Therefore, I open this section by explaining the AKP's main principles from the moment it came to power, and how the European accession process informed these principles. In this period, despite being a conservative party with its roots, going back to radical Islamists parties, the AKP's political interests strongly overlapped with the democratization movement triggered by EU negotiations. Thus, the biggest impetus behind the improvement to some minority rights in this period came from European Union sanctions against Turkey. However, as the intentions behind the reforms had more to do with EU and international politics than domestic goodwill, the actual effects of those reforms were somewhat limited. They certainly did not bring substantial changes to the lives of religious minorities.

During the mid-eighties, the government's response to Islamic activism and political liberalization was flexible in the sense that it opened up new opportunities for some Islamist groups. The hardcore Islamic Refah Parti's (RP) political journey proves this premise. Although the RP had become more of an opposition party in parliamentary elections in the mid-1980s, it was the winning party in the 1995 elections and then became a coalition partner in 1997.<sup>72</sup> However, as already noted, relations between the government and the army had begun to deteriorate by the beginning of 1997. After the army achieved what, at the time, Turks called "the first post-modern coup", banning the RP, Islamists reorganized and founded the FP (Fazilet Partisi / Virtue Party).<sup>73</sup> In 1999, the first elections were held after the coup of 1997. Observers were anxious to know if there would be an Islamist backlash. But there was

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<sup>71</sup> İsmail Kaplan, *The Ideology of National Education in Turkey and Its Implications for Political Socialisation*, Dissertation submitted to the Institute of Social Sciences, Boğaziçi Univ, 1998, p. 257.

<sup>72</sup> Nilüfer Narlı, "AKP Victory was Forseeble in 2001." *Bia News Center* 4 Nov. 2002. Web. 10 Dec. 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 301.



no backlash and the FP lost about a quarter of the old RP's support. One main reason for this was that pro-Islamic groups realized that Islamic social and economic networks could be damaged even when political Islam was at its peak (1995-1999). Therefore, they opted out to withdraw their support from Islamist political movements.<sup>74</sup>

On 22 June 2001, the constitutional court banned the FP, arguing that it was a direct continuation of the Refah Partisi (RP). This sparked debates within the FP between the conservatives, who were in favour of a strict Islamist line, and the modernists, who wanted to turn the party into a broad right of centre movement and jettison the Islamic rhetoric.<sup>75</sup> When the modernists lost out, they broke away (under the leadership of Abdullah Gül and Tayyip Erdoğan) to form the AKP in August 2001. Having seen the waning support for political Islam, the AKP immediately portrayed itself as a moderate, conservative, pro-Western party that advocated a liberal market economy and Turkish membership in the European Union. Referring to themselves as “conservative democrats”, AKP leaders announced a program that highlighted democracy, rule of law, civil society, human rights, globalization and Turkey's accession to the European Union.<sup>76</sup> Instead of an overt political representation of Islam, AKP leaders opted for a conservative-centrist approach to secure Islamic social and economic networks.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the AKP symbolized the withdrawal of Islam from the political sphere in return for safeguarding its social network which was the basis of conservatism the AKP claimed to represent.<sup>78</sup> Thus the AKP shifted the focus of religiously affiliated politics from concern over Turkey's lack of Islamic characteristics to a push for democratic and economic reforms. In addition, they claimed to represent moral values through the communitarian-liberal consensus. AKP tried very hard to temper its Islamist image and to be disassociated from National View Movement (*Milli Görüş*) from which it had originated.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the AKP succeeded in drawing support from poor rural and immigrant areas, as well as from reformists, the middle class and youth. In the 2002 elections, the AKP received 34 percent of

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<sup>74</sup> İhsan D. Dağı, “The Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics, and Discourse of Human Rights in the Search for Security and Legitimacy.” *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*. Ed. Hakan Yavuz. Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 2006, p. 95.

<sup>75</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 304.

<sup>76</sup> Amr Taha, “Political Islam in Turkey- FAQs.” *Islamonline* n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2008.

<sup>77</sup> İhsan D. Dağı, “The Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics, and Discourse of Human Rights in the Search for Security and Legitimacy.” *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*. Ed. Hakan Yavuz. Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 2006, p. 95.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>79</sup> One way to achieve that was to build a broad coalition with members of centre right parties. This move was bolstered by promises to further Turkey's bid to join the EU. In addition, the party positioned itself in opposition to the old, state-driven development parties which not only paid more attention to the problem of heavily skewed income distribution and social injustice, but also supported medium and small-scale businesses in order to vitalize the production sector. See: Keyman, E. Fuat. “A Political Earthquake in Turkey: An Analysis of the prospects of the AKP government in Turkey.” *Eurozine* 23 Jan. 2008. Web.

the vote and won a majority in the National Assembly.

Despite its party statements, the AKP has introduced numerous changes that could be described as rooted in Islam.<sup>80</sup> Gradually, these changes polarized the Turkish society. Some saw Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP's policies as a movement towards a more democratic, liberal society, one that could make room for religious expression. Others believed that allowing Islam into the public realm was "a pretext for the forced expression of Islam and adherence to shari'a law, which would constitute a religious retrenchment that could be as subversive to the country's well-being and progress as a military coup."<sup>81</sup> I believe that the intense focus on the headscarf debates, in particular, may have pushed other, related issues to the background. In this regard, it is difficult to assess AKP policies towards non-Muslims and Alevis. My analysis is in keeping with that of İhsan Dağı, who argues that the AKP's discourse and policies reflect the Party's relative 'insecurity' in its encounters with the secularist establishment.<sup>82</sup> Dağı states that:

The AKP emerged at a time when two previous political parties of the founding leaders of the AKP had been closed down by the Constitutional Court in the last three years; when the leader of the movement, Tayyip Erdoğan, had been imprisoned<sup>83</sup> and banned from active politics; and when the Kemalist/Secularist center represented by the military and the judiciary had displayed its determination to eliminate any Islamic-popular opposition as well as its social and economic networks. Under these circumstances the AKP has developed a strategy of adopting a language of human rights and democracy as a discursive shield.<sup>84</sup>

In other words, the search for legitimacy and security shaped the AKP approach to human rights. In the party program for the 2002 election campaign, the AKP placed a heavy emphasis

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<sup>80</sup> In 2004, Istanbul's Mayor Muammer Güler passed a bill banning all publicly displayed images, including advertisements, containing partial nudity. In 2005, the AKP banned the sale of alcoholic beverages in a section of Ankara which was mostly occupied by bars and restaurants. This ban was soon lifted, although a licensing requirement still remains for the establishments. The AKP has also been accused of placing Islamist individuals in government offices and giving out government contracts to parties rooted in Islam. Following the 2007 elections, the AKP began to pursue a more state-oriented agenda that critics have described as Islamic populism. Support for the party has fluctuated as its leaders denied allegations of anti-secular activity. In 2007, the AKP passed a bill removing the headscarf ban in all universities. This action drew substantial criticism and by 2008, there were calls for the AKP to be disbanded. Thus the AKP found itself locked in battle with Turkey's secular elite, backed by the powerful military, over changes to the ban on wearing headscarves. As the height of this conflict, hundreds of Turks gathered in protest around Atatürk's mausoleum.

<sup>81</sup> Henry Kegan, "Turkey's Future under the AKP." *The Forum for International Policy* Aug. 2008. Web.

<sup>82</sup> İhsan D. Dağı, "The Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics, and Discourse of Human Rights in the Search for Security and Legitimacy." *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*. Ed. Hakan Yavuz. Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 2006, pp. 88-89.

<sup>83</sup> In 1998, Erdogan was imprisoned for four months because of a poem he read in public, which prosecutors decided incited religious hatred. The poem read in part "the mosques are our bayonets, the domes our helmets, and the believers our soldiers."

<sup>84</sup> İhsan D. Dağı, "The Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics, and Discourse of Human Rights in the Search for Security and Legitimacy." *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*. Ed. Hakan Yavuz. Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 2006, p. 95.

on human rights and democracy. The program declared that different social, ethnic, political and religious identities must be regarded as a source of richness, rather than as a threat.<sup>85</sup> In sum, recent legislative reforms have been driven by Turkey's EU membership bid. Securing a clear path to membership has been regarded as essential, not only for the democratization and development of Turkey, but also for AKP modernization and legitimacy. It is in this context that AKP relations with Turkey's religious minorities must be evaluated.

