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**Compulsory religion education and religious minorities in Turkey**

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## **Chapter 6**

### **Listening to the voice of religious minorities**

In this final chapter, I examine my arguments in relation to ethnographic material. Specifically, I integrate the expressed views of religious minorities reflecting on their experiences in compulsory religion education. This is an endeavor I consider to be valuable in two respects. First, individual stories have the power to disrupt comfortably settled meta-narratives and as will be seen, the stories recounted in this chapter cast a shadow on the declared secularity of the Turkish state. Secondly, in bringing people's experiences out into the open, we begin to glimpse what is at stake at both the individual and societal levels when educational policies are formulated with a singular or idealized notion of the 'citizen'.

Given the minuscule number of religious minorities in Turkey, it is arguable that the incorporation of religious minorities into the existing religion education system would be logistically difficult and even unnecessary, as minority populations reside mainly in specific cities and therefore, are not dispersed across the whole of Turkey. There are some 23,000 Jews in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> According to an official from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, as of 24 March 2007, the number of Greeks in Turkey is about 4,000.<sup>2</sup> There are just over 60,000 Armenians living in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these numbers constitute a rather small portion of the religious demography of Turkey, where approximately 99.83 percent may be described as Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

However, to focus solely on numbers would be to miss the larger mentality behind religion education policies, which gives Sunnism priority over other beliefs. Moreover, if we include Alevis in our assessment, then state religion education policies lose even greater ground, because the number of Alevis is much higher than the combined numbers of Armenians, Jews or Greeks in Turkey.<sup>5</sup> Although the precise number of Alevis is still a matter of contention, estimates range from about 10 percent to as much as 40 percent of the total

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<sup>1</sup> This, and below statistics are taken from the official website of Minority Rights Group International: World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. *Minority Rights Group International*. N.d. Web. 20 May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> "Orthodox-Christians." World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. *Minority Rights Group International*. N.d. Web. 20 May 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "Armenians." World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. *Minority Rights Group International*. N.d. Web. 20 May 2010.

<sup>4</sup> United States. Dept. of State. *Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report 2008*. Web. 20 May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> "Alevis." World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. *Minority Rights Group International*. N.d. Web. 20 May 2010.

population.<sup>6</sup> An academic study launched in November 2006 estimates that Alevi constitute about 11.4 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup> However, the Alevi-Bektaşî Federation claims that there are around 25 million Alevi in Turkey, nearly 33 percent of the population. Moreover, unlike Jews, Armenians and Greek Orthodox, Alevi are dispersed all around the country.

Although it is important to view the larger demographic picture, this chapter gives priority to words rather than numbers. In this way, we add to our understanding of what is at stake and what is lost when a portion of citizens does not fit into regulating discourses of the 'ideal citizen', and the policies devised according to those discourses.

## 6.1 Methodology

To pursue the ethnographic objectives of this chapter, I conducted 16 open-ended, semi-structured interviews with Alevi and non-Muslims who agreed to share their experiences with me about compulsory religion education in the Turkish education system. While half of the interviews was conducted with Alevi, the other half was conducted with non-Muslims. The interviews were anonymous and were not set at a fixed number from the outset of the process. It is not the objective of this thesis to produce an exhaustive quantitative study. However, my interviews successfully gathered together a substantive volume of anecdotal and qualitative evidence. This evidence has proved more than sufficient for the identification and analysis of a range of important themes and problems. I found my interviewees in two different ways. With Alevi, I emailed several Alevi online forums explaining my research and interviewing people in the Netherlands and Turkey. As for non-Muslims, I contacted people by making use of my personal networks in Istanbul. By opting not to differentiate between various religions among non-Muslims (such as Jews, Armenians and Greek Orthodox), but to group them under this single heading, my rationale was two-fold. First, my preliminary interviews revealed that the experiences of Jews, Armenians and Greek Orthodox showed strong similarities that would prove difficult to disentangle, given the scope of this research project. Secondly, in the eyes of the state too, the identity of non-Muslims had generally eroded, especially in the context of religion education. Acknowledging the risk inherent for this kind of an analysis to reproduce official state discourse which tends to oversee different ethnic/religious identities of these religious groups, since part of my aim in this chapter is also about elucidating the state's perspective on the three main ethnic minorities, I consciously avoided going into details of the particularities of each

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

ethnic/religious group and their unique relation with the religion courses.

My main criterion for selecting non-Muslims was attendance at state or private schools available in the Turkish education system, rather than attendance at minority schools.<sup>8</sup> This is due to the fact that in minority schools, students are able to study their own religions and are exposed to a different education system than the one I examine here.

As for age and time period, I did not limit my field research to a fixed generation. My initial aim was to talk with people who were subject to the course after 1980, the year it was made compulsory. Although compulsory religion education (DKAB)<sup>9</sup> came into effect after the 1980 military coup, two of my interviewees had experience of the course before 1980 not in their *lise* years, but in *ortaokul* years.<sup>10</sup> Their testimony must be seen in that context, but does give added historical perspective to the interview material. Therefore, I opted to include them in my analyses as their experience fit with the broad context of my ethnographic research.

In this qualitative research, my analysis of the interviews has been informed by the method described as ‘thematic content analysis’, adapted from Glaser and Strauss’s ‘grounded theory’ approach and from various works on content analysis.<sup>11</sup> My aim was to produce a detailed and systematic recording of the themes and issues addressed in the interviews and to link the themes and interviews together under a comprehensive category system.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, it is not possible to make claims regarding the experiences of all non-Muslims and Alevis. Instead, my intention is to identify common patterns in the local and specific experiences recounted to me in the interviews. In this way, the ideas and concerns of Alevis and non-Muslims, specifically in relation to compulsory religion education, may receive a wider hearing in Turkey.

Since the 1990s, Alevi views have become more apparent than those of non-Muslims. The Alevis have established a number of organizations that put this controversial issue on

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<sup>8</sup> The Turkish Education system divides schools into two: public or private (that are established by private enterprises).

<sup>9</sup> From here on, I use the word ‘DKAB’ (abbreviation of ‘Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi’) to mean religion courses.

<sup>10</sup> In this section, I retain the Turkish equivalent for high school that had two parts until 1997; *orta* consisted of 6th, 7th, 8th and sometimes 9<sup>th</sup> grades, and the *lise* lasted until 12<sup>th</sup> grade. After 1997, the *orta* part of high schools merged with primary schools (*ilkokuls*) that lasts for 8 years, constituting compulsory education in Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> See: Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine, 1967; Berg, Bruce L. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1989; Babbie, Earl. *The Practice of Social Research*. 3rd ed. Belmont (CA): Wadsworth, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Burnard, “A method of analyzing interview transcripts in qualitative research.” *Nurse Education Today* 11.6 (1991), p. 461.

their agenda. When I started this project in 2007, there was a proliferation of newspaper articles about the unjust treatment that Alevi students were experiencing in these courses, both structurally and sometimes physically at the hands of some teachers.<sup>13</sup> As noted in Chapter Four, one Alevi parent took the issue of compulsory religion education to the European Court of Human Rights and won his case; this legal victory received wide media coverage.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, following a lawsuit brought by two parents demanding that their children be exempted from the religion course, the State Council decided in favor of the parents and found the course unlawful given the actual course content.<sup>15</sup> The AKP opposed the decision of the State Council, arguing that the content of the course was changed in 2002 and later in 2007, and that the changes made to improve the quality of the textbooks were not taken into account in the State Council ruling.<sup>16</sup>

Today, the quality of this inclusion is still under attack by Alevis, who interpret these various government acts and decisions as superficial appeasements. They continue to demand the abolition of the course, arguing that the state still asserts its own version of Alevism, not the one that is actually practiced in Turkey. It can be argued that after the 2000s, the course's legitimacy was almost always discussed in regard to the Alevis and their specific demands. These discussions have not addressed the situation of non-Muslims, as they 'officially' hold the right to opt out of the course.

This right, granted to religious minorities in 1990, has proved to be ambiguous and arbitrary in its application. Nonetheless, it has rendered the course justifiable by the state and left it relatively unchallenged by the public, especially given the minuscule numbers of non-Muslims remaining in the country. This poses a number of problems for non-Muslims. In order to claim exemption, they must assert their religious identities to school governments; most of the time they are expected to leave their classrooms and friends during the course hour; finally, the pedagogical content of lessons and textbooks can also be problematic. These dimensions of the course, which remain largely invisible, are put into the spotlight in a book by Yahya Koçoğlu titled *Azınlık Gençleri Anlatıyor (Minority Youth is Speaking)*. My own

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<sup>13</sup> "Alevi diye öğrencisini dövdü" ["The teacher beat his student because he was an Alevi"]. *Hürriyet Gazetesi* 8 Dec. 2007; "İçinizde Alevi var mı sorusu insan hakları ihlali sayıldı" ["The question of 'are there any Alevi among you?' is treated as a human rights breach"]. *Haber Aktüel* 7 Dec. 2007.

<sup>14</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. 15 Jun 2010. See also: "Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey." *Netherlands Institute of Human Rights*. Utrecht School of Law, n.d. Web.

<sup>15</sup> "Danıştay: Din Dersi hukuka aykırı" ["Council of State: religion courses are against the law"]. *Hürriyet Gazetesi* 4 Mar. 2008. See discussions in Chapter 4, section 4.3.2.3.

