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Compulsory religion education and religious minorities in Turkey

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

This dissertation has provided a genealogy of compulsory religion education (the Religion Culture and Morals Course) in the Turkish formal education system since the late nineteenth century. The objective has been to analyze the course in relation to Turkish secular nationalism and the position of religious minorities (Jews, Christians, and Alevis). A central concern of the study has been to elucidate the place, and indeed the *agency*, of religious minorities throughout this history. This strategy makes it possible to map the ways in which minority perceptions of the religion course relate to their larger perceptions of citizenship and the Turkish state.

Assessments of Turkish secularism have been rather limited and often sidetracked by discussions of the issue of the headscarf. These assessments have bypassed the issue of compulsory religion education and its effect on religious minorities. However, knowledge of the complex relations between religion education and religious minorities is crucial to our understanding of both Turkish secularism and the limits of Turkish democracy.

Historically then, discussions of the religion education course have taken place at the margins of the secularism debates. This is partly due to the Lausanne Treaty, which granted non-Muslims educational rights, including the right to set up minority schools for the teaching of other religions. Thus it is arguable that the problems of minority groups (particularly with regard to the compulsory course) became invisible and unimportant, especially given the diminishing population and economic power of non-Muslims. The Lausanne Treaty effectively gave the Turkish state an immunity, an exemption from considering the problems of non-Muslims with respect to the compulsory religion education course.

All this changed drastically with the Alevi revival in the 1990s. Historically, the Alevis had been placed in a double bind. As Muslims, they were unable to access the right granted to non-Muslims to organize their own schools; at the same time, they were not exempt from the religion course although it was clearly intended for Sunni children. It was after the Alevi revival that the issue of compulsory religion education finally moved to within the parameters of secularism, thereby challenging state education policy.

Beginning with the Tanzimat era, the first four chapters of this dissertation tracked the gradual development of the Turkish national education system, in which compulsory religion education finds a place. Special emphasis has been placed on socio-political developments

relating to minority issues and an increasingly fixed definition of Turkishness that marginalized religious minorities. In addition, the thesis has looked at the education that religious minorities (the Alevi excepted) received in their own *millet*s and later, in minority schools. This material has given the reader background knowledge of minority education programs and shown, in addition, the gradual closure of minority schools that occurred alongside a sharp decrease in Turkey's minority population.

In the second, third and fourth chapters, various materials relating to compulsory religion education have been analyzed. These include speeches by ministers of education, government and policy documents, legal papers and scholarly debates. The fifth chapter examined the range of textbooks that have been used for religion education courses. Finally, by directly addressing the experiences, thoughts and feelings of religious minority groups, the sixth chapter breathed life into the various arguments developed in the preceding chapters. This was achieved through a series of qualitative interviews conducted as part of my research and which I believe, begins to document the accounts of people who were exposed to compulsory religion education in their youth.

In the second chapter, I surveyed the development of education in public schools during the Ottoman Empire, explaining the educational policies of Jews, Armenians and Greeks within their *millet*s, as well as providing information about the impact of Ottoman Public Education on the Alevi living in Anatolia. The chapter addressed changing notions of citizenships in three different eras, namely, the Tanzimat, Hamidian and Young Turk eras. The origins of modern Turkey and the Kemalist social contract could be found here. In the same vein, I argued that an understanding of these conceptual developments was crucial to grasp the relation that the Turkish state, from its inception, established with its religious minorities.

During the Tanzimat era, Ottomanism had been the dominant ideology and this had profound effects on the education system. The changing conception of citizenship was to be rooted through the new education system that promoted mixed education, Muslims and non-Muslims together. With secular curricula, the new Ottoman schools struggled to retain minority enrollment. The hope was to prevent further segmentation of society along ethnic/religious lines. There were fears that this segmentation would prefigure the decline of the Ottoman Empire. However, and as we have seen, the Ottomanism formula did not hold. The Enlightenment ideas that pushed Ottoman Muslims to reform the state, also motivated minorities to press for greater rights with the state.