#### **4.2.1 The EU and non-Muslims of Turkey**

In order to guarantee liberties to believers in the officially secular nation, the AKP has pursued a policy of religious freedom. It has assured the EU that it would respect freedoms for religious minorities, although progress has been somewhat limited. As mentioned in chapter one, in the last few years, there has been an increase in the numbers of religiously motivated hate crimes. This would suggest that AKP measures to improve the rights of non-Muslims and other religious minorities have not yet created a nation free of xenophobia and religious enmity. Moreover, all of these reforms must be understood as belonging to the complexities of EU accession, and therefore cannot be simply judged as party political or grass roots changes.

In the 1990s, under the accession requirements, Turkey faced the question of how to preserve its national and territorial integrity while also recognizing the ethno-linguistic and religious diversity present in society. The growing visibility of non-Turkish and non-Muslim identities unleashed a process defined by Kadioğlu as the "denationalization of citizenship".<sup>86</sup> According to Kadioğlu, the "denationalization of citizenship" gained momentum after Turkey's official candidacy for the European Union. Parliament passed numerous reforms enabling the use of other languages and the practice of multiple religions.<sup>87</sup> These reforms were upheld by civic organizations in order to signal the presence of multicultural identities in Turkey. In Kadioğlu's scheme, these processes pointed to a denationalization of citizenship in Turkey. It is clear that the rise of identity politics, demands for cultural rights, and debates on constitutional citizenship all contributed to the pressures put on the Turkish government by the EU accession process. Indeed, the 1993 Copenhagen summit confirmed that prior to EU accession, a candidate country must have achieved a stable democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. However, it was left to the specific

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Denationalization of Citizenship? The Turkish Experience." *Citizenship Studies* 11.3 (July 2007), pp. 284-286.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

negotiations between the EU and candidate country to produce a detailed program for minority rights and protection. In Turkey's Accession Partnership Document, priority was given to enhancing the linguistic and cultural rights of minorities. As a candidate country, Turkey was tasked with satisfying minimal standards of protection within the national system.

From 1998 onwards, the EU Commission's annual progress reports on Turkey also monitored its progress in relation to minority rights and protection. The Commission prepared eleven such reports on Turkey during the period 1998-2008. "These reports are important in the sense that they not only put forth what is expected of Turkey for its accession to the EU but also monitor the progress taken by Turkey after each report in a comparative manner with the previous years' report as well as the shortcomings and ill-treatments in fulfilling the political criteria in the area of minority rights and the protection of minorities."<sup>88</sup>

Within the specificity of the protection of minorities, all of the reports pinpoint that Turkey's minority regime, as set out in Lausanne Treaty, was restrictive and hence did not provide a protective framework for other ethnic, cultural and religious groups and communities that fall outside the scope of the Treaty as there were other groups in Turkey which might have qualified for minority status such as the Assyrians, the Kurds and the Alevis.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the reports repeatedly stated that Turkey was not applying the Lausanne Treaty to its full extent, as there were problems in the daily lives of the recognized non-Muslim minorities.<sup>90</sup> To this end, the reports urged Turkey to adopt constitutional amendments that would enable it to meet EU standards on minority protection. In one of her articles on the topic, Toktaş produced a chart showing the minority rights issues raised in EU Commission Reports between 1998 and 2005.<sup>91</sup> This chart identified numerous problems, including minority experiences in state schools, the status of minority schools and the content of textbooks. With the exception of 1999 and 2002, every annual report cited discrimination against minorities as a feature of the compulsory religion course.<sup>92</sup>

As for the problems facing the 'Lausanne minorities', the 2003 report noted that some parents had encountered difficulties in enrolling their children in religious minority schools.<sup>93</sup> Children could only attend such schools if their father was registered as belonging to that

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<sup>88</sup> Şule Toktaş, "EU Enlargement Conditions and Minority Protection: A Reflection on Turkey's Non-Muslim Minorities." *East European Quarterly* 40.4 (Dec. 2006), p. 492.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 507.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 497.

religious minority; the mother's faith was not considered.<sup>94</sup> In that same 2003 report, there was criticism of the ban on the publication and import of non-approved religious textbooks. This problem was of particular concern to Greek minority schools. Finally, the report noted ongoing concern over the appointment of a Muslim deputy head to a religious minority school.<sup>95</sup>

In 2004, the Greek minority schools reported problems in obtaining approval of new teaching materials and the recognition of teachers from abroad.<sup>96</sup> The report also noted that in contravention of the 2003 Labour Law and in contrast with the situation of their colleagues of Turkish origin, Greek minority teachers were only permitted to teach in one school. The Armenian community had concerns about the provision of Armenian language instruction. The Alevis experienced difficulties in opening places of worship and were unhappy that compulsory religion instruction in schools failed to acknowledge non-Sunni identities.<sup>97</sup> Three reports made mention of positive developments such as the editing of textbooks in order to address the concerns of Christians and remove discriminatory language.<sup>98</sup> In 2005, the Ministry of Education indicated that Alevism and other faiths (including Christianity and Judaism) would be included in compulsory religion education from 2006.

In more recent reports, especially for the years 2006, 2007 and 2008, the issue of compulsory religion education and its failure to acknowledge Alevi specificity has been repeatedly voiced. Having started negotiations and introduced several reforms, Turkey still faces EU criticism with respect to the protection of minorities. Indeed, EU officials have frequently remarked that Turkey slowed down its reform process in 2005. Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn expressed his concerns over the treatment of minorities on various occasions.<sup>99</sup>

Since 2002, only a few of the non-Muslim communities' demands have been addressed as part of the EU adaptation process. Ongoing issues have included minority status and the Lausanne Treaty, the absence of a legal status for the patriarchates and rabbinate of recognized minorities, the lack of institutions of higher education for the clergy and religious officials, and the compulsory appointment of vice-Directors "of Turkish origin" (*Türk asılı*) in minority schools. These areas have yet to receive attention, along with the outstanding problem that recognized non-Muslim minorities do not receive a share of public funds

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 500.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 497.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 500.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 513.

earmarked for religious services.<sup>100</sup>

Reform has been hampered by the reluctance of an incrustated bureaucracy to implement real change. Moreover, as Etyen Mahçupyan of the Turkish think tank TESEV points out, the law-making process itself gives cause for failure. The relevant administrative authorities are reluctant to enforce laws and reforms which are often formulated in vague terms. New rights are announced, but given no concrete basis. They are often dependent upon approval by the relevant state authority, which empowers the bureaucracy to interfere in the internal affairs of minority groups.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, these EU-related reforms have generated more open debate on sensitive issues, often bringing fresh air into the closed world of officialdom and its regulations that have brought social stasis.<sup>102</sup> Turkey's taboo subjects—the Armenian massacres, the 6-7 September pogrom, the killings of Alevi in Kahramanmaraş and later in Sivas—are being discussed and criticized.

#### **4.2.2 Alevi, EU and the AKP government**

As we have seen, Alevism has been an object of rediscovery in the last two decades. During AKP rule from 2002 to the present, as in the case of non-Muslims, the 'question of Alevism' became one of the most discussed topics in the Turkish media. Indeed, this was mostly the result of the EU workings. In Germany and the rest of Europe, identity politics allowed for greater recognition of the Alevi as a separate community. More specifically, the German Alevi community has achieved a degree of institutional integration. This is a local success with transnational implications insofar as it empowers Alevi in Turkey to press for similar results.<sup>103</sup>

Thus internal and external developments brought the Alevi issue to the European Commission agenda. In December 1999, at the Helsinki summit, Turkey was recognized as a candidate to the EU. To become a member, Turkey must meet the 'Copenhagen criteria', including the protection of minorities. Yet in 1998, the first 'Regular Report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress towards Accession' stated that: "Turkey's Alevi Muslims are estimated to number at least 12 million. There are no government-salaried Alevi religious leaders, in contrast to Sunni religious leaders". One year later, the Commission again

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<sup>100</sup> Gabriel Goltz, "The non-Muslim minorities and reform in Turkey." *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*. Ed. Hans Lukas Kieser. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 176.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>103</sup> Bedriye Poyraz, "EU Minority Perspective and the Case of Alevilik in Turkey." *European University Institute Working Papers* RSCAS No.2006/24. N.d. PDF file. p. 7.

mentioned the Alevis: “As far as freedom of religion is concerned, there still exists a difference of treatment between those religious minorities recognized by the Lausanne Treaty and other religious minorities”.<sup>104</sup>

Poyraz notes that in November 2000, the Commission seemed to have become more serious about the Alevis. The Commission stated that:

The official approach towards the Alevis seemed to remain unchanged. Alevi complaints notably concerned compulsory religion instruction in schools and school books, which would not reflect the Alevi identity, as well as the fact that financial support is only available for the building of mosques and religious foundations.