<sup>16</sup> Umay Aktaş, Salman. "Çelik: Zorunlu Din Dersi Mevcut Müfredatla Sürer" ["Çelik: Compulsory Religion Course lasts with the current curriculum"]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 5 Mar. 2008.

research project drew inspiration from Koçoğlu's work, which consisted of 46 interviews conducted with non-Muslim youths about their identities and problems in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> In that book, I encountered a number of moving passages where individuals reflected on the exclusionary practices they experienced as a direct consequence of the religion courses. It was interesting to see that the same course, which personally did not leave any particular memories in me apart from being a course whose existence I took for granted just like any other course, in many cases could and did have different implications for people who were non-Muslims and Alevis.

## **6.2 Findings**

With all these discussions in mind, I present my findings under four main headings: (I) "The Religion Courses", which examines the structurally different procedures encountered by non-Muslims in relation to these courses. These may include enforced procedures as well as ones that are more discriminatory and disorganized in nature. (II) "Reactions of religious minorities to the courses" looks at how non-Muslims experience the fact of encountering these different procedures in the same classroom as their Muslim classmates, how the course could be a potential source of stress, and finally, how they approached the course and came to terms with it. (III) "The experiences of students" questions the views of religious minorities on two important elements of the course: teachers and textbooks. (IV) "Alternative visions of religion education" gathers minority views of what might constitute an ideal religion education in Turkey and examines these views in relation to debates about secularism.

### **(I) The Religion courses**

#### **(i) Enforced religion education**

In the official history of compulsory religion education, the assumption is that before 1982, the courses were optional for everybody and that it was after that period that the courses became compulsory for all, with the exception of non-Muslims who, because of minority rights guaranteed by the Lausanne Treaty, were exempt from the course. However, my findings suggest that not only are there cases where non-Muslims were subject to religion education long before the 1980s in *ortaokuls*, but there were also cases (after 1982 and even today) when these exemption rights of non-Muslims have not been honored.<sup>18</sup> What *has*

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<sup>17</sup> Yahya Koçoğlu, *Azınlık Gençleri Anlatıyor* [Minority Youth is Telling]. Istanbul: Metis, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Hacer Foggo, "Çocuğa Zorunlu Ayrımcılık" ["Compulsory discrimination to the child"]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 24

changed is that non-Muslims in Turkey are now more assertive in demanding their rights. There are regular complaints to school governments as well as domestic and international legal proceedings, making it harder for school governments to handle this issue in an arbitrary manner.<sup>19</sup>

A non-Muslim interviewee told me that during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades, he learned *namaz* and *sures* just like everybody else. Then in 1963, he had to take the course again in *orta 1* (sixth grade). However, when he went to *orta 2* (seventh grade) in 1964, they told him that he could no longer take the course:

While I was in *orta 1*, they [teachers/school administration] made us memorize prayers. I tried to memorize a couple of them, but then the teacher told me that I don't have to do that anymore. Despite the course being compulsory, for that one year they showed tolerance to me. I don't know why.

As will be remembered, it was after 1956 that the religion courses found themselves in *ortaokul* curricula, in an optional way. This particular interviewee was not informed in 1963 that he had the right to opt out from the course. After 1980, this right, which had been granted to all people regardless of religious identity, was rescinded. It was not until 1990 that it was granted to non-Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

Those interviewees who attended school between 1980 and 1990 confirmed this practice. One informant told me that he was obliged to take these courses in the 1982 and 1983 academic years, and fulfill all the obligations of the course, including the memorization of prayers, although it was obvious from his name that he was Armenian.

However, another interviewee who went to high-school between the years 1981 and 1987 commented that,

I thought that I had to take all of the courses. I did not know that we had the right to be exempted from it [religion course]. A friend of mine told that to me later.

This informant attended school in Istanbul and it is clear that in her school, it was possible for non-Muslims to claim exemption from the course. Nonetheless, the interview suggests that this right remained ambiguous and was not something everybody knew.

After 1990, with the Ministry of Education decree, the course was made elective for non-Muslims. However, in primary schools the courses remained compulsory for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. A Jewish informant said “the courses in the primary school were compulsory, we

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Oct. 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Adnan Avuka, “Mardin’de Süryani öğrenci zorla din dersine sokuluyor” [“Assyrian student is being forced to take compulsory religion course”]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 20 Nov. 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Hacer Foggo, “Çocuğa Zorunlu Ayrımcılık” [“Compulsory discrimination to the child”]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 24 Oct. 2004.

learned the life of Muhammad, *hicret, mekke, medine* etc.”

In sum, there was confusion surrounding the application of course regulations and possibilities for exemption, especially in the transition period between 1980 and 1990. As will be seen in the next section, there was lingering confusion as to how to treat non-Muslims in state schools, especially in relation to the exemption and how it might be put into practice.

## **(ii) Submitting the Petition**

As will be remembered, between the years 1982 and 1987, when the religion course was first made compulsory, non-Muslims were forced to take the course. It is also known that the Ministry received a number of letters from non-Muslims demanding an end to this practice. However, it was not brought to an end until 1987, with the decision of the Board of Education and Discipline (*Talim Terbiye Kurulu*).<sup>21</sup> The same decision was repeated in a decree passed in 1990 and signed by the Minister of Education, Avni Akyol, the Minister of Culture, Namık Kemal Zeybek, the Minister of National Defense, Sefa Giray, and the Minister of Labor and Social Security, İmren Aykut. The decree ordered that Christians and Jews who were not attending minority schools would be exempt from religion courses, with the condition attached that their religious statuses must be documented. However, if they wished to attend the courses, they were to bring a petition from their parents declaring that wish.<sup>22</sup> As can be seen, there was ongoing ambiguity between 1982 and 1990 about how to handle non-Muslims who attended state schools.

However in 1992, contrary to what was decided in 1990, it was determined by the Ministry of Education that non-Islamic religions were also to be introduced in the curricular framework of the course. This decision was explained in the *Tebliğler Dergisi*, the decree that was sent to all schools nation-wide<sup>23</sup>:

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 the pupil's faith and culture and it will enable them to behave more tolerantly and sensitively

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<sup>21</sup> “Bakanlık'tan 'seçmeli' din dersi uyarısı” [“‘Voluntary’ religion education warning of the minister”]. *Zaman Gazetesi* 28 Sept. 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Hacer Foggo, “Çocuğa Zorunlu Ayrımcılık” [“Compulsory discrimination to the child”]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 24 Oct. 2004.

<sup>23</sup> *Tebliğler Dergisi* (Communications Journal) is a biweekly journal which reports all Ministry of Education decisions since 1939.

(sympathetically) towards followers of other religions.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, article four of the decree stated that Jewish and Christian students attending schools other than minority schools should not be made to recite and be taught prayers and topics of *Kelime-i Şahadet*, *Kelime-i Tevhid*, *Besmele*, *Amentü*, *Ayet*, *Sure* and *Namaz*. Therefore they cannot be held responsible for these topics in evaluating their academic performance.<sup>25</sup> Thus, this decree may be seen as an explicit conversion from the premises of the 1990 decree that stated that Christians and Jews were to be exempted from the course. Unfortunately, not much is known as to why this change was made in 1992. I would argue that it only increased the uncertainty surrounding the question of to how to handle non-Muslims in religion courses.

This history shows us that there has been a procedural ambiguity as to how non-Muslims might actually opt out of the courses and confusion persists even today. The procedure is so unknown, and so often left to the discretion of school governments or even to teachers, that there is no identifiable pattern to practices on the ground. In order to understand the views of non-Muslims about this ‘petition submitting’ procedure, I asked my interviewees what they remember of the practice. Their answers underlined the ongoing confusion:

I think we [religious minorities in the class] did something like giving a petition, once when I entered to the high school and nothing further.

Yes we [religious minorities in the class] did give a petition. Actually the petition was not present at the first day of school and they made us take the course for that one day. We were really angry. We did not interpret this as an anti-Semitic act though.

As far as I remember, since our religion is seen from our ID cards, we were automatically exempt; I remember that we had to give petition if we actually wanted to take the course.

I do not remember giving something like a petition in the beginning of the school year, I was exempted, I can’t remember how though.

I don’t remember giving petition. My teacher knew [his identity], I was the only non-Muslim in the classroom, he told me that I could be exempted from the course; I think there was some kind of a declaration from the Ministry of Education about this. He told this orally to me, but I said I want to take the courses anyway.

Now, somebody had to tell us about this right, right? What good is it to me if I don't know that right? With whom should I talk about this, especially at that age? We did not

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<sup>24</sup> Recep Kaymakcan, “Christianity in Turkish Religious Education.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999), p. 283.

<sup>25</sup> Hacer Foggo, “Çocuğa Zorunlu Ayrımcılık” [“Compulsory discrimination to the child”]. *Radikal Gazetesi* 24 Oct. 2004.

have it at that time [referring to courage and a culture of demanding rights, etc.]. It might happen now, but I know if I gave a petition to the school during those days I would be kicked out of the school.

It was the case that sometimes parents submitted the petition to school administration and sometimes the administration would say something about the issue. But in our case they did not say anything, or say that this was our right. Maybe they waited for our demand, or maybe it is like this: there are 100 students in the school, out of which only one Armenian. He can be so easily forgotten.

In subsequent sections, the discriminatory aspects of procedures followed by school administrations and teachers, in handling petitions for exemption, will be examined in greater detail. Specifically, the inept management of these measures had implications for the psychological well-being of students.

### **(iii) The weight of religion courses on exams, and on grade point average (GPA)**

Before 1980, the course was taught only one hour per week. Currently, DKAB is offered for two hours per week, from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade until the 12<sup>th</sup>. It also has a bearing on the student's GPA. As the content and assessment of the course have been relatively easy in comparison to subjects like math or physics, there has been an incentive to do well on this course in order to raise one's GPA. Altan argues that religion teachers do not give low grades as a policy and that in some cases when they do so, they can be warned by school administrators, at the request of parents protesting that the school is not a religiously tracked one.<sup>26</sup>

On this issue, some of my interviewees touched upon two points that deserve attention. First of all, the course was seen as a useful means to raise GPAs. According to some informants, this encouraged a number of non-Muslims to take the course, although this was not interpreted as a discriminatory practice. "It was a course that helped my grades," said one Armenian interviewee, talking about her incentives for taking the course.