In the Hamidian era, Ottomanism functioned less and less as an ideological glue holding the Empire together. Abdulhamid worked very deliberately to create a uniform

empire, preferably one composed of Muslims who would prove loyal to the sultan as caliph. I have argued that in this period, Ottoman education policies were influenced by a widespread feeling that the Empire was under attack from various quarters and that it was in a vulnerable position. Non-Muslim and foreign schools were treated as enemies of the Empire and were closely monitored. During this period, the state redoubled its efforts to fund and build schools in which education would be informed by Enlightenment notions of progress, but would retain strong Islamic elements.

In the Young Turk era, the absence of a grounded ethnic identity among the Ottoman elites, facilitated the emergence of a composite identity that was called Turkish. I argued that in this period, educational concerns were shaped by this newly emerging paradigm of the Turkish nation. Young Turks combined ethnic identification of Turkishness with the older pattern of Islamic interpretations of Ottomanism. Inevitably, this led to the exclusion of non-Muslims from the emergent Turkish nation. Thus the seeds of the Kemalist social contract had been successfully sown. In terms of education, all non-Muslim and Muslim schools were attached to the Ministry of Education. Moreover, all schools would be required to include Turkish culture and language (taught by Turkish teachers) in the curriculum. This chapter also showed that it was during the Young Turk this era that the state challenged the authority of religion in the educational realm. The religious content of the newly established schools became a concern for the state, whereas before, this had been mainly handled by the *waqfs* (*vakıfs*). I have argued that the growing control of the Turkish state over religious education was a legacy of the Tanzimat period. Another important legacy was the recognition of the importance of education in shaping the ‘ideal citizen’.

The third chapter traced the history of Turkish education policies from 1918 to 1980, paying particular attention to religion education. Divided into three subsections, each corresponding to a distinct period, the chapter identified the most significant political events relating to minority rights and education policy. The three periods were: 1918-1923, 1923-1950 and 1950-1980. Here, my larger argument was that, throughout the entire period, non-Muslims and Alevis were increasingly marginalized by state policies of “Turkification”, which contained a strong Sunni Islamic element.

During the period 1918-1923, the ideological contours of a ‘national education’ developed in the context of the War of Independence and the foundation of the Grand National Assembly. During these early years before the official declaration of the new republic, there was sympathy in the parliament for pro-religious education in schools. However with the advent of Kemalist reforms, religion was dismissed from political life and

education. Minority schools were still seen as institutions that collaborated closely with Western powers. Therefore, various regulatory tactics were deployed in order to control and Turkify these schools.

The period between 1923 and 1950 was marked by an authoritarian nationalism that saw a corresponding rise in ethnic tensions. This had serious consequences for the non-Muslim populations, as the Thrace Pogrom clearly showed. Beginning in the 1920s, Islam became an identity marker of Turkishness, although faith itself was seen to be outside the public sphere. In this era, the most important development with regards to education was the introduction of the “Law of unification of instruction” in 1927, whereby religion courses were removed from the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Thereafter, religion courses became an integral topic in discourses concerning secularism in Turkey. At this time, Alevi issues also made their appearance in education policy discussions. By 1936, the radical secularism of the republic meant that the spotlight fell on minority schools, where religious instruction was also banned. By the end of the 1940s, there was evidence (within the state education system) of a more positive attitude towards religion courses. However, this was a change met with growing discontent among some intellectuals and MPs. Finally in 1949, due to public pressure and political concerns, the CHP reintroduced religion courses on a voluntary basis for 4th and 5th graders in *ilkokuls*.

By the early 1950s, it was believed that the democratization of Turkey would lead to more liberal policies towards religious and ethnic minorities. However, it proved impossible to change the widely held belief that non-Muslims were located ‘outside’ accepted definitions of the Turkish nation. As indicated by the events of 6-7 September 1955 and the Cyprus crisis of the 1970s, the era witnessed a deterioration in relations between the state and non-Muslims. The number of minority schools decreased significantly. Moreover, the requirement of Turkish language instruction, along with the state monitoring of schools, added to the Turkification process of non-Muslim educational institutions. The Alevis, on the other hand, continued to be ignored at the state level, while the state favored a Sunni religion education for all Muslim pupils.