In later reports, these concerns were reiterated almost *verbatim*. The interesting point is that the criticism appeared in the section concerning freedom of religion in the chapter on ‘civic and political rights’, and not in the chapter on ‘rights and protection of minorities’, which concerned mainly Gypsies and Kurds. In this context, the EC has implicitly recognized Alevism as a religious phenomenon, and legitimized the Alevis’ demands. Thus the Alevi issue has been clearly added to Turkey’s European agenda among the points of necessary improvement for EU accession.”<sup>105</sup>

However, it is very difficult to say that conditions have changed for the Alevis in Turkey. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has not taken up Alevi concerns. Alevis have continued to complain that compulsory religion instruction and school textbooks fail to acknowledge the Alevi identity. Financial support is still only available for the building of Sunni Muslim mosques and religious foundations. As some examples in my limited case study illustrate, compulsory religion instruction has failed Alevi students.

Although the 2003 report referred to a specific example of progress for the Alevis in Turkey, it continued to emphasise undemocratic practices towards the Alevis:

As far as the situation of non-Sunni Muslim communities is concerned, there has been a change as regards the Alevis. The previously banned Union of Alevi and Bektasi Associations was granted legal status in April 2003 that allowed it to pursue its activities. However, concerns persist with regard to both representation in the Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and compulsory religion instruction in schools which fail to acknowledge the Alevi identity.<sup>106</sup>

In 2004, the Alevi issue was again placed on Turkey’s European agenda. The report found no change in the status of Alevis, noting that they continued to experience difficulties in opening places of worship and that compulsory religion instruction in schools failed to

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

acknowledge their non-Sunni identities.<sup>107</sup>

In more recent reports, especially those of 2006, 2007 and 2008, the issue of compulsory religion education and its failure to acknowledge Alevi specificity was reiterated. There has been no evidence of improved conditions, and more specifically, the Alevis continued to experience difficulties in opening their *cemevleri*.

After the AKP came to power in 2002, it continued to pursue official policies and remained indifferent to Alevi demands. This not only provoked strong protests from Alevis, but it discredited AKP claims of being fully committed to secularism and of being a centre party representing the entire nation.<sup>108</sup> It took a few years before the AKP made a move towards Alevis, the internal dynamics of which may be summarized as follows: Before the 22 July 2007 elections, no Alevi sat among 354 members of the ruling AKP party. Following protests about this important absence, four Alevis were included in the new parliament. Mainly due to pressures from EU, after the 2007 elections, AKP launched a new policy towards Alevis to meet the expectations of the Alevi community. Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wanted Reha Çamuroğlu, the Alevi member of the AKP, to prepare a democratization package including the rights of Alevi community. In January 2008, AKP, organized an Alevi fast breaking feast, (*iftar*), in which AKP members and Alevi organizations could meet and thus improve chilly relations between the government and the Alevi community. However the *iftar* which was actually organized by Çamuroğlu caused split between the Alevis. First of all, "the initiative met with little support from the rank and file of Alevi civil society. Alevi organizations with very few exceptions declared that the ruling party's *iftar* is a misguided attempt at appeasing the EU in its demands for more inclusive policies toward the country's sizable minorities. Others insisted that this was yet another plot to destroy Alevi identity through assimilation into the Sunni mainstream."<sup>109</sup> Thus the AKP's Alevi opening took place without the community's legitimate representatives and civil society.

In February 2008, there were reports of a peaceful march in the streets of Istanbul attended by 10,000 people protesting the government's policies on Alevis.<sup>110</sup> In November, more than 50,000 followers of Turkey's Alevi branch of Islam gathered in the capital demanding equal religious rights. The demonstrators called on the government to abolish the Religious Affairs Directorate, cancel compulsory religion courses in schools and legalize the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Şahin Alpay, "Is Official Recognition of Alevism impending?" *Today's Zaman* 3 Dec. 2007. Web. 15 Dec. 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Kerem Öktem, "Being Muslim at the Margins: Alevis and the AKP." *Middle East Report* 38 (Spring 2008).

<sup>110</sup> Canada. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. *Turkey: Situation of Alevis (2005–May 2008)*. TUR102821.E. 27 May 2008. Web. 10 Mar. 2009.



community's prayer houses, known as “*cemevis*”.<sup>111</sup> These measures were not what Çamuroğlu and the AKP government had in mind. Çamuroğlu’s plan provided for a state-funded Alevi religious council operating and financed just like the Sunni Directorate of Religious Affairs, and did not take a clear position on compulsory religion education in state schools. Neither did the plan refer to the recent past of massacres and pogroms whose pain was deeply engraved into Alevi identity. Finally, it failed to call for an end to the practice of state-funded mosque-building programs in Alevi villages, enforced since the 1980s.<sup>112</sup>

As Alevi leaders suggest, the AKP has continued to ignore long-standing requests and grievances from the community, as well as its organized civil society. Indeed, Öktem has stated that the AKP’s new Alevi policy is not based on an “affirmative recognition of difference and a readiness to acknowledge past mistakes, but appears to follow the clientalist model of incorporation and assimilation that the party has so far successfully employed for the incorporation of Kurdish voters.”<sup>113</sup> Even Çamuroğlu’s modest proposals did not seem to be an urgent priority for the government and after promises of more engagement following the *iftar* and much talk in the media, the debate simply ebbed away. At last, in June 2008, Çamuroğlu resigned from his advisory post in the AKP, stating that the party did not keep the promises it made to the Alevis.<sup>114</sup>

Since the AKP has ideological roots in Turkey’s version of Sunni political Islam, the party has not actively embraced the nation’s Alevi communities. This is partly because AKP ideology and policy are largely irreconcilable with Alevi notions of ethics and justice. “From its tacit promotion of Islamic dress to its inherent social conservatism, from its gendered policies to its anti-alcohol stance, AKP policies appear to most Alevis as socially regressive and threatening to their identity and lifestyle.”<sup>115</sup> In conclusion, the AKP has failed to maintain its reformist agenda and as such, has not produced any tangible results beyond symbolic gestures toward the Alevis.

### **4.3 Religion education: 1997-2009**

At the beginning of this period, there was much discussion about a new law (passed 18 August 1997) that extended the duration of compulsory education from five to eight years.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Behzat Miser, “Aleviler Taleplerini Haykırdı” [“Alevis announced their demands”]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 10 Nov. 2008.

<sup>112</sup> Kerem Öktem, “Being Muslim at the Margins: Alevis and the AKP.” *Middle East Report* 38 (Spring 2008).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> “Turkish PM’s Alevi advisor resigns.” *Hurriyet News*. 12 June 2008. Web. 24 Dec. 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Kerem Öktem, “Being Muslim at the Margins: Alevis and the AKP.” *Middle East Report* 38 (Spring 2008).

<sup>116</sup> Yasemin Gümüş, “TBMM Tutanaklarında Milli Eğitim Bakanlarının Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi Hakkındaki

On February 28, the army had presented the cabinet with a long list of demands aimed at curbing Islamist influence on the economy, education and the state apparatus. For many, the most striking demand on this list was the one calling for compulsory eight-year primary education in state schools. Many argued that this would put the schools for preachers and prayer leaders (*İmam-Hatip lises*) at middle school level out of business.<sup>117</sup> These schools were very popular among the poorer sections of the population because they offered free and (in the eyes of conservative Muslims) safe education. Graduates of these schools had access to college-level education and ultimately universities and, since the schools produced many times the number of graduates than could be employed in the religious establishment, most of these graduates found places in other branches of the ‘secular’ state apparatus. In the eyes of the military and many secular Turks, this created a danger that people with an Islamist agenda might infiltrate and gradually take over the state.<sup>118</sup>

Unsurprisingly then, religious conservatives thought that the new legislation was introduced by the army and bureaucrats to attack the Pastor and Preacher Schools (*İmam-Hatip Schools*). This view was not entirely unfounded. The MGK (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu/ National Security Council) resolutions adopted on 28 February 1997 were largely congruent with the framework—especially the parts which dealt with Pastor and Preacher Schools (*İmam-Hatip Schools*)—proposed in a report prepared by TUSIAD (Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Association) in 1990.<sup>119</sup> This report, entitled “Education in Turkey”, was prepared by Zekai Baloğlu, a former Chairman of the Training and Education Council of the Ministry of National Education. It was critical of the large number of Pastor and Preacher Schools and Koran courses which were seen as detrimental to technical-vocational schools; the latter schools were expected to train manpower for industry. The report was also critical of the fact that the İmam-Hatip school graduates were being appointed to school directorships and to high-ranking posts in the Ministry. As such, they were diminishing the secular quality of the Turkish state.<sup>120</sup> The general political climate after the 28 February, in light of TUSIAD report dating back to 1990, strongly suggests that the introduction of this new law was

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Görüşleri 1980-2003” [“The views of Ministers of National Education about religion education as reflected in the parliamentary reports”]. MA thesis Marmara U Soc. Sci. Inst, 2007, p. 84.