The other issue concerned *lise* entrance exams and the place of DKAB questions in them. Up until the 1997-1998 academic year, primary education lasted five years, after which everybody could take two exams, one of which was for private colleges and the other for *Anadolu liseleri*.<sup>27</sup> In those exams, 5 questions out of 100 multiple-choice questions came

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<sup>26</sup> Özlem Altan, "Sanctifying the State: Universal Religious Education in Turkey." *Proceedings of the 'Constructs of Inclusion and Exclusion: Religion and Identity-Formation in Middle Eastern School Curricula' conference at the Brown University Watson Institute for International Studies, Providence, 14-15 Nov. 2003.* Web.

<sup>27</sup> "Anadolu Liseleri" is a specific term used in Turkey to indicate public or state high schools that admit their students based on the Nationwide High School Entrance score. Anatolian high schools were established as

from DKAB. However, pupils could also answer five additional social science questions in lieu of the religion questions. This proved a beneficial option for those who could answer both sets of questions, as it allowed answers to be crosschecked. These exams put a great deal of pressure on children, especially those aiming to enter the best high schools in Turkey. Although non-Muslims were exempted from the course, the competition for places pressed them to learn about DKAB and how to crosscheck their answers. On this issue, I was told:

It was our parents who made the course compulsory. Why? 5<sup>th</sup> grade was a time where you had to prepare very well for the entrance exams. In that exam you had questions about religion, not about *namaz* and etc. but questions about Islamic history. We had the right to opt out of the course but we actually took the courses and learned that stuff as well.

Who would dare not to do those questions even if we were exempted from the course? Out of 100 questions, you had to do at least 96, let's say, to enter to Robert College.<sup>28</sup>

My daughter said 'I can do those 5, 6 questions. This is not a reason to give up my own religion'. We grew up here learning to accept everything as a minority.

Nowadays people take the course only to raise their GPAs, and maybe learn a religion that they do not want to learn at the first place. Some people work harder for other courses taking this into account, but is it worth it? In the exams for the entrance to the colleges<sup>29</sup> you have parts about religion. If you want exemption from that, you get a lower mark, which is why my daughter always did the religion questions. I don't understand why questions about religion have to be there, that is something different, my religion, something that belongs to me. Why use it for to enter to the colleges, it is something not nice.

It is clear that after the 1990s, the DKAB course, originally designed for Sunni Muslims, was adjusted in order to accommodate non-Muslims. These adjustments came in response to non-Muslim challenges that not only questioned the course, but constituted a larger critique of the much-vaunted 'secular' character of state education. However, in the light of conflicting decrees, these efforts failed because there was no consistent procedure for handling the needs of non-Muslims. Most of the time, responses to non-Muslim needs and requests were handled at the discretion of school administrators who lacked a coherent set of policy guidelines. The end result was often unsatisfactory for non-Muslims. In relation to these uneven processes, the larger issue of "how" to assert one's identity through exemption was fraught and confusing.

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alternatives to expensive private schools teaching in foreign languages.

<sup>28</sup> Robert College of Istanbul is one of the most selective, independent private high schools in Turkey. It accepts equal numbers of female and male students who have scored in the top 2% of the National Examination to Private High Schools.

<sup>29</sup> In the Turkish usage, 'college' (*kolej*) refers to established, well-known and private high schools and not to the university level education as it connotes in English.

There was an ongoing potential for discrimination embedded in all of these regulations and practices. Finally, the assessment of the course in the entrance exams has tended to create incentives for non-Muslims to study the course content of DKAB.

## **(II) Reactions of religious minorities to the courses**

### **(i) Exposure to a different procedure in the same classroom**

In Turkish primary schools, due to the examination system explained in the previous section, the curriculum of DKAB was also a concern for non-Muslims. Where non-Muslims wanted to sit entrance exams, the general solution was that they would remain in the classroom and listen to the DKAB course, rather than leave the room, as was generally the case in *orta* or *lise* education. If the topic was about the specific teachings of Islam, then the pupils found themselves in a difficult and exposed situation:

Even in Işık Lisesi<sup>30</sup>, students had to memorize prayers, except us [non-Muslims]. This was our difference. We studied the parts which were necessary to do the questions in the high school entrance exams but when our friends said those prayers out loud, we would sit in the classroom, wait our turn to pass, and then it [meaning the session of prayer telling] would finish.

Everybody was saying prayers out loud. When it was my turn, I said ‘I don’t know’. My teacher then said ‘pass’. He knew I was a Christian. We [teacher and herself] both knew it. But, because I wasn’t exempted from the course, things like that happened. I was stressed out then, when I said I don’t know.

In the above case, when I asked my interviewee how her classmates reacted to the teacher’s remark, she replied that her friends did not know she was a Christian when she went to the primary school and nobody asked her a specific question about this episode. She said:

I think the teacher followed a transparent [a good, accommodating] way. He included me in the oral exams [prayer memorization and recitation] so acted as if I am one of ‘them’ but then he also said ‘you can pass’. My oral exam grades were never zero. So

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<sup>30</sup> Işık Lisesi is known for its close affiliation with Sabbetais (*Sabetaycılar*) in Turkey. The school was established by Sabbetais in Salonica in 1885. Its original name was Fevziye Mektebi which was later changed to Işık Lisesi, with the approval of Atatürk on 17 December 1934. The school attracts the attention of many Jewish parents in Turkey today. “Sabbateanism, known in Turkish as *dönme* (“convert”) or *Selanikli* (“being from Salonica”), refers to the followers of Sabbatai Zwi, a Jewish rabbi from İzmir (Smyrna) who declared himself the messiah in the seventeenth century, initiating a messianic movement that divided the Jewish community. The forced conversion of Zwi to Islam under Ottoman rule resulted in the emergence of a double identity based on dissimulation. Of Jewish origin, Zwi’s followers maintained a Muslim identity in public and a Sabbatean identity in private, in their base in Salonica. Descendants of the Sabbatean community of Ottoman Salonica now live mostly in Turkey, in the city of Istanbul. Officially Muslim Turkish citizens, they have been ardent supporters of the Turkish modernity project. Yet the question of origins continues to rankle, even as the community has largely assimilated.” This passage is retrieved from Leyla Neyzi. See: Neyzi, Leyla. “Remembering to forget: Sabbateanism, national identity, and subjectivity in Turkey.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44.1 (Jan. 2002), p. 144.

that's how I interpret his actions now.

As it will be remembered, in *orta* school too, non-Muslims sometimes had to take the DKAB courses and when that was the case, their treatment in classrooms repeated their primary school experiences. However, at this further stage of schooling, both the non-Muslim student and his friends would have greater awareness of identity differences and the meaning behind the statement 'you can pass' regularly made by teachers.

When I was in *orta* 2 or 3, I remember they [teachers/school administration] told me that I could opt out of the class. Then a friend of mine had a bicycle. Sometimes I would audit the course just out of curiosity and sometimes I would ride my friend's bike. In the classes I audited while they were doing stuff he[teacher] would not ask me, and pass me, this was the application... My teacher for instance would not make me say prayers. That bothers you too... you like it [that he doesn't force you], but on the other hand you feel different from them [classmates], which is something bad. That is why I am for a course on religions and not for a religion course as the way it is now. It is not good that some people learn it thoroughly and some people don't. It is a procedure that accentuates your difference. You feel it and you are annoyed by it.

My findings show that where religious minorities were present in DKAB classes, the procedure described above was often followed. This approach to treatment of religious minorities who attend DKAB could be seen as a form of tolerance, since they are not forced to recite prayers and fulfill the course obligations like Muslim students. The problem, however, is that it accentuates the fact that these students are 'religiously different'. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that in Turkey, there is not yet a settled culture of respecting 'difference'. This dual treatment of students within the same classroom is clearly troubling to some students, as can be seen from informants' descriptions of the stress experienced at the exposure of their religious identities. Moreover, sometimes teachers chose far more explicit methods to mark non-Muslims in classes, by asking students to state their religious difference in front of other classmates.

Our religion teacher made the opening speech, he asked, 'Which are the ones that don't take the course?' Then we, four people, raised our hands.

On this same issue, one of my interviewees asserted that it was very problematic to force children of that age to make a religious statement. He said:

You have to make children of age 9 or 10 make a religious statement. I am Jewish. Okay. But do the others [other classmates] know what that is? It might be on that very day that the other child learns that something called Judaism exists.

To oblige people to announce their religions and beliefs is to create a conflict with what might be called 'religious privacy'. The right to religious privacy is not set out explicitly in leading

human rights declarations, but it may be derived from the right to religious freedom in conjunction with the right to privacy (CCPR Art 17)<sup>31</sup>. Thus the Human Rights Committee (HRC) finds that “no one can be compelled to reveal his thoughts or adherence to a religion or belief”.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, Moe argues that the introduction of religious school subjects, especially compulsory ones from which parents may wish to claim exemptions, would seem to compel parents and children to reveal their religious adherence or non-adherence.<sup>33</sup> That is exactly the case in Turkey where, as my interviewee has stated so clearly, students are made to reveal their religious affiliation at a very young age. The next section will examine the ways in which the course has the potential to be a source of unease and anxiety for religious minorities.