In 1950, new legislation was introduced, incorporating religion instruction in the weekly class schedules of all primary schools, on a voluntary basis. The issue of religion courses was in a deadlock, as the CHP and DP engaged in ongoing battles over the question. In 1956, despite opposition in various circles, the DP government introduced religion courses for the first two levels of secondary schools. In 1967, courses were extended to the first two years of *lises*. By 1974, religion courses had been introduced to the third levels of each stage

of education, in other words to the 3rd, 8th and 11th grades. Thus during the period 1950-1980, there was an undeniable increase in the importance given to religion education in Turkish schools.

The fourth chapter traced the development of religion education between 1980 and 2009. In 1982, the military government declared the course compulsory for all Turkish students. In line with the dominant “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” of the time, there was a general increase in religious sentiment, as expressed in publications and in the education sector. The era witnessed a growth in Islamic movements alongside the rise of Kurdish nationalism and Alevi consciousness. In this period of increased globalization, both non-Muslims and Alevis became visible actors. However, this visibility did not translate into any real influence over education policy, and Alevis were still forced to attend the course. Designed with the Sunni student in mind, the course still did not address the Alevi perspective. In the case of non-Muslims, the state pursued rather clumsy measures that left the issue to the discretion of school governments. This only changed when non-Muslim complaints served to remind the state of minority rights as guaranteed by the terms of the Lausanne Treaty.

The period between 1997 and 2009 was largely defined by the social and political direction taken by the AKP. In policy terms, the AKP has preached a message of religious freedom as a way to expand liberties for believers in the officially secular country. It has assured the EU that it would respect religious freedom. However, moves to improve religious freedom appeared to have been limited to assuring the rights of Sunni Muslims. It should be added that since 2002, some demands made by non-Muslim communities have been addressed during the EU adaptation process. It is arguable that the limited scopes of these improvements were the result of an incrustated bureaucracy and a reluctance to implement reforms.

During this period, the question of Alevism became one of the most discussed topics in the Turkish media. Internal and external developments brought the Alevi issue to the European Commission agenda. A democratization package (*Alevi Açılımı*) featuring the rights of the Alevi community met with Alevi disapproval, as it was interpreted primarily as an insincere attempt on the part of the AKP to appease the EU. The AKP has persistently ignored longstanding requests and grievances emanating from the Alevi community and from civil society. It is arguable, therefore, that official policy with regard to the Alevis remained unchanged. Indeed, one of the most important Alevi complaints concerned religion education. Recent changes to the curriculum have not satisfied the Alevis who continue to demand a total

abolition of the course. This demand was of paramount importance in drawing attention to the course, thereby reviving Turkish NGO interest from a human rights perspective.

In the fifth chapter, I turned my attention to the textbooks used for the religion education courses. I utilized the method of discourse analysis in my examination of various textbooks associated with different historical periods. The first textbooks to be analyzed belonged to the early single-party regime, and were in use between 1927 and 1931. I then turned my attention to textbooks dated between 1951 and 1954, associated with the multi-party regime. Lastly, I inspected textbooks from the period 1982-2002 and 2002-2009. This research revealed pedagogic material that tended to marginalize Alevis and non-Muslims, by reflecting an implicit and/or explicit Sunni perspective.

The first group of textbooks revealed early efforts to legitimize the official discourse of the Republic, which was still in the process of formation. In these books, categories such as state and nation were turned into religious subjects and Islamicized. Since being a good Muslim was equated with being a Turkish nationalist/etatist, the ostensible theme was Turkish nationalism rather than religion. There were some derogatory statements towards Christianity in these textbooks mainly written according to the confessional approach (*ilmihal* understanding) that was mentioned earlier in this specific chapter.

The textbooks associated with the multi-party regime belonged to the academic years 1951-1954. The 4th grade textbooks covered general information about Islam and morality, while the content of the fifth grade course dealt with more specific teachings of Islam and the practice of memorizing prayers. During that time, it was decreed that textbooks should not touch on denominational differences, a decree strictly adhered to and which arguably meant there would be no information about Alevism included in the books. With respect to non-Islamic religions, commentaries about Christianity and other religions have been abandoned, with greater emphasis given to a detailed account of Islam. It is arguable that latent claims to the superiority of Islam over Christianity and Judaism may still be found in these texts. In 1982, the course became compulsory and its title was changed from “Religion Courses” to “Religion Culture and Morals Course”. This move was supposedly intended to make the course inclusive of all students, regardless of their religion. However, this objective was not achieved. After 1982, the curriculum provided an opening for the study of non-Islamic religions, but not much interest was shown in the question of how to present this material. Moreover, the biased approach towards Christianity and Judaism remained in place, while the Alevi perspective was still neglected in textbooks.