<sup>117</sup> The incidents after 1997 marked a turning point for IHL: first of all in 1997, with the law of eight-year continuous education, the secondary part of these schools closed down. After one year, their university exam (as known as ÖSS in Turkish) coefficients decreased to make entrance to the universities more difficult.

<sup>118</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 300.

<sup>119</sup> Zekai Baloğlu, *Türkiye’de Eğitim; Sorunlar ve Değişme Yapısal Uyum Önerileri* [Education in Turkey; Problems and Change. Recommendations for Structural Adaptation]. Istanbul: TUSIAD (Türk Sanayicileri ve İş Adamları Derneği), 1997.

<sup>120</sup> İsmail Kaplan, ‘The Ideology of National Education in Turkey and Its Implications for Political Socialization’, Dissertation submitted to the Institute of Social Sciences, Boğaziçi University 1998, p. 290.

intended as a show of power in the tug-of-war between the army and the Islamist circles.

This new structure in the education system, had repercussions for the religion education curriculum in both *İmam-Hatip* schools and in other state schools. As a consequence of primary education having been extended to eight years, transition from primary to secondary education was rearranged. This development coincided with a decision by theology scholars and the Minister of Education to revise the structure and the content of religion education courses. The plan was to revise first the primary education level consisting of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, and then the secondary level.

Beginning in 1998, the Ministry of National Education worked to redefine the vision, mission and basic values of religion education. With the implementation of the new system, the Ministry launched an intensive process of program development by establishing direct cooperation with the Ankara University Faculty of Theology, and partial cooperation with other theology faculties. As a result, a program titled the “Ankara Model”<sup>121</sup> was utilized in *İmam-Hatip schools* in 1999 and in other primary schools starting from 2001.<sup>122</sup> The Ankara model was established by a commission of eighteen people who based their ideas on concepts from rationalism, analytic thinking and the social sciences.<sup>123</sup> Recognizing the unsatisfactory aspects of religion education, they sought to bring a more scientific point of view to the role of religion in society and to the solution of daily problems. In this scheme, religion was to be a guide in making human values come true.<sup>124</sup> The approach was an interdisciplinary one that involved the participation of related scientists and institutions. Here, the larger objective was to ensure that the target learning included in the program would conform to pedagogical principles and can meet the requirements of a democratic and secular society.<sup>125</sup> The commission agreed that previous religion education curricula had not been successful in incorporating new developments both in educational sciences and in the religious (Islamic) understanding of Turkish society.

Scholars such as Ademoğlu, Altaş and Doğan gave three reasons as to why a need to change the course curriculum for primary education arose at this specific juncture.<sup>126</sup> The

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<sup>121</sup> The reason for this name stemmed from the fact that the members of the new religious education curriculum committee mainly worked in, or were closely associated with, the University of Ankara.

<sup>122</sup> Recai Doğan & Nurullah Altaş, “What is the Ankara Model?” *Açıkarsiv* n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2009.

<sup>123</sup> Abdullah Ademoğlu, “Ankara Modeli Din Eğitimi” [“Ankara Model Religion Education”]. *Fikirbahçesi* 19 Apr. 2008. Web. 10 Mar. 2009.

<sup>124</sup> Turkey. Ministry of National Education. *National Education At the Beginning of 2002: Innovations in the Education System*. 2002. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Abdullah Ademoğlu, “Ankara Modeli Din Eğitimi” [“Ankara Model Religion Education”]. *Fikirbahçesi* 19 Apr. 2008. Web. 10 Mar. 2009; Recai Doğan & Nurullah Altaş, “What is the Ankara Model?” *Açıkarsiv* n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2009.

first reason was the accumulation of changes and transformations in the conception of religion by the Turkish society, which not long ago made a transition from a rural society to an industrialized one. This transition inevitably triggered the development of various critical approaches to conventional religion and its ability to solve contemporary problems. The second reason had more to do with general changes in the education field. There were numerous innovations which, according to these scholars, affected both general and religion education. The third reason related to the second one. There were important developments in religion education methods at both the national and international levels. These shifts required careful consideration in relation to the Turkish context. In addition, EU accession processes made these considerations indispensable to Turkish scholars and policymakers.

It was in this context that religion education in Turkey gained a new momentum. There were new teaching programs and textbooks, guidebooks for teachers and students, as well as in-service teacher training. The Ministry of National Education argued that the larger objective was religion education that gave students correct information about religion rather than making them devout or believers in Islam. According to one government document, “no matter what the preference is, it must be based on correct learnings and individuals must not be religiously exploited.”<sup>127</sup> As a democratic, secular state, Turkey required an education program that accurately reflected these features. Religious education should provide ‘inclusive religious teaching’; in other words, a non-denominational program, incorporating material on non-Islamic religions.<sup>128</sup> Despite these attempts to transcend the confessional approach to teaching religion, evidence suggests that the course has failed to present religious diversity and therefore, it falls under the “learning religion” model, as conceived by John Hull.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Turkey. Ministry of National Education. *National Education At the Beginning of 2002: Innovations in the Education System*. 2002. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

<sup>128</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Religious Education Culture in Modern Turkey.” *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*. Eds. Marian de Souza et al. Vol. 1. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006, p. 458.

<sup>129</sup> As Kaymakcan relates:

John Hull describes the three main types of school religious education in the world. These main types religious education used firstly by Michael Grimmit: like thus: learning religion, learning about religion, and learning from religion.

1. *Learning religion*: A single religious tradition is taught as the religious education curriculum, and is taught from the insider perspective. The teachers are expected to be believers in the religion themselves, and the object of the instruction is to enable pupils to come to believe in the religion or to strengthen their commitment to it. This type of religious education may be also described as confessional or traditional religious education. Learning religion means that the pupils are expected to learn that the religion is true, and to learn to live in accordance with that religion. This type of religious education is challenged when religious or secular pluralism appears in the society.

2. *Learning about religion*: Instead of religion being taught from the insider perspective, religion is now taught from the outsider perspective. Sometimes this kind of religious education may be called

Alongside all the developments described above, there was a growing Islamic influence on education in general, especially under the AKP government. The AKP took other measures which fed public fears that the secular character of education was under threat and that education as a whole was being ‘Islamicized’.<sup>130</sup> The measures of the AKP in the education arena showed the increased social visibility and acceptance of Islamic elements under a conservative government.

#### 4.3.1 Religion education and non-Muslims

From a minority perspective, the changes made to textbooks (to primary textbooks in 2002, and secondary textbooks in 2005) were unsatisfactory. They did not deliver the declared Ministry of Education objectives that had looked very appealing on paper. The books retained an undeniable bias in which Islam was regarded as superior to other faiths. In one of his

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‘education in comparative religion’, and may be based upon anthropology. It is more common, however, to find that religious education of this ‘learning about religion’ type is influenced by developments in the study of religion itself. This approach may be called ‘learning about religion’ because of its descriptive, historical and critical approach. It tends to appear as a reaction against the mono-religious ‘learning religion’ situation, and is often motivated by the desire to create a purely educational religious education. This kind of religious education, learning about religion, has a significant role to play in the prevention of religious intolerance. However, this approach often makes little or no explicit contribution to the pupils’ search for moral and spiritual values.

3. *Learning from religion*: In this type of religious education pupils are expected to participate in the beliefs and practices of the religion being taught, whereas in ‘learning from religion’ the distance between the pupils and the religious content which is typical of ‘learning about religion’ is strictly maintained, and yet at the same time the life-world of the pupil, rather than the internal structure of the religion, tends to inform the curriculum. The question at stake is to what extent, and in what ways, children and young people can gain educational benefit from the study of religion. This becomes the kind of religious education which has as its principal objective the humanisation of the pupil, that is, making a contribution to the moral and spiritual development of the pupil. This approach may also be called edification. In the first two kinds of religious education, learning religion and learning about religion, religion is taught for its own sake, whether as an object of faith to which the children are summoned, or as an object worthy of critical study. However, in the third kind, learning from religion, the central focus switches to the children as learners. Religion itself has become instrumental to the humanisation process. It is because, in this third kind of religious education, the main concern is to make a contribution to the education of the children that this third kind may be described as educational religious education (Recep Kaymakcan. “Religious Education In Modern Turkey In The Context Of Freedom Of Religion Or Belief.” *Teaching for Tolerance and Freedom of Religion or Belief: Report from the Preparatory Seminar held in Oslo December 7-9, 2002*. Eds. Lena Larsen and Ingvill T. Plesner. Oslo: Oslo Coalition of Freedom of Religion or Belief, U of Oslo, 2002).