## **(ii) Course as a source of stress**

Most of the interviewees were bothered by the fact that through the course, one’s identity is revealed in front of fellow pupils. Whether one enrolls for DKAB (as in the case of Alevis and non-Muslims) or only audits the course intermittently, the experience can be a source of stress for students. My findings indicate that especially during the teenage years, students want to be part of a group and any experience that places them ‘outside’ the group can prove difficult. This factor makes the decision *not* to take the course a costly one for non-Muslims. One interviewee commented:

I took the course in *orta* 1 and *orta* 2. After that I learned that I had the right to be exempt from the course. I did not want to do that [be exempted], thinking I could get negative reactions from my classmates and teachers... Some of my friends knew my identity and some didn't. I took the course from the beginning. My friends had the presumption that I would take it in the coming school years. During those times nobody would leave the classroom. What would I do? I would have to wait at the corridors of the school, I could not leave the school anyway, and then I would have to face other teachers’ questions as to why I am not in the classroom and so on, that is why I preferred to take the course. I was the only Christian in the classroom, because of that feeling that I was the only one, I did not want to leave the classroom and to stand out. If there was one other like me, it would have been possible, maybe, to go out of the classroom, but I chose to stay in the classroom and to act in concert with the whole class.

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<sup>31</sup> United Nations. UN Human Rights Committee. *CCPR General Comment No. 16: Article 17 (Right to Privacy), The Right to Respect of Privacy, Family, Home and Correspondence, and Protection of Honour and Reputation*. 32nd sess. 8 Apr. 1988. Web. 28 May 2010.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations. UN Human Rights Committee. *General Comment 22, Article 18*. 48th sess. 1993. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1 at 35 (1994). Web. 10 May 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Christian Moe, “Religious Human Rights and Religion in Schools.” *Proceedings of the International Conference ‘Religion in Schools: Problems of Pluralism in the Public Sphere,’ Kotor, Montenegro, 22-24 Apr. 2005*. PDF file.

I was told by my interviewees that when non-Muslims audited the courses, out of curiosity or because there was nothing else to do, they would feel anxious, as though they were intruding in a world where they did not belong:

When I audited the course I would feel really tense, and anxious. I would say to myself, 'What is the topic today going to be? Are people going to talk about things differently because of my presence?' Or would it [her being in the class] have no affect at all?

Sometimes these concerns and feelings of anxiety transferred to parents, who did not want their children to face unpleasant confrontations with teachers or other students. I argue that this parental concern may be heightened by larger cultural memories of ethnic and religious minority experiences.

My parents did not really like that I audited the courses once in a while, they were afraid that something unpleasant could happen. Like, the teacher could say something and then I would then feel bad and I would then talk back to him and so on.

The same arguments are valid for Alevis who, before 1980, could opt out of the course along with Sunnis. An Alevi interviewee told us that she opted out following a request, approved without difficulty, made by her father to the school government. However, on the first day of school, during a speech by the religion teacher, she changed her mind and decided to take the course:

He [the religion teacher] said something like 'We are living in a Muslim country, we are Muslims, we are all brothers and sisters, we have to learn our religion, if we don't do so, other people could assimilate us'... He probably said something of this sort about unity and stuff like that and I felt outside of that unity. Maybe it was due to my weakness, because I was a weak child in terms of psychology. I was not happy at all in the primary school. My father was a worker working abroad. He was away for those first 5 years. He had just returned when I enrolled to the *ortaokul*. I always felt fatherless; as the daughter of an uneducated mother in a rich neighborhood, who had always felt a kind of inferiority towards my teachers. I felt lacking, hurt and outcast. I wanted the *ortaokul* and *lise* to be a new beginning and to start everything from scratch. I did not want to be in that position [lonely, singled out] again. I wasn't strong enough.

Another Alevi interviewee expressed similar sentiments:

Religion courses started in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. You had to memorize prayers but you did not ask yourself why you were doing it. This is due to the fact that you are at such an age that you don't want to be outcast from your circle of friends. Because you can't express yourself fully at those ages, the most important thing is to be in a group.

This problem cannot be resolved by simply opting out of the course, as the student must leave the classroom and spend time separated from the others, in the schoolyard or

canteen. Although opting out may, at first glance, seem a fairer solution, it brings its own problems. As my interviewees confirmed, leaving the classroom for that particular course and then returning for the next class was not always desirable. It tended to accentuate the 'otherness' of religious minorities and again exposed students' identities to their classmates and teachers, creating a divide between non-Muslims and Muslims:

I was exempted from the course. Yet, I audited a couple of DKAB courses just because you had nothing to do when you leave the class. What we did then, was to sit in the class and listen to the teacher. Sometimes the teacher would say 'Children today we are going to rehearse prayers. If you want you can go out'...He was not like forcing us to go outside the class but he would say like that and we would then leave.

I remember that it was annoying to leave your classmates and leave the classroom. I remember it [that experience] like that. It felt like I couldn't communicate with the things they say in the course. On the contrary, religion should be something that unites. Shouldn't it be? It [the course] does its opposite. It chases you [non-Muslims] out of the classroom. They tell us to leave the class. They didn't say it to us. But it was expected from us that we leave. We would leave [the classroom] like that. In fact, it is weird to go outside the classroom. At that age, you still have group psychology. Because of this, you feel annoyed. Although the subject matter [course content] does not concern you, the fact that you are excluded from it, makes you feel uncomfortable. Of course when we returned to class again, we didn't see our classmates gazing to us in a bad way because of the things they learned. We continued on from where we left off... But still that break or discontinuity disturbs you deep inside.

Exemption made you remember your religion, identity. It reminded of me being a Jew in the normal course of a school day where you kind of don't think about it at all.

### **(iii) Acceptance or questioning of the course**

In the case of Christians and Jews, the response to DKAB was mainly one of acquiescence, whereas for Alevis, the experience of the course was a bitter one. Christian and Jewish responses were informed by collective memory of the unfortunate historical events that left a mark on perceptions of identity, and on minority relations with the larger Turkish society. "There is no way I can do something about it, as a Christian...Who are we to change this system?" said one of my interviewees, clearly indicating a sense of being 'outside' public discussions about the DKAB course and how it might be improved. This was reiterated by another interviewee who said, "The people who are going to change this system are 'secular' Turks. This is not our problem". Another informant showed her awareness of problems with the DKAB, but also some resignation in the face of those problems:

We were born in this country. You learn to accept things in a certain way when you are really small. We learned that we can not speak our language out loud but can only speak it at our homes. We were raised like this. My grandchildren will also do this [speaking mother tongue at home and Turkish in public life], therefore I cannot even

imagine how it could be otherwise. People who had protests against religion courses and other issues etc. left the country. Of course it is not normal [the fact that you have religion courses], but you accept it, if you go to state schools you accept to do 5 or 6 DKAB questions in the high school entrance exams or if you want to learn your own religion you have to go to minority schools. We accepted it. We know we can't change a thing. If we want to live here, we accept things in a certain way. My ancestors have done so, we did so, my grandchildren will do so... People who strongly oppose these practices have already left Turkey.

“We didn't question the course, the worse could always happen”, stated yet another interviewee, indicating a widely held perception that discrimination against religious/ethnic minorities in Turkish social life is inevitable. The fact that the religion courses contain problematic elements in terms of secularism and equality is not seen as a ‘serious problem’. It is clear from all of these comments by interviewees, that they situate the courses in the larger context of Turkish minority history.

In sum, the general approach to the DKAB adopted by non-Muslim students has been to try to ‘settle’ within the existing situation. The development of a serious critique of the course seems to surface only at later ages, and even then, there is evidence of some acceptance of the course:

I didn't go into a questioning process. I didn't have a critical gaze back then. I tried to learn my religion from my family.

I took the courses for granted. We never asked why we did nothing in those times when they [Muslims] had their religion courses. But now I think that many opportunities could have been offered or created.

I had never questioned it. I am doing it now, at the age of 35.

During those times, rules were rules. I accepted it [the course] and did not question it at all, ‘Just like the history course I have to take regardless of my liking it, I have to take this too’, I thought to myself. The children of those times did not know developing a critical gaze at things, children of today can do that better.

There is a huge difference between my thoughts about the course today and when I was a student. If it was now, I would never take DKAB. I would say ‘Why should I learn stuff that is not relevant to me?’ But we were children then.

We didn't have a strong reaction to the course because the truth was we did not want this issue to come up that often. We thought that if the issue was brought up then we would be faced with questions about our identities...

You were memorizing prayers from the book, this is something hard even if you are a Muslim. You think that it has nothing to do with you, you learn it as a course. But I am a Christian, you see, it [dealing with the course] is harder for me...

Compared to the non-Muslim interviewees, the Alevis expressed greater anger about the question of whether to accept the course as it was. Much of this anger derived from the fact of not being able to recognize themselves *as Muslims*, in a course specifically designed for Muslims. For some Alevis, questioning the course and its content began during their school years. For others, it came later in life, due partly to a lack of knowledge about Alevism and its history. Moreover, general practices regarding assimilation in Turkish society played a significant role.

The curriculum only addresses Sunnis. It is propaganda. An advertisement of Sunnism. If all of the content is about Sunnism then what is the purpose of the course? You [referring to the state] don't recognize Alevism [as a religion] but you offer Alevi religion education.

I questioned it all from the beginning but it [questioning] doesn't do any good does it? You still have to take the course. What could you do?

It was a time we played three monkeys. But when you reach the age of 16, you ask yourself 'why do I live like this'? [living out her culture discreetly].

In primary school there was no questioning, there was acceptance. There was always a discrepancy between what we were told at the school and what *dedes*<sup>34</sup> told us. After the 1990s we [interviewee and his classmates] all became leftists, Marxists and there was a constant questioning of the education system, including religion courses.

That [taking DKAB] was something I did because I was forced to. I knew it. This was a course I took to pass my classes. If it was elective, I am so sure that I would not have taken the course. The bottom line is that you have to pass your classes, even if you fail one, you can't go to the next grade. You are obliged to do it.

The teacher treated everybody like they were Sunnis. I had to memorize all those prayers because I simply had to, to be able to pass the class. I didn't care about anything else.

The course served to increase the 'assimilatory pressure' placed on Alevi students, as may be seen in the statements below. There is a clear suggestion that Alevi children were denied full experience of Alevi culture, in some cases by members of their own families in order to protect them and facilitate processes of assimilation.

During those times, Alevis were oppressed and they had a lot of fears. It was not easy to say you were an Alevi in Turkey. You still can't say it in specific places. I always knew I was different, we are Alevis, but because of the things they [his parents] had experienced, we were assimilated. Our parents did not encourage us [to live their culture explicitly], on the contrary they didn't want us to stand out. Now I hear that people are suing the state about compulsory religion education. You can do this now,

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<sup>34</sup> A *dede* is a socio-religious leader in the Alevi community. The institution of *dede* is the most important of all the institutions, integral to the social and religious organization of the Anatolian Alevis.

but back then, it was impossible.

At those times we [his Alevi friends] were not aware of the level of discrimination against Alevis. We did not know how we were different from them [Sunnis], how they were different from us etc. Because you don't know, you don't search for elements of discrimination; you don't ask why there is not more of a place for Alevis in the course.

Let me put it this way. They [school administration, teachers] made us think that there was only one true way and that was what they taught us. They shrunk my world so much that I thought everybody was going to mosques, praying, doing *namaz*. You felt you were being directed towards someplace... like everybody has to go to *hac*, everybody has to know five pillars of Islam and so on.

In this section, I examined the reactions of non-Muslims and Alevis to the DKAB course. The first issue to emerge clearly from the interviews was the methods to which non-Muslims were exposed when they took the DKAB courses, both in primary schools and later, in *orta* and *lise* schools. I found that the common way of dealing with non-Muslims during DKAB teaching and prayers, was simply to 'pass' by them in class. Although this seems to be a tolerant approach, it also entails a number of problems. First, it can be seen as a violation of the right to religious privacy. Secondly, and in direct relation to this first problem, it is potentially stressful for non-Muslims to be obliged to reveal their religious identities. In some cases, non-Muslims preferred to submit to the course rather than face myriad questions that would invariably be asked should they exercise their exemption rights. This was also a factor for Alevi students who before 1980, still held the right to exemption, along with other minority students. Many non-Muslims found the option to leave the classroom an undesirable one. I was told that it created a divide between non-Muslims and their Muslim classmates. This was particularly problematic during the teenage years when peer acceptance has added importance. Finally, given these various and complex problems inherent in the course's structure, students often felt it was better to accept the course as it was. This choice was relatively easier for non-Muslims who saw themselves outside of the discussions and problems surrounding the course. Alevis, on the other hand, experienced greater difficulties in accepting and abiding by the regulations of the course, although here too, some students opted for silent acceptance of the assimilatory policies of the state.

### **(III) Experiences of students**

#### **(i) Teachers**

Besides the textbooks, which provide the formal content of a course, the quality of

teaching is hugely important to students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral experiences and educational outcomes. In Turkey, the profession of teaching is highly respected and there are numerous expressions in Turkish that reinforce the elevated status of teachers. One well-known saying, still used by parents when they enroll their children at primary school, is as follows: "His flesh belongs to you, his bones belongs to me" (*eti senin kemiği benim* in Turkish). This is a figurative expression meaning that parents give full authority to the teacher to make the child work hard and if necessary, punish him severely. I argue that in Turkey, this frequently exaggerated submission to teachers is a legacy of the *hoca* understanding of the Ottoman period. Traditionally, the term *hoca* has been used to describe teachers *and* religious leaders, with both roles seen to be occupied by "knowing men". In Ottoman times, when the level of literacy was very low, *hocas* were exalted and treated with significant respect, formality and fear. In modern Turkey, an exaggerated reverence for teachers lingers. It is my contention that this reverence sometimes gives teachers too much immunity from criticism. Moreover, it reinforces the asymmetrical relation between teacher as source of knowledge and students as mere recipients of knowledge, a situation now increasingly challenged and criticized by new pedagogical approaches.

My interview material provides strong evidence that teachers' attitudes to children impact upon how children interpret the material covered by the textbooks. The attitudes and actions of teachers are directly implicated in whether the religion course is a positive or negative experience for students. I open here with quotes reflecting some of the more negative experiences of teachers, as described by my informants.

The first statement comes from a Christian who went to one of the well-known Anadolu *lisesi* (for girls only) in Istanbul. Here we are presented with a teacher who did not hesitate to offend a Christian student:

Once I said, 'Let me audit the course once and see what the course is about, what Islam is about'. We had this horrible teacher, the worst in the history of our school. I got permission to come to class. At that particular course, he started talking about how unlike Muslims, Christians were going to go to hell and stuff like that, although the topic of the day was totally different. To tell the truth, I had a lot of fun. Because I was supported in my life through various other channels, my psychology wasn't affected. But if you think about it thoroughly, it is an age where you could possibly be affected. We were 8 people of minorities in the class. Even my friend with a headscarf started laughing at the teacher's remarks... But think, you show an attempt to audit the course, to listen it and at that age somebody is telling you that you are going to go to hell if you do not choose Islam. This is really something bad.

The second statement is by an Alevi who went to school in Antakya, a city known for its multi-cultural population. His student years took place before 1980, but he was still forced

to take the class. In this case, the teacher's discrimination against Alevis is more subtle, yet no less damaging in the eyes of the student:

Half of the class was composed of Alevis and the other half was Sunnis. Among ourselves [classmates] we [Alevis] didn't experience fanaticism. We were friends with everybody. However, our religion teacher was a really disciplined man. That was what we thought [that he was a tough teacher to everybody]. When everybody got their grades, we realized that he was not disciplined, but he was just discriminating. How was it [his discrimination]? Let me tell you. He would implicate stuff in the class, but we wouldn't get them all, because we didn't have prejudices. Let me give you an example of how he did it. He would say 'Where are you from, from which neighborhood? Do you know Arabic? Do you go to mosques? Do you practice *namaz*? Do you go to *hac*?' which in fact he knew well that we didn't [the Alevis in the classroom]. [All these are] Questions which latently humiliates you, but of course I realized it afterwards. When I got a really low grade, like 2 or something, I understood it. I got a 2 in my report card. One time he said I will give 10 to students who can demonstrate *namaz* in the classroom. My father read Koran and he knew how to do *namaz*. He taught me everything he knew. We were only two people in the class who said we can do it. Remember you have lots of *sures*, you have to know all of them, say them consequently and do the moves. So two of us were courageous enough to do it in front of the whole class. The other girl got 8 or 9 and I got 2. But I had done it without any problems when my father was around. I returned to house on that day. My father was really anxious, because it was the only time he helped me with my courses... because he couldn't help me with my other courses. He did not even graduate from primary school. I came home, he was excited. He said 'Son, what happened?' and I said 'Daddy, I got 2'. He said 'How come?' and I said 'I don't know'. He said 'Come and show it to me'. Then I did it and he said 'You did it well'. I said 'I don't know', I asked him if I pronounced the prayers wrongly or did the movements wrong. 'No he said, 'You did it all well'. That's it. That was how I met with religion teachers. My dad was furious afterwards. Later on, [the next academic year] it was not compulsory and I didn't take it at all. There was a general impression at those times, whatever you did in religion course [as an Alevi], you couldn't pass, because discrimination had reached its maximum. There were not many [among Alevis] who could pass the course, maybe yes, [there were some] but they got the minimal grade...you would get 5 out of 10... After that incidence we didn't look back.<sup>35</sup>

The third account comes from an Alevi woman. Here we see the subtle, yet palpable power of teachers over children.

Our teacher made the opening speech. He was religion teacher. In front of the whole class he asked 'Who is not participating in the class?'. Then we raised our hands. The general application is that students who didn't take the course spent time in the school garden. My school was an all-girl school. What do you do [during those hours]? You don't do anything in those hours. I looked and saw only 4 people like me. Now I know that one of them was Armenian, her name was Selin [can also be a Muslim name], but I know now very well that she was an Armenian, the other was also Armenian, the other was Muslim and one was me. The teacher made such a speech that... It wasn't really hard, but he spoke in such a way, that you felt excluded from a group... like you

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<sup>35</sup> In the Turkish grading system from 0 to 10, 9 and 10 is equivalent to 'A' in US system, 7-8 to 'B', 5-6 to 'C' and below grades to a 'F'.

felt like an 'other'... I felt unhappy you know, I didn't like that position. The teacher then told us that we could change our minds in one week's time. I came home and told this to my mother. I said to her that I didn't feel good at all because of this situation. My mother is illiterate. She didn't want me to feel that way, excluded and oppressed. It was also the time when leftists and rightists were fighting with each other. She didn't want me to stand out. She gave me the money right away and I participated in the course without my father's consent. It turned out it was only me who did this among the four people. The next year, the course became compulsory and because these three friends of mine did not take it from the beginning they held their rights not to take it in the remaining *lise* years, where as I lost it and had to take it for all years.