<sup>130</sup> The Creation Atlas, which attempts to counter Darwinism with a religious explanation, was handed out to high school teachers for free. When it was found that students at a high school in Istanbul were praying en masse during school hours, the Director of Education said, ‘There is freedom of religion and conscience’, which caused great commotion in the media and in secularist circles. On a list of ‘100 basic books’ recommended by the Ministry of Education, some titles had been Islamicised/Turkified. For instance, Pinocchio’s carpenter father Gepetto was changed to Galip Dede, and Heidi’s father Alm to Alp, names that have Turkish connotations. In 2008, five imams were tasked with giving religion education courses in a school in Izmir, due to a shortage of teachers. Finally, in the Chief Prosecutor’s 2008 petition to ban the AKP on the grounds that it had become ‘a focal point in anti-secular activities’, there was a paragraph claiming that republican reforms had been ignored in Religion Culture and Morals textbooks and that the books contained Islamic teaching and superstition, rather than a study of religion culture.

articles, Kaymakcan takes Christianity as an example and briefly examines how other religions have been presented in primary school textbooks, both before and after the revisions. Kaymakcan finds that the new understanding of religion education is exemplified in the presentation of Christianity in the revised primary religion education curriculum.<sup>131</sup>

He argues that the new curriculum supports the teaching of non-Islamic religions, and the purpose of teaching them is explained as follows: “By gaining basic knowledge and understanding other religions by pupils, they will contribute to the development of more tolerant attitudes towards the followers of other religions”.<sup>132</sup> He also states that the increased inclusion of other religions in the curriculum should bring greater tolerance to a globalizing world.

More specifically, Kaymakcan argues that one of the significant developments in relation to the content and new educational approaches can be seen in the presentation of Christianity in the textbooks. Firstly he recalls that the old textbooks used to give a classification of the religions as divinely (*semavi*) or non-divinely (*semavi olmayan*) originated. The divinely originated religions were then further subdivided into distorted (*bozulmuş*) or undistorted (*bozulmamış*) religions.<sup>133</sup> In this classification, Christianity was considered as distorted, divinely originated religion. From the beginning, this connoted prejudice against Christianity. So Kaymakcan’s first argument is that this classification of religions in the new textbooks has been removed. This change can be considered a significant positive step for the understanding of Christianity and other world religions. Secondly, he finds that the new textbooks contain more material on non-Islamic religions. Under the previous program, Christianity was studied during the sixth year of primary school. Since the revisions, it has been presented in grades six, seven and eight at secondary school. Thirdly, in addressing ethical issues and values, the new textbooks refer to and quote from the Koran as well as other Scriptures, including the Bible. With this approach, the new textbooks highlight points of ethical agreement between religions, rather than conflicts. Lastly, Kaymakcan argues that in contrast to the old textbooks, the new books make reference to contemporary issues, such as missionary works. The activities of missionaries have been recently discussed in the Turkish media, and the new textbooks present them in a descriptive and objective manner.

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<sup>131</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Religious Education Culture in Modern Turkey.” *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*. Eds. Marian de Souza et al. Vol. 1. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006, p. 458.

<sup>132</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Christianity in Turkish Religious Education.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999), p. 291.

<sup>133</sup> “Distorted” (*bozulmuş*) refers to the common perception among religious scholars in Turkey and thus in the Turkish society that Judaism and Christianity has lost their original forms.

In sum, Kaymakcan finds that the new primary religion course curriculum and textbooks have gone some way to developing ‘non-confessional’ religious education in Turkey.<sup>134</sup> He thinks that the new curricular approach to Christianity indicates that the traditional Islamic perspective about *ahl al-kitab*<sup>135</sup> has now been limited, with priority given to common points between Islam and Christianity. For Kaymakcan, the new curriculum has marked a significant shift from a focus on traditional religious material to a more modern and pluralistic presentation of other religions.

Although it is important to acknowledge such positive developments in the representation of non-Islamic religions in the curriculum, it does not necessarily follow that these structural changes have, in and of themselves, promoted a culture of interdenominational peace in Turkey. Even in the new textbooks, there is no attention given to the contemporary and living dimensions of Christianity. Such questions as what it means to be a Christian in our time, how Christians’ faith influences their family and social life, the relevance of their faith to Christian pupils—all these questions are neglected. Instead, Christianity is taught from a historical point of view, as if no Christians actually reside in contemporary Turkey or may even share the same classrooms with Muslims. Moreover, Kaymakcan’s assertions that missionaries are presented in an objective manner may require further scrutiny.<sup>136</sup>

On 17 May 2002, the AKP Gaziantep MP Nurettin Aktaş submitted a written question to the Minister of Education, in which he asked if school children were being exposed to missionary activities in various social environments.<sup>137</sup> The Minister of Education, Necdet Tekin, replied that in the curriculum for seventh graders, there was a section addressing missionaries, their working methods, and any possible detrimental effects on the country caused by missionary work.<sup>138</sup> He argued that Turkish school children were being made aware of the ‘dangers’ around them, and were fully equipped to fight those dangers.

In addition to this specific examples given above, the needs of Christians and Jews

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<sup>134</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Religious Education Culture in Modern Turkey.” *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*. Eds. Marian de Souza et al. Vol. 1. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006, p. 458.

<sup>135</sup> (Arabic: “People of the Book”). In Islāmic thought, those religionists such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians who are possessors of divine books (i.e., the Torah, the Gospel, and the Avesta), are distinguished from those whose religions are not based on divine revelations.

<sup>136</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Religious Education Culture in Modern Turkey.” *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*. Eds. Marian de Souza et al. Vol. 1. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006, p. 458. Although it might be true of some textbooks that he analyzed, it is seen that stance towards missionaries have always been negative which reveals itself promptly in the views of the Minister of National Education after the curriculum has been revised and changed.

<sup>137</sup> Turkey. T.B.M.M. *Tutanak Dergisi* 21 (2002), p. 199.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

continue to be omitted from discussions of the new religion education programs.<sup>139</sup> The main objective is to enable *Muslim* children to get to know people from other religions. The concerns and needs of non-Muslim children attending state schools, rather than minority schools, have received little mention in discussions of the new curriculum. Once more, the fact that non-Muslims have their own schools (and own religious education in their schools) seems to have granted the curriculum planners immunity from criticism. Moreover, we now know that during the process of textbook revision, there was no consultation of Christian or Jewish leaders in the preparation of material on their faiths.

Representing the views of many non-Muslims, years before his assassination, Hrant Dink, declared that he objected to religion education in schools. He thought it preferable for each faith to provide its own religious education.<sup>140</sup> But as a general trend in Turkey, voices such as Dink's were not taken seriously by the officials. In 2007, a Turkish Alevi parent brought a case concerning compulsory religion education to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In 1990, the ECHR had already decreed that the Ministry of Education decision to offer exemption from the course to Christian and Jewish citizens was not sufficient to guarantee the freedom of belief.<sup>141</sup> The seven judges presiding over the court case, one of whom was from Turkey (Riza Türmen), added that such practices contributed to discrimination. They also argued that if people wanted to be exempt from the classes, this was an indication that the syllabus did not treat different belief systems equally.<sup>142</sup> In addition, the system of exemptions forced parents to declare their beliefs to the school management. These more detailed arguments (concerning the discriminatory effects of compulsory religion education on non-Muslims) went unnoticed by many observers who thought the case centred on a specific Alevi demand.