Another incident indicates the ways in which children might be pressured in terms of the decision to enroll in the course:

Because I was an Armenian who actually wanted to take the course, he [religion teacher] told me if I took the course I would have to do all of the things Muslims do. So at first he was not keen on the fact that I took it. But later the same teacher harassed my brother who didn't take the course in the school corridors, by saying things like 'Your sister is taking it, why don't you take it' and so on. This is not the right approach. Every child is different, so since I took it, it didn't mean he [my brother] would take it too.

Indeed, there were a number of positive statements about the role of teachers in making the course a good experience for minority students.

We had an Alevi teacher. He would say 'Children, I have to teach you this stuff'. When he said it like this, we were very understanding towards him. He would say 'Otherwise I would be in trouble'. When we were approached like this we were also positive towards teachers.

I was really lucky with my religion teacher. He didn't force us to do anything. He didn't put pressure on us.

The fact that I took the courses as a Jew made my religion teacher happy. He was a modern man. He was actually an engineer. He said he wanted to be a religion teacher because he wanted to teach it the right way. He would ask my opinions in class. He would ask about our culture and our practices. He was happy to see me in class because he asked my opinions. Sometimes when we were talking about morality, he would ask 'How do you approach this topic?'. He had a very gentle approach. He was like somebody from my family who made you see the right path.

We had a really nice religion teacher. He was like a friend to us. He had a totally different approach. He was himself from Erzincan. He knew where we came from, that we were Alevis. He would advise us to see this [the course] as a compulsory thing. In this regard, we had to learn stuff from textbooks such as *prayers*, *suras*, five pillars of Islam, Islamic wars etc. Of course it created uneasiness, but he wouldn't put pressure to us. He would say, 'Children you're going to have an oral exam please understand me.' He would say this to us...but not when our Sunni friends were there...he would say it to us [Alevi children] in groups. We as Alevi children, 5 or 6 people, would hang around. When he found an opportunity, he would say 'Children prepare well for the

exams. It is enough if you memorize short prayers.’ His approach was really good.

I remember one teacher. In that particular class, girls had something else to do, like a choir or something like that. The teacher said to me, ‘Stay in the classroom. We will talk about manly stuff, you might also need it’. One another time, when the topic was Judaism he especially wanted me to stay in the class.

We were two Christians in the class, others were Jewish. I audited the course once because I was curious. We had really different religion teachers. Some of them were really religious. But we had a really good teacher. He would actually say ‘the course should not only talk about Islam. If you [Christians and Jews in the class] want, I can also teach you Christianity or Judaism as a separate class. He was an intellectual but he left the school in the next year.

### **(ia) Challenging the teacher**

In Turkey, before and during the 1980s, it was considered acceptable for teachers to beat children as a means of maintaining authority in the class.<sup>36</sup> Sümer and Aydın argue that the use of corporal punishment in schools had its roots in the Ottoman period, when *falaka* (striking children’s feet with a rod) had long been part of formal education.<sup>37</sup> In contemporary Turkey, the practice continues although it has become much more costly for teachers.<sup>38</sup> All of the interviewees confirmed the practice of physical violence in their classrooms, whether as recipients or witnesses of that violence. Religion teachers also beat students, however contradictory that may seem. One interviewee told me that his religion teacher beat him and that this teacher was a very harsh man. Another interviewee gave a detailed account of the methods used by his religion teacher:

Our religion teacher was a graduate of *İlahiyat*, he also did wrestling sports, he was known for his great slaps on the face. When he slapped, you would feel dizzy.

Given instances like this, for many it was impossible to challenge the teacher or enter into discussion with him. During the 1980s in particular, when the military was in charge of the country, teachers held enormous power. There were exceptions to this, related to the political climate of the region in question, or to the culture of the school. My findings showed that challenges only occurred in particular situations. One of the Alevis I interviewed, a Kurd, had

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<sup>36</sup> Dilek Gözütok, Oğuz Er, and Cem Karacaoğlu. *Okulda Dayak: 1992 ve 2006 Yılları Karşılaştırması I* [Student Beating at Schools: A Comparison of the years 1992 and 2006 I]. Online Library of Eğitim-Sen, 2006. PDF file.

<sup>37</sup> Zeynep Hatipoğlu Sümer & Gül Aydın, Incidence of violence in Turkish schools: A review, *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 21:335-347,1999, Kluwer Academic Publishers pp. 336-339 retrieved from <inhttp://www.springerlink.com/content/p34m36055r221577/fulltext.pdf> on 15-05-2010.

<sup>38</sup> For a good summary of Zeynep Hatipoğlu Sümer & Gul Aydın, see ‘Incidence of violence in Turkish schools: A review’, *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 21:335-347,1999, Kluwer Academic Publishers , p 336-339 retrieved from <inhttp://www.springerlink.com/content/p34m36055r221577/fulltext.pdf> on 15-05-2010.

spent his years at *lise* when Kurdish separatist groups were agitating in Alevi Kurdish cities. This, according to him, took the pressure of teachers on them, intimidating their Sunni teachers in great extent. He said that during that period, it was possible to initiate discussions and assert their Alevi identities in class:

Something that we [as students] developed in *lise*, is that nobody would call Caliph Ömer, Hz. [In religion textbooks the letters Hz., the abbreviation of the word ‘Hazreti’ is put to show respect to religious leaders] This includes the Prophet Muhammad too. Our teacher would get angry. But then we would tell what has been done to Ali, and Hüseyin... Another religion teacher would tell an anecdote where Ömer shares his camel with his slave in the desert. It was an anecdote to show the kindness of Ömer towards people. I would then ask, ‘Why does he have a slave in the first place?’ Another time we would discuss *houris* in the heaven, I would ask questions like if *houris* would look like Cindy Crawford and so on. Then he would get angry at me, saying that is beyond my conceptualization.

It was also more possible to challenge teachers in particular geographical locations. The incident related below took place in a wealthy neighborhood in Istanbul, where it was unlikely that a teacher would beat his students.

One time, teacher told us about the *haram*-ness of pork. I told it to my mother, she said to ask him about chickens as they eat all dirty stuff as well. The next day, I asked this to my teacher, ‘Why isn’t chicken *haram*, he eats dirty things too?’. He told me to sit down and said there are things I don’t know. Later I learned that there is something about pigs sharing their spouses and that is why...I was like this, when I found the opportunity I wanted to debate these things...

It is arguable that the quality of the teacher-student relationship, along with the democratic climate of a classroom, may be measured by whether students feel empowered to ask questions and open discussions in class, regardless of the course content. My findings showed that for non-Muslim and Alevi students, there was little evidence of such empowerment. The teacher was more or less omnipotent in the classroom, and this tended to silence children and stifle critical questioning of the course. For non-Muslims and Alevis especially, there was a feeling of ‘othering’ or invisibility that reduced the possibility of creating a genuinely democratic classroom environment.

## **(ii)Textbooks**

Bourdieu and Passeron argue that pedagogical work has the function of making dominated groups internalize values that serve the interests of dominant groups.<sup>39</sup> My interviewees seemed to acknowledge the ideological role of DKAB texts in reflecting official

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<sup>39</sup> Passeron, Jean Claude, and Bourdieu, Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage, 1977, p. 40-41.

state discourses about religion. Having examined the complex role played by teachers in religion education, it is also necessary to recognize the importance of textbooks. Indeed, the wide range of perspectives and attitudes displayed by teachers serves to underline the decisive role of the textbooks in fixing course content as a constant in all classrooms.

Altan argues that since religion teachers are generally from religious track *İmam-hatip* high schools, to which generally students from lower and lower middle class families go, and also because many of these schools have a reputation for their students' noteworthy success in university exams, in many instances the educational background of these teachers, mingled with their socioeconomic status can be readily distinguished by the students.<sup>40</sup> The students do not share the same settings; and they do not see their future in the teacher standing before them. In this respect, Altan argues that students are inclined to distance themselves from these teachers, dismissing what they have to say in class.

She argues that the discrepancy between students' perceptions of their teachers' attitudes and the characteristics of the general curriculum creates a resistance. In other words, religion teachers become the internal 'others'. The more the students feel the teacher is contradicting their initial socializations, or that he is not capable of answering their questions the more likely they are to dismiss what they have to say as nonsensical bigoted and so on. Altan found that this contrasted considerably with the actual content of the textbooks. In a sense, the material in the textbooks was unexpectedly reinforced by what the teachers said or chose not to say. As a result, resistance in religion classes is highly subtle and complex. Student indifference or resistance may be directed toward the religion teacher whose personal background and characteristics mark him/her as a clear 'other'. In this process, the larger context in which the state creates an official Islamic knowledge imbued with nationalism is left relatively unquestioned. Students simply differentiate between the written word in the text and the teacher's departures from that text. Hence the course appears to offer competing versions of the truth rather than a systematically established 'knowledge'. In this context, the students' perception of the teacher as other has the potential to steer classroom resistance towards a reproduction of official knowledge.

I think that Altan's analysis is worth mentioning here, because I believe it holds true for Muslims who take these courses, and may also have implications for non-Muslims and

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<sup>40</sup> Özlem Altan, "Sanctifying the State: Universal Religious Education in Turkey." *Proceedings of the 'Constructs of Inclusion and Exclusion: Religion and Identity-Formation in Middle Eastern School Curricula' conference at the Brown University Watson Institute for International Studies, Providence, 14-15 Nov. 2003.* Web. This point has also been made by Kaymakcan. For a more thorough information, see : Kaymakcan, Recep. *Öğretmenlerine göre Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersleri* [Religion Culture and Morals Course according to its Teachers].Istanbul: DEM, 2009, pp. 13-14.

Alevi. By directing their critical attention to the teachers rather than the textbooks, Muslim students (unknowingly) adhere to, and reproduce the existing official discourses about Islam, thereby contributing to the further marginalization of Alevi and other religious minorities.