Needless to say, religion education in Turkey does not take place in a vacuum. A more objective and sympathetic representation of non-Islamic religions can only increase social tolerance if it is accompanied by a less biased account of history in the general education

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<sup>139</sup> One exception to this trend is a symposium prepared by the Directorate of Religious Education in 2001, where besides international scholars, religion education teachers of non-Muslim minority schools in Turkey were also invited to discuss the new methodological approaches in religion education. The Chief Rabbi and Greek Patriarch of Turkey made the opening speeches at the symposium. However, due to the late notice of the symposium, actual religion teachers of the non-Muslim schools could not make substantial contributions, although they were pleased to be invited. This event could be seen as a goodwill gesture towards non-Muslims, but not necessarily a full engagement with non-Muslim problems with regards to religion education, especially given that this initiative was not continued. (This impression was related to me by Beyza Bilgin, during our interview)

<sup>140</sup> Burçin Belge, "Religious Education at Temples." *Bia News Center* 17 Oct. 2003. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

<sup>141</sup> Erhan Üstündağ, "Alevi Organisations Urge for Lifting Mandatory Religion Courses." *Bia News Center* 25 Aug. 2008. Web. 1 Jan. 2009.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*



program. In June 2008, the General Staff of the Turkish Army prepared a six-part documentary, which was sent to all primary schools under the authority of the Ministry of Education.<sup>143</sup> The DVDs were to be shown to children “at a convenient time”, and schools were to report back on the effects of the film.<sup>144</sup> The full title of this documentary is “Sarı Gelin: The Inside Story of the Armenian Problem” which, as the title indicates, deals with the events of 1915, based on the official Turkish interpretation of the events. The documentary incited protests by NGOs and individuals. Some observers have claimed that the nation-wide showing of such propaganda material in schools will instil hatred in a whole generation. The “International Hrant Dink Foundation” applied to court demanding an end to school screenings of this controversial documentary about the Armenian issue. The History Foundation has also denounced the film as propaganda, rather than a documentary.<sup>145</sup> The foundation stated that “the documentary was using a language of hostility and discrimination to sow seeds of hatred in a society where hostility towards Armenians existed already”. Aris Nalçı, a writer for the Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos*, reported that the Armenian schools, which have also received the DVDs, are worried.<sup>146</sup> Some heads of school have said that their teaching staff watched the film and decided that it would create trauma among children.<sup>147</sup>

Following the media controversy, the Ministry issued a declaration claiming that the film had been intended for the viewing of teachers only, although in some schools children had already been exposed to the film. Apart from this high profile event, there have been other, less known incidents. For example, a private school in Istanbul known for its high number of non-Muslim, especially Jewish students, issued a homework assignment to its fifth graders.<sup>148</sup> Assigned to a Turkish literature class, the homework consisted of questions on a piece of reading. The subject of the reading was internal and external enemies of the Turkish Republic and it included the following statement: “In order for a nation to survive, there must exist a unity of culture, language, *religion*, country, history and ideal...Our country, Turkey, is faced with many external threats, mostly coming from our neighbour countries.”<sup>149</sup> The piece goes on to enumerate these threats among which are “Israel’s invasive policies” and problems with Greece about Cyprus and the Aegean Sea. After this homework was distributed, some

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<sup>143</sup> “Children Exposed to Racist Propaganda Movie.” *Bia News Center* 18 Feb. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> “Stop Screening Discriminatory Documentary to Pupils.” *Bia News Center* 19 Feb. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

<sup>146</sup> “Children Exposed to Racist Propaganda Movie.” *Bia News Center* 18 Feb. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> The reading piece which is in Turkish can be found in the Annex.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

Jewish parents sent petitions to the school government. The school issued an apology for assigning material that “was also very contrary to the principle of the school that considers different cultures a richness”.<sup>150</sup>

Although these last examples are not about religion education *per se*, they serve to remind us that specific changes to the religion course curriculum will not bring greater tolerance unless attitudes embedded in the larger curriculum are also revised. To put it more simply, it will not be sufficient to teach students about Christianity and Judaism in an “objective” manner in the religion course, if students continue to confront prejudices outside that classroom.

#### **4.3.2 Religion education and Alevis**

In the Turkish context, the notion of cultural pluralism has often been ignored in traditional school culture. For a long time after the introduction of the religion course, the Alevis were not mentioned at all in the curricula. During the 1990s however, the growing Alevi movement allowed for greater questioning of discriminatory policies. The practice of compulsory religion education in schools became one of the most pressing issues for Alevis, who demanded the abolition of the course altogether, or the right to be exempted from it.

Until the latest changes in 2005 the curricula did not allow for an Alevi understanding of Islam, a situation severely criticized by some Alevi groups who demanded that Alevi Islam must also be included in the curriculum and textbooks.<sup>151</sup> In general, the lack of Alevi information in the curriculum had been legitimized on the basis of three arguments.<sup>152</sup> Firstly, there were claims that the different Alevi groups lacked a consensus about their community, making it hard to determine which version of Alevism to include in the course. Secondly, the religion education curriculum was not intended to promote denominational religion instruction. Therefore, information from the Koranic perspective should underline common points in Islam rather than its diversity. Therefore, there was no reason to teach the Alevi branch of Islam. Thirdly, if Alevism became a part of religion education in schools, this risked leading to a separate Alevism lesson.<sup>153</sup> Inevitably, this thinking constituted discrimination against Alevi students and a violation of the student-centred pedagogy that 1997 curriculum

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Not all Alevis demand this, arguing that it would be better if the state did not intervene in any kind of religious education in a secular country.

<sup>152</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Pluralism and Constructivism in Turkish Religious Education: Evaluation of Recent Curriculum of Religious Culture and Ethical Knowledge Lesson.” *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 7.1 (Jan. 2007), p. 205.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

claimed to have established. The denial of the existence of Alevi students in classrooms rather suggests that the course planners have opted to ignore religious diversity in schools. In order to understand the changes taking place in this period, it will be helpful to look at a court case that put its stamp on relations between Alevis and the Turkish state.

#### 4.3.3 Hasan Zengin's case <sup>154</sup>

Hasan Zengin's 2004 European lawsuit against Turkey generated public discussions that tell us a great deal about Alevi views of compulsory religion education, the position of the Turkish state, and finally, the European Union's perspective.

In 2001, Hasan Zengin, as a parent of Eylem Zengin, submitted a request to the Provincial Directorate of National Education (the Directorate) at the Istanbul Governor's Office, seeking to have his daughter exempted from Religion Culture and Morals courses.<sup>155</sup> Pointing out that his family were followers of Alevism, he claimed that under international treaties (for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), parents had the right to choose the type of education their children were to receive. He also alleged that the course in question was incompatible with the principle of secularism and was not neutral, as it was essentially based on the teaching of Sunni Islam. All his requests were dismissed, lastly on appeal before the Supreme Administrative Court in a judgment on 5 August 2003, on the basis that the course in religion culture and morals was in accordance with the Constitution and Turkish legislation.

After exhausting all internal remedies, Zengin took his case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in January 2004, and demanded his daughter to be allowed exemption from religion courses. In his application to ECHR, he demanded that "as compensation, Turkey make its education system and national laws compatible with Article 2 of the Additional Protocol of the European Convention of Human Rights".<sup>156</sup>

Zengin maintained, in particular, that the way in which the course was taught infringed his daughter's right to freedom of religion, and her parents' right to ensure her education in

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<sup>154</sup> Detailed information about this court case can be found at : European Union. European Court of Human Rights. *Case of Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey*. 1448/04. 9 Oct. 2007. Web. For the summary, see: "Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey." *Netherlands Institute of Human Rights*. Utrecht School of Law, n.d. Web.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Erhan Üstündağ, "ECHR: Compulsory Religious Education Violates Rights." *Bia News Center* 10 Oct. 2007. Web. 10 Jan. 2009. Article 2 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Additional Protocol of the "European Convention on Human Rights" reads as follows:

No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

conformity with their religious convictions as guaranteed under Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 (right to education) and Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>157</sup> The applicants notably alleged that the course syllabus lacked objectivity because it gave no detailed information about other religions and it praised the Sunni interpretation of Islamic faith and tradition.

On 15 November 2004, the Turkish state presented a defense containing twenty articles in which it demanded the dismissal of the case. Briefly, the state argued that the classes in question had been drawn up for the purpose of promoting understanding, tolerance and respect among pupils from differing backgrounds. Secondly, the state challenged the applicants' allegation that instruction in religious matters was based on the Sunni understanding of Islam. It argued that in the classes on religion culture and morals, no specific instruction was provided on the doctrine and rituals of a particular religion; general information was given about various religions. Thirdly, the state claimed that the mere fact of providing children with teaching on the Muslim faith did not contravene the Convention, so long as the lessons were taught in an objective, pluralist and neutral manner. Fourthly, the state tried to legitimize the absence of information about Alevi in the curriculum by arguing that the syllabus did not include material on the *mezheps* of Islam or the *tarikats* (religious orders). In other words, no other groups were included in the syllabus, and therefore the argument was that the Alevi should be no exception to this. The government also argued that knowledge of the Alevi faith, which seemed to belong more to the area of philosophy, required more in-depth teaching. Thus, information on this topic was given in the ninth grade (the first year of upper secondary school).

The state also defended making the course compulsory, stating that this was a means to protect children from myths and erroneous information, which gave rise to fanaticism. Moreover, Jewish and Christian pupils were exempted from these lessons under the Treaty of Lausanne and decision no. 1 of the Supreme Council for Education (see paragraph 18 above). During the hearing, they also indicated that if individuals professing atheism wished to be exempted, the authorities assessed their request.