My findings showed that for Alevi and other religious minorities, it was important to find traces of their culture in the textbooks. For example, one interviewee emphasized how good it felt to hear the name of “Ali” in the school context and to have his family teachings confirmed:

I only remember that we had to learn those prayers, and also to know their Turkish meanings. In terms of Alevism, there was nothing. One thing I remember was that the name of Ali passed in the textbook, which had made me happy. I said to myself ‘What we've been told [from family and from *dedes*] is correct, Ali exists’.

Another Alevi interviewee told me that he liked those parts of the textbooks that related stories about various prophets, something he found similar to the Alevi oral culture to which he was accustomed. Thus again, where students are able to recognize their own culture and experience in the textbook material, the course works better for them:

The only thing I remember from textbooks is that they were really boring. There was nothing about Alevism in it. It had little information about Christianity... What I liked most in the textbooks were stories about lives of the caliphs and prophets. I am a person who was raised in a culture where orality was really important. Life stories are an established culture. Epitomes (*kıssas*) are always told in our culture... What I liked was these stories but the rest was boring, all these memorization of *prayers*, how to take *abdest*...

Some Alevi were clearly offended by the lack of reference to Alevi culture and beliefs:

There was nothing about Alevism aside from the information that said Ali was the 4<sup>th</sup> caliph.

As far as I remember concept of morality was based on Koranic interpretation of morality, based on Sunnism, and everything was about Mohammad and his personality. It was like if you like him, your morality would be high. Lots of *prayers*, how to do *namaz*, the five pillars of Islam, *farz*, *sünnet*s and so on... No mention of even just the name Alevism... Teaching of Sunni Islam.

In the case of non-Muslims, again there was evidence of acceptance, even resignation, in relation to the textbook material:

I always took a glance at the textbooks, even when I was in primary school. In *orta* school I remember that the textbook said that the Old Testament had gone under lots of changes, and there were justified doubts about the testament being different from the one God had offered to Moses.

I asked this interviewee if he was bothered by this remark. He replied,

I am very familiar to the context. If you want to tell something about Judaism that is

one paragraph long, and if you put this sentence at the beginning, that means...I am really familiar with anti-Semitic texts, therefore I wasn't bothered by that. I was like 'Did they tell it because of this, or that, what are their arguments, do they take Talmud as a reference point or that?'. It just created a curiosity in me, that's it...It sounded soft to me. [meaning he was used to anti-Semitic texts and that this implication in the paragraph wasn't that biased compared to them]

It is evident from the interviews that, just like attitudes to the courses in general, the textbooks were met with broad acceptance. Non-Muslims were aware that the course addressed Muslims only and this awareness brought silent acceptance:

I see textbooks as textbooks that teach Islam. There is the historical development of Islam, Islamic ways etcetera.

Information about all religions was offered but the space allocated to them was rather small. If Islam took 10 pages, Christianity or Buddhism took 1. When telling those religions other than Islam, there was no depth. Just the very known factual information.

### **(iii) Victims of the course**

My findings showed that there was a consensus among non-Muslims and Alevis that Alevis were the major victims of the DKAB, since they did not have the exemption right, or their own schools. However, we should not underestimate the course's effects on non-Muslims. The words of an Armenian interviewee provide a snapshot of the distortions of minority identities carried in the structure and content of the course. She told me,

I thought I was the only 'other' when I was a student, as if everybody was the same and I was the only outcast. I can't decide on or say who has been the biggest victim.

As the course does not accommodate any culture other than Sunni-Islamic culture, anybody who falls outside that culture may feel victimized by classroom experience. This isolation of minority students, Alevis in particular, should not be underestimated.

My Alevi friends suffer from the course the most. They can't accept things like we do.

I think the victims of the course are Seculars, Alevis, Christians. This is [information in the religion courses] something put into people's brains by force.

It was Alevis [the victims] from that particular teacher. Their [teachers'] points of departure was really bad. You knew from the start that you couldn't get an 8 or 10 from that teacher even if you excel. At best, you could get a passing grade. Because it is written on your forehead, [that] you are an Alevi. There was a common perception. [It was that] Alevis don't go to mosques. And if they don't go to mosques they don't do *namaz*, they [thus the children] can't learn *namaz* either. They [Alevis] don't know [Islam]. They [Alevis] are Muslims but have nothing to do with Islam. They [the teachers] had an approach like this. Our grades were already given.

Because I am an Alevi, I see myself as the biggest victim but certainly besides Alevis, you have hundreds of other people who believe in different things. They have also been treated unjustly. Especially in south-east of Turkey, you have a mixture of beliefs and religions. People living there are victimized at least as I was because if they see that course like I do, then they can't also find themselves in that [course]. There is a system imposed on them and when they can't see themselves they are of course being victims.

I think Sunnis are also victims of the course. Alevis are victims as always, but Sunnis are too. If you force something on people, impose your opinions on them, teach it [Islam] in your own way, especially when they are young; then you come to Turkey's current situation, the initial aim was this.

At least we have our minority schools, despite their problematic situation, we do have them. But Alevis don't have them. There are millions of Alevis, I think they are the biggest victims.

Teachers and textbooks are the major elements that define classroom experience for students. In this section, I have tried to show the extent of the influence of teachers on students by including the good and bad experiences recounted by the interviewees. Specifically, I have suggested the ways in which these experiences impacted on their views of the DKAB course as a whole. My findings showed that the teacher's authority made resistance difficult, even where there was clear evidence of classroom discrimination against minority students. Put simply, the classroom was not a democratic environment. Textbooks provided the source of 'official knowledge' and as such, clearly addressed Sunnis and ignored Alevis. Non-Muslims and Alevis alike tend to see the Alevis as the main victims of the course. Indeed, discrimination against Alevis may be exacerbated by the fact that the course is 'supposed' to address them too, but singularly fails to do so.

#### **(IV) Alternative Visions of Religion Education**

In this final section, my main aim has been to clarify whether religious minorities believed religion education to be compatible with secularism in Turkey. In addition, I sought views of what kind of religion education might be more appropriate or indeed, what their ideal religion education might be. Finally, I asked whether they believed religion education should exist at all.

A couple of interviewees argued fervently that religion courses, especially as designed, were not compatible with Turkish secularism. An Alevi interviewee, who favored removing the courses from schools, legitimized his view by pointing out the existence of *İmam Hatip Liseleri*, institutions that already offer religious education:

I think religion courses should not exist. If you have *İmam Hatip Liseleri (IHLS)* [religious tracked schools], and they have to exist too, and you go to a common *lise*, then the courses should not exist there. You call it a secular country and then also engulf religion into your curricula. And moreover you only teach it in a particular way. What this does is it consciously extinguishes other belief systems. Definitely they [the religion courses] should not exist. Elective courses should not be an option in *common lises*. If you have IHLS, then people who want to learn thoroughly about religion can go there. If you did not have IHLS, I would have said that the courses could be elective, but if you have schools like them [IHLS] that offer religion education than DKAB should not exist.

The same concern was reiterated by a Jewish interviewee, who believed that religion had no place in the formal education system:

If there is a single atheist student in classroom, he has to hold the right not to go into that class. To think about one atheist student and his parents, I believe that these courses should not exist. We are living in Turkey. If there is a claim that Turkey is an Islamic country, then we should know it, but such a thing doesn't exist. Ideally a course like this should not exist.

There were many other interviewees who also argued that the course was not compatible with Turkish secularism. However, most of interviewees who belonged to this group thought that this incompatibility stemmed not from the *form* of the course, but from its *content*. They believed that secularism of the state did not necessarily mean absence of religion but that it required neutrality towards it. In the same vein, they argued that in the context of religion education, courses were incompatible with secularism since it imposed one belief, Sunnism, over the others.

I think that the religion education in Turkey, content-wise speaking, is not compatible with secularism because Turkey is, in its name, not a religious country. Islam is not one of its founding principles. Of course as every other nation, it [the state] can raise children in accordance with its national aims but religion is not one of those components in Turkey. Therefore I don't think it holds a right to impose any religion on a student.

First of all I think that religion course should not mean a course on Islam. I think everybody should take this course if the name of the course is DKAB...I think we [non-Muslims] should have been included in the course too, for instance seeing how different religions approach the same topic in a comparative manner, at least the bigger religions I mean...

It totally depends on the content of the course. I don't know exactly the content of the course, therefore my comments might not be a hundred percent correct but I think it is not logical to have this course if the course only talks about one religion in particular where you have to memorize prayers. From my friends, I know that textbooks talk about ethics based on a Koranic understanding of it.

We have to come to the year 2010. Why would only one religion be offered? I now

know that, people in power knew what they were aiming at with these courses. I know that all these [refers to assimilatory policies in other social realms too] are efforts to push people in one direction only, and now they are collecting the fruits of it. Their aim was this; to assimilate everybody. I have many Sunni friends. Can I abandon them? No, of course not. I can't do it due to my philosophy and culture and religion, but let me know my religion [Alevism] too. Let everybody learn theirs and also others', so that our world enlarges... You can do it [this kind of an education where people learn freely their religion] in the school. What are you afraid of?

Some of my interviewees argued that courses forced students to expose their identities in the classroom and that this exacerbated their minority status and treatment. For this reason, these informants argued that religion education should be conducted through the various religious communities. As I outlined in the previous chapters, this was an idea that came up regularly in the interviews.

There should be no coercion in religion. I think religious matters should be strictly differentiated from the state affairs. Thus, religion courses should not be a burden in school life. I think there should not even be a religion section in our ID cards. If I have to prove my Christianity I should do so by showing them my certificate of baptism but it should not be written on my card. This is how I think, but this is not how it has been since I was born. I think religion courses in formal education system should not exist. Everybody should get education from their families. If my children want to learn about Christianity I should manage to provide it through our churches etcetera. This should not affect his/her grades. That is why I think religion could well be learned through one's mosque, synagogue, church or immediate surroundings.