The state also pointed out that the teaching was provided under the supervision of the

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<sup>157</sup> Article 9 of the "European Convention on Human Rights" provides:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

administrative courts, which strictly monitored compliance with the principle of secularism. In addition, teachers responsible for primary school classes were trained in universities and had obtained diplomas in the discipline of “knowledge of religion culture and morality”. Teachers responsible for these classes at secondary level had a Master’s degree from a faculty of theology. And finally, according to the government, it was clear from the Court's settled case law that the preparation and content of curricula fell within the discretionary power of the state. Consequently, Article 2 of Protocol No.1 did not enable parents to object to this state prerogative. Otherwise, it would be impossible to put in place institutionalized education.”<sup>158</sup>

However, the Court made its decision in favour of Zengin. First of all, it determined whether the course was taught in an objective, critical and pluralist manner. To that end, it examined the Ministry of Education's guidelines for lessons in religion culture and morals, along with school textbooks submitted by the applicants. It found that the syllabus for primary schools, the first cycle of secondary school, and the relevant textbooks gave priority to knowledge of Islam over that of other religions and philosophies.<sup>159</sup>

In particular, the syllabus included a study of the prophet Mohammed and the Koran. Pupils had to learn several *suras*<sup>160</sup> from the Koran by heart and study, with the support of illustrations, daily prayers. They also had to sit written tests. The textbooks did not just give a general overview of religions, but provided specific instruction in the major principles of the Muslim faith, including its cultural rites, such as the profession of faith, the five daily prayers, Ramadan, pilgrimage, the concepts of angels and invisible creatures, and belief in the other world. On the other hand, pupils received no teaching on the confessional or ritual specificities of the Alevi faith, even though its followers represented a large proportion of the Turkish population. Although ninth grade pupils received information about the Alevis, the Court, like the applicants, considered that insufficient to cover the life and philosophy of the two great Sufis, who had had a major impact on the movement. In sum, the Court found that the religion culture and morals lessons could not be considered to meet the criteria of objectivity and pluralism necessary for education in a democratic society and for pupils to develop a critical mind towards religion. As for the specific case, the Court agreed that the lessons did not respect the religious and philosophical convictions of Ms Zengin’s father.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> European Union. European Court of Human Rights. *Case of Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey*. 1448/04. 9 Oct. 2007. Web.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> *Sure*, or *sura* is the Arabic term for “chapter of the Koran.” These are traditionally ordered in roughly reverse chronological order, with Madinan *suras* coming first and Makkan ones last, for the most part.

<sup>161</sup> “Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey.” *Netherlands Institute of Human Rights*. Utrecht School of Law, n.d. Web.

Secondly, the Court examined whether appropriate means existed in the Turkish education system to ensure respect for parents' convictions. Following a 1990 decision by the Supreme Council for Education, it was possible for children "of Turkish nationality who belong to the Christian or Jewish religion" to be exempted from religion culture and morals lessons. That decision clearly suggested that the lessons were likely to create conflict (for Christian or Jewish children) between the religion instruction given by the school and their parents' religious or philosophical convictions. Like the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Court considered that the situation was open to criticism: if the course was intended to be about different religious cultures, there was no reason to make it compulsory for Muslim children alone.

The fact that parents were obliged to inform the school authorities of their religious or philosophical convictions was an inappropriate way to ensure respect for freedom of conviction. Moreover, without clear guidelines, the school authorities always had the option of refusing exemption requests, as in Ms Zengin's case. Consequently, the Court found that the exemption procedure did not provide sufficient protection to those parents who considered the course to be in conflict with their values. That was especially true for non-Sunni parents, where the exemption procedure involved the heavy burden of disclosing their religious or philosophical convictions. Indeed, the Court pointed out that forcing non-Muslim children to announce their religious beliefs in order to be exempt from classes was a violation of rights. Accordingly, the Court concluded that there had been a violation of Article 2 of Protocol No.1. Thus, the ECHR found Turkey guilty in the appeal by Hasan Zengin and his daughter Eylem, who had sought exemption from the religion courses because of their Alevi beliefs.<sup>162</sup> This meant in practice that Turkey either stopped making religion courses compulsory or ensures that the syllabus treated all belief systems equally. The decision was met with enthusiasm by Alevis and gave encouragement to Alevi parents who shared Zengin's views and wanted their children to be exempted from the course.<sup>163</sup>

The court case also made its way into the European Commission Reports for the years 2006, 2007 and 2008. In 2007, the report declared that Turkey should bring its education system and domestic legislation in conformity with the ECHR. In 2008, an Alevi Federation petitioned the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, complaining that this judgment was still not being implemented. The 2008 report included claims by the Alevi

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<sup>162</sup> European Union. European Court of Human Rights. *Case of Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey*. 1448/04. 9 Oct. 2007. Web.

<sup>163</sup> "Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey." *Netherlands Institute of Human Rights*. Utrecht School of Law, n.d. Web.

federation that in the new Turkish textbooks, material on the Alevi was superficial and in some places, misleading. In March 2008, in two other cases, the Council of State decided that children of Alevi families were entitled to exemption from religion education classes.

Although the Turkish government showed great reluctance to implement the decision of the European Court, there was clear pressure to revise religion education curricula. In this sense, the European influence on Turkey has been advantageous for Alevi demands. In addition, the Turkish media began covering reports of Alevi students who were bullied by their teachers during the religion education classes. For example, there were reported cases of bullying of students who did not fast during Ramadan.<sup>164</sup> Such events captured public attention, while some critics demanded that the Ministry of Education and other state officials condemn such behaviour and dismiss any teachers who behaved in this way. Various NGOs initiated projects aimed at improving the quality of religion education in Turkey. The Education Reform Initiative (ERI) has been one of the most vocal projects working to reform religion and schooling through a participatory process with different stakeholders, including non-Muslim and Alevi scholars. In March 2005, they published the principles and policy recommendations that emerged from these discussions.<sup>165</sup> They argued that confessional religion education should be optional and organized within the framework of formal education, although there have been different recommendations on how and where to conduct such courses. Proposals included formal education institutes, summer courses, community education centres or TV programs. As can be seen, school classrooms were not seen as the best place to conduct confessional religion education. Moreover, the ERI argued that the content of the optional confessional course should not conflict with the content and philosophy of the non-confessional course on Religion Culture and Moral Education. In addition, the optional confessional courses should be taught by teachers possessing a university degree and pedagogic training. Their salary should not be allocated from the state-budget. As for the existing compulsory course on religion culture and moral education, the ERI believed that it should be totally revised. The compulsory course should be based on a secular understanding that promotes neutrality between the state and *every* religion and sect. Thus they argued that religion education should be optional even in its revised version, and in order to protect the rights of parents wanting their children to receive confessional education, the state must arrange that education, preferably outside the school classrooms.

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<sup>164</sup> “Ramazan'da Alevi Öğrenciyi Dayak” [“Beating of an Alevi student during Ramadan”]. *Star Gazetesi* 7 Dec. 2007.

<sup>165</sup> “Religion and Schooling in Turkey: The Need for Reform.” *Education Reform Initiative* Mar. 2005. PDF file.

Although these recommendations (declared in 2005) did not materialize immediately, they were influential in changing the opinions of some people. In the curriculum introduced in 2005, the Ministry of Education decided to include material about the Alevi in grades nine to twelve.<sup>166</sup> As Kaymakcan notes, the topic ‘Alevism’ appeared in the assigned readings in the new curriculum.<sup>167</sup> There are now nine short readings in religion textbooks in the entire secondary curriculum. In grade twelve, the material on Alevism includes ‘Sufistic Comments in Islamic Thought’ together with sufistic thoughts; the *Bektashi* order, *Yesevism*, *Mevlevim* and *Ahism*. In grade eleven, the *Caferi* sect (Twelver Imami shiism), along with the other four Sunni sects, is taught through ‘The Comments in the Islamic Thought’. Also at the same level, the topic ‘Love for the Ehl-i Beyt in our culture’ is included in ‘The model Muhammad’. It is clear that Alevism and the *Bektashi* order have been given some attention in secondary religion education. Compared with the previous curriculum, even this limited inclusion of Alevism can be seen as a positive step but it is of course not sufficient with the presentation of internal pluralism in Islam.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the Ministry of Education did not consult Alevi leaders when these changes were made, causing considerable resentment among Alevi intellectuals.<sup>169</sup>

In the first week of June 2007, at the start of the election campaign, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with Professor Ergun Özbudun, a liberal and highly esteemed political scientist and constitutional lawyer. Erdoğan asked Özbudun to form a group of experts to prepare a draft “civilian” and “democratic” constitution, as promised in the AKP election manifesto.<sup>170</sup> After the 22 July general election, one of the key constitutional issues was the organization of religion education. In the draft constitution prepared by the committee under Prof. Ergun Özbudun, two alternatives were presented.<sup>171</sup> The first was that religion education become an elective class, which parents or students could request. The second alternative was that religion education remain compulsory, but that students could ask to be exempted from the lesson. When the AKP Central Executive Council debated the draft, it

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<sup>166</sup> Turkey. MEB [Ministry of Nat’l Educ.]. *Orta Öğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı* [Curriculum for Secondary Education Religion Culture and Morals Course]. İstanbul: Devlet Kitapları Müdürlüğü, 2005.