The state should not have a religion. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) belongs to Sunnis in Turkey. It shouldn't be like that. I cannot say that it [DRA] should cease to exist but it should be able to organize Alevis, Sunnis, Christians, everybody; or the DRA should leave all of this to religious institutions, so that state does not have a relation with religion. Why would the religion of state be Sunnism. I am also a citizen, but it tells me I am an Armenian and sees me like an 'other'. The state does not do anything for me, it doesn't support my school, my church, why is this? If I did not have minority schools there would be nothing the state does for me. What minority? I am also a citizen. You are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but you are supporting one type of citizen and not the others.

It is of course impossible to take religion out of social life. That means that social life encompasses religion, therefore it means that in societies there are institutions where information about religion is offered. People can go and pursue education in institutions; the right of the parents to raise their children in accordance with their beliefs and convictions should not be breached either. But I think existence of religion courses in either elective or compulsory format is not something compatible with secularism. I was lucky, as a Jew I did not have any problems in my schools, but I could have well had problems. It is not appropriate to force children to make a religious statement at the age of 9 or 10, at an age where children have not met with the concept of religion.

A non-Muslim interviewee agreed that institutions related to different religions could handle

religious education, although she had hesitations as to how to prevent any further encroachment on the secular state. For another interviewee, this was not an option, as he felt strongly that it would prove impossible to monitor educational institutions that operated beyond the reach of the Ministry of National Education.

I would really support an ethics, morality course because sometimes you have to get that sort of an education when you are young. Therefore maybe institutions should take care of this, yet they have to have some kind of a license to do it.

I don't think institutions can do it, if you leave this to them, then we know how they operate in Turkey, they do all sort of other things, so I think these courses should better be organized through Ministry of National Education instead of religious institutions and *cemaats*.

A couple of interviewees favored elective religion courses, although they emphasized that this option would need to overcome the peer pressure that has been prevalent in the system thus far, making it personally difficult for students to elect such courses. These concerns were based mainly on their own experiences of the course in the past. Therefore they argued that any system of elective courses must be carefully organized and monitored.

As far as I know religion is something very personal. Everybody should be free [as to learn it or not to learn it]. There are institutions, books, internet, etc [that people could learn their religions from]. Okay, Turkey is a country where most of the population is Muslim, the course can be offered too. But it should be completely elective. But this electiveness should not remain on the paper it should be genuinely implemented and abided. Because I know that if a Muslim child does not take the course, although the course is elective then he will get lower grades in other courses because of the prejudice against him. They will say to him, 'What kind of a Muslim are you?'. Their view of him will change in a bad way and the child will feel upset. Then he will say, 'Whatever, I'd better take it and not face this'...

It should not exist but a course on world religions in a history course format can be given, not a one that imposes one religion over others. If you render it elective than you know how peer pressure works in Turkey. It would be wrong to expect that kind of a stance [a stance against peer pressure] from a small child, it is the parents who will decide on this. We can't stand peer pressure, I don't know, if Alevis are going to challenge it, or lesbians or homosexuals, or anybody that is beyond 'standard', with the help of these groups, it can be challenged. I think we should challenge and propose religion courses as they exist now, because how the course is applied is at the discretion of teacher, school, the district that the child lives in.

Several interviewees elaborated on their vision of an elective course. There was a strong desire for a course that provided a general introduction to world religions. They also talked about the important role of education in promoting tolerance; specifically there was hope that social prejudice against non-Muslims and Alevis might be overcome. Another common theme was ethics, seen as something that might be included in a newly designed course. The Turkish

saying “*Agaç yaşken eğilir*” [a tree can only bend when it is young] was uttered repeatedly to underline the importance of *early* learning with regard to moral education.

If I listen to the course on Islam with my 29 classmates, because I am curious about it, the same people should also listen to Christianity. Or, if he doesn't want to [listen it], of course he doesn't but at least he knows that there is somebody offering information about it in the school environment. Up to 10 or 15 years ago people were afraid of the term Christian, they were curious about what it entailed. What is an Armenian? There are many people who do not know about it. Therefore it would be good to know that in schools they can learn about it. I mean for brotherhood, for everybody in the class. It should not be the case that only I get to learn about Islam and the vice versa does not happen. They should also have the choice to learn about Christianity. Therefore I don't think it's unnecessary. For instance I don't know much about Judaism. But I regret it, I wish it was told, it doesn't concern me or is relevant to me in the first place but still I wish I knew, I wish I knew about Buddhism too.

Ideal religion course should focus on the commonalities between religion instead of making discrimination based on religion. If you live in a country with a mosaic of people, maybe it would be more beneficial to teach common history of all of these cultures emphasizing their moral values. Not everybody gets religion education in their families, you have very conservative ones and also modern ones. Maybe in order to direct everybody towards being a good human being, it is good that a balance could be found, and then to write a textbook accordingly.

I think that this textbook should be close to every religion, otherwise you could also call the book a book on Islam. I think everybody should find something of themselves in it.

I think the book should talk about every religion, I'm not against the fact that Islam takes more place than any other religion in the book or that you have prayers in them, we are living in a country where Islam is the main religion. However, I think more space could have been allocated to other religion.

Courses should be given with the outmost care not to inject and enforce one religion to students, it should be a course that talks about every religion, Why now should I learn about Christianity at the age of 25. They should tell us that as they tell us which societies live in which places. I don't want an Alevi course either, let them teach every religion, Buddhism etcetera... Let people take good sides of every religion and let the ones that they do not like leave.

I think it should remain elective, if students want to learn it, they learn it, and if don't, they don't. I know this. For instance, do Muslim students develop bad feelings towards Christians or Alevi? I don't know, I think that the content should be like a general culture, telling religions in a comparative manner. I think school is the right place to do it but I don't know how the state is managing that in a right way.

If it is to exist then I would want something that covers all religions, since religion is such a personal thing, I think that it would be better to have something very general about religions. There is no reason to have a detailed account of religions. School is not the right place for it, something like world religions, but that too compatible with

school curricula.

In terms of religion courses, it should be religion knowledge. It should not teach me *ezan* but contain something of a morality course; it should not teach me *namaz* or the life of Muhammed. What is religion in terms of philosophy? If you could turn it into a science then it can be but the course as it is not, prayers memorization etcetera, you can't have a course like this, it should not exist I mean.

In this section, I examined the role of teachers and textbooks in the context of DKAB. The interview material showed that the actions and attitudes of teachers impacted strongly on student experience of the course, making it bearable for some, offensive for others. Student memories of the course largely depended on their personal encounters with teachers. I also argued that the overriding authority of the teacher made it very difficult for students to express themselves fully in class or to challenge their teachers.

The textbooks, which represent official state discourse on religion, constituted another arena in which the Alevis (and in some cases, non-Muslims) tried to *find* themselves. This endeavor invariably ended in failure, generating disappointment and a sense of exclusion from the course as a whole. Finally, and without wishing to minimize the difficulties faced by all the minority groups, my findings suggest that within the context of the DKAB courses, the Alevis tended to be the most disadvantaged student group.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

I wish to end this chapter with an extended comment by a Jewish interviewee, addressing the idea of non-Muslims pursuing religion education from their own religious officials during the DKAB hour in a separate class. As will be remembered from previous chapters, this was something first conceived in the 1940s, but never been put into practice.

I am now thinking... How could it be if somebody lectured us on Judaism in a separate class. It sounds so fantastic and surreal. I will go to school and somebody will talk about Judaism in Turkey. This would be a totally different life that you can't envisage right away. In that case Turkey would be a different Turkey, everybody would be different in Turkey. That is a world totally different. Where you could learn also about Alevism etcetera, where everybody could learn their own religions from people of their religion. This is totally a different world, but not an ideal one. For me an ideal world would be a one there would be no religion courses at all. If it was to be given, certainly not in this way...

I can't imagine how a world like this could exist because we are 20,000 Jews, and an organization of that sort for this amount of people, to give them this much importance and to be open like this is like a bit... It would not be bad. People would get to know them [Jews], maybe they would be Jews and not only 'minorities', then he [Muslim] would get to know Jews. In case I was taught my religion by a rabbi, I would feel important. But this is not a healthy expectation. It is like you come to Holland and in your absence people have established a party called 'people who love Seda' and they

have made flags for you...It just doesn't exist.

I know it was something thought before, but I don't think it solves anything. It would be a nice, sweet gesture, like giving a foreigner the evil eye... But the solution of Turkey does not lie there...In Turkey the number of Jewish students at the age of schooling does not exceed 5000, most of whom live in Izmir and Istanbul.

You don't have proper pavements for blind people. If you think about blind people in Turkey when you are designing pavements, then you are in a different country. There is a saying that goes something like 'a country is civilized as it gives importance to its disabled people'. Maybe it is not a nice analogy but here disabled corresponds to religious minorities in Turkey...How much you give importance to religious minorities designates your level of civilization, in Turkey; a right to opt out...

This is a remarkable statement of the sense of estrangement evinced by all the interviewees with regards to the quality of relation they have established with the state. The comment suggests that there is a surreal quality to the presumption that state religion can address the needs of Jews in Turkey. The interviewee positions himself as foreigner and Turkey as a host who only 'gestures' hospitality.

The solution to this deep estrangement does not reside only in compulsory religion education in Turkish state education system. Yet I think one has to acknowledge the course's great potentiality and subtle ways in reproducing it.