<sup>167</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Pluralism and Constructivism in Turkish Religious Education: Evaluation of Recent Curriculum of Religious Culture and Ethical Knowledge Lesson.” *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 7.1 (Jan. 2007), p. 207.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> See: Yaman, Ali. “Uluslararasılaşan Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersleri Sorunu ve Konunun Almanya Boyutuna Genel bir Bakış” [“The internationalized issue of religion culture and moral courses and a general look at its Germany Dimension”]. *Journal of Anatolian Folk Beliefs Kirkbudak* 3.11 (Summer 2007), pp. 38-46.

<sup>170</sup> Şahin Alpay, “What does the Draft Constitution Signify?” *Today’s Zaman* 1 Oct. 2007. Web. 2 Mar. 2009.

<sup>171</sup> Erhan Üstündağ, “Silenced by Compulsory Religion at School.” *Bia News Center* 24 Sept. 2007. Web. 2 Mar. 2009.



favoured the second alternative. However, the draft constitution had already ignited furious opposition led mainly by the representatives of the judiciary, higher educational authorities, and of course the CHP. All of these groups questioned the initiative for a new constitution, believing it paved the way for dismantling the secular regime. The “secularist” media has even gone as far as defining the initiative as a step toward turning Turkey into Malaysia.<sup>172</sup> Although the draft contained a much stronger commitment to freedom of conscience and belief, “secularists” believed that it would allow radical Islamists to shift the focus of religion education away from the state-monitored school system, by making it easier to open private Koran courses.<sup>173</sup>

The two alternatives posed in the draft did not satisfy “secularists” who believed that if the religion course remained elective but was still given in classrooms in a confessional manner, then opting out would have social costs for those seeking exemption from the course. Critics of the plan saw the new course as regressive, both in the pedagogical sense and in terms of the historical trajectory of religion education in Turkey. However the draft did not materialize and these discussions have faded away as time passed by.

The year 2008 witnessed several NGO events and projects that targeted the biased nature of religion education in Turkey and its impact on Alevis. In August 2008, having inspected the textbooks for the compulsory “Religion Culture and Morals Course”, Turkey’s Education and Science Workers Union (Eğitim-Sen) announced that the textbooks still solely reflected Sunnite teaching.<sup>174</sup> At the same time, Alevi organizations launched a series of campaign activities demanding implementation of the court decisions and removal of the compulsory religion courses. Protesting the government’s reluctance to take on board the EHRC and State Council decisions, the Alevi organizations spread their activities to the whole nation.<sup>175</sup> Sit-ins took place in Istanbul, Izmir, Adana and Malatya. In addition to the Alevi Bektashi Federation (ABF) and the Pir Sultan Abdal Culture Association (PSAKD), many unions, professional organizations and institutions supported these activities.<sup>176</sup>

In spite of these criticisms by prominent NGO leaders, the Minister of Education said that the court decrees referred to the old curriculum. He claimed that since the curriculum had changed, the mandatory religion course would continue.<sup>177</sup> According to him, as Alevism was

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<sup>172</sup> Şahin Alpay, “What does the Draft Constitution Signify?” *Today’s Zaman* 1 Oct. 2007. Web. 2 Mar. 2009.

<sup>173</sup> Gareth Jenkins, “New Draft Turkish Constitution Foresees Easing Restrictions on Religious and Ethnic Identity.” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 4.169 (13 Sept. 2007). Web.

<sup>174</sup> “Sunnite Teaching Dominates Textbooks for Religion.” *Bia News Center* 15 Sept. 2008. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

<sup>175</sup> “Alevi Reaction to Mandatory Religion Courses Spreads.” *Bia News Center* 29 Aug. 2008. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Erhan Üstündağ, “Alevi Organisations Urge for Lifting Mandatory Religion Courses.” *Bia News Center* 25

included in the new curriculum, this decision by the ERHC was inapplicable. Thus the AKP government chose to hide behind its superficial revisions to the textbooks and curricula, described by some Alevis as cheap “make-up” to look better in the eyes of Europe. In other words, the Alevis did not believe the improvements to be sincere or sufficiently thorough. Thus, according to Alevi leaders, the AKP understanding of freedom of belief has been confined to the requirements and wishes of its own constituency, the Sunni community.

In February 2009, a collaborative project of the History Foundation (TV) and the Turkish Human Rights Foundation (TIHV) resulted in a report entitled “Human Rights in School Books”.<sup>178</sup> In the framework of the project, 139 primary school books (covering grades one to eight) were examined for militarist, nationalist, unscientific, gender biased and racist passages. Out of the many textbooks from various subjects, the most problematic one was the Religion Culture and Morals textbook. The researchers found even the newer, revised versions to contain biased material. Despite these various setbacks, a 2009 court decree in Antalya gave hope to those parents who did not want their children to attend the controversial, compulsory religion courses. A family applied to the court for an exemption from the course for their fifth grade daughter.<sup>179</sup> In their application, the family asked for the exemption because the religion education given was “against our decision, religious beliefs and philosophical outlook.”<sup>180</sup> The Antalya Third Administrative Court decided in favour of the applicants, arguing that forcing the child to take the class could “lead to irreparable damage.”<sup>181</sup> It is revealed that, as of yet, the school of the student has not offered an exemption, but this is expected to happen within the next couple of months. The district administration of Muratpaşa in Antalya, against whom the suit was brought, is said likely to appeal, but even so, the student was granted with the right to be exempt from the class until the case is solved.

Thus as can be seen the period that has started with 1997 and which was mostly under the AKP’s rule witnessed many developments, events, law suits, boycotts etc with regards to religion education. In this sense, it can be argued that the era was productive in exposing people to many different views and opinions on the matter. The fact that many NGOs and projects were done on the issue made the arguments put forward in this era more insightful and result oriented, especially when they are compared with their ancestors from the 1950s

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Aug. 2008. Web. 1 Jan. 2009.

<sup>178</sup> “New School Books for Peace and Equality.” *Bia News Center* 2 Feb. 2009. Web.

<sup>179</sup> “Parents Should Protest Against Religious Education Classes on Philosophical Grounds.” *Bia News Agency* 28 Feb. 2009. Web. 16 Feb. 2009.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

and 60s, which were most of the time lacking these qualities. As of 2009, compulsory religion education is still given place in national curricula. However, current debates about it cast doubt on the legitimacy of the course with the way it is conducted now in terms of the course's ability to promote peace among various religious groups. Thus, the course is in the spotlight, which makes it prone to, hopefully, positive changes in the coming years, especially with respect to rights of non-Muslims and Alevis.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the complex history of religion education in the Turkish state system between 1980 and 2009. In the first section, I looked at the period between 1980 and 1997 which brought momentous social and political developments, marked first by a *coup d'etat*, then by the rise of Islamist currents against the backdrop of globalization. Reflecting on the effect of these processes on non-Muslims and Alevis, I have closely examined the context in which religion education became compulsory through legislative changes to the Constitution. I also examined the impact of these changes on groups other than Sunni-Muslims. I introduced evidence to show that during this period, the negative effects of the compulsory course on religious minorities were not sufficiently scrutinized by civil society organizations or other institutions. Such scrutiny only occurred later, in the 2000s. Thus the period after 1997 brought efforts by various individuals and groups to change the course structure, in order to make it more inclusive and respectful of other communities. Mostly went under the AKP's rule, education was Islamicized in this period. At the same time, several EU bodies and European NGOs monitored Turkey's human rights record. These evaluations naturally made the topic of compulsory religion education an issue. Although this forced the government to take action against the course with the way it was designed—recall the curricula revisions or for instance the plans to change the compulsory nature of the course in the new draft constitution—not much has been changed as of 2009. Alevi activism was also of paramount importance in bringing attention to the course, reviving many Turkish NGOs, and reflecting on wider human rights/minority rights concerns.