In more recent textbooks, those dated 2002-2009, a program called the “Ankara Model” has been pursued. This new program accepted the need for a pedagogic strategy that promotes tolerance and respect between different cultures. In the new textbooks written under the auspices of this program, there was an attempt to present non-Islamic religions in an objective manner, pointing out shared values and ethical concerns. However, we have seen that the course did not meet the objectives of a Religion Culture and Morals Course. A very detailed explanation of *namaz* (ritual prayer) can be given as an example of this point. Following the socio-political developments mentioned in the last chapter, the Ministry of Education made some changes to the 2005 curriculum. For pupils in grades 9-12, information about the Alevis was added to the course content. However, the changes in the textbooks do not yet amount to a full acceptance of the Alevi identity.

The last chapter consisted of a thorough analysis of sixteen interviews conducted with people belonging to religious minorities. My aim was to produce a detailed and systematic recording of the themes and issues addressed in the interviews and to link them under different headings. The four headings I identified were as follows: “The Religion Education”, “Reaction of religious minorities to the courses”, “Experiences of students”, and “Alternative visions of religion education”. My aim was to create a space for members of minority groups to voice their experiences, feelings and critical reflections in relation to compulsory religion education. I also hoped to discover whether, or to what extent, religious minorities felt estranged by some aspects of the course. The first section, “The Religion Education”, revealed a perception that there was no consistency in handling issues relating to non-Muslims. In addition, there was a view that the course could be discriminatory insofar as it demanded non-Muslims to explicate one’s identity. Finally, assessment of the course in the entrance exams did create an incentive for non-Muslims to know about the course.

In the second section, “Reactions of religious minorities to the courses”, my findings revealed that even in the same classroom, non-Muslims were exposed to a different procedure than their Muslim classmates. It was argued that the best way to meet the needs of non-Muslim pupils, especially in primary schools, was to exempt them from the topics of DKAB covered by Islamic teachings and prayers. I argued that this was a problematic approach and a potential source of stress for non-Muslims and Alevis. Some students felt that they were being forced to reveal their identities in the school environment or that the course did not address them at all. In short, it was arguable that there was an inevitable process of ‘othering’ in the context of the course. Also, in higher levels of education, the right to exemption, which allowed non-Muslims to leave the classroom, could create its own problems, causing a

“break” (*kopuş*) between non-Muslim and Muslim students. Before 1980, similar concerns were expressed by some Alevis who preferred to take the course rather than face societal pressure and the myriad questions posed when they exercised the exemption rights.

Thirdly, the section “Experiences of students” looked at student-teacher relations, taking note of both good and bad minority experiences of teachers, and how these experiences affected their views of the DKAB course as a whole. My findings showed that in general, the teacher’s authority made it difficult for students to express themselves fully in class or challenge their teachers. Textbooks, on the other hand, were perceived to be a source of official knowledge and therefore, a ‘place’ where Alevis as well as non-Muslims might seek to ‘locate’ themselves. However this endeavor met with frequent disappointment, as textbooks addressed Sunni Muslims exclusively. Interestingly, both Alevis and non-Muslims agreed that the Alevis were the victims of this course.

In the last section, “Alternative visions of religion education”, I sought to map the kind of religion education religious minorities envisaged in Turkey. Opinions were varied as some of the interviewees believed that the courses were not compatible with the secularism principle, whereas others thought that in its optional and a highly democratized version, the course might be made compatible with secularism. The most frequently expressed desire was for a course that provided a general introduction to world religions. As in general public discussions, there were mixed views as to whether the state, or religious communities, should be the providers of religious education.

This dissertation does not offer specific solutions to problems encountered by religious minorities in the context of compulsory religion education. That endeavor, especially if it included a project of new course design, would certainly necessitate expertise in many different fields, including pedagogy, philosophy and law. Rather, my research maps the development of the compulsory religion education course with specific reference to non-Muslims and Alevis. The larger aim is to gain greater insight into the nature of Turkish secularism.

Risking tautology, it might be argued that compulsory religion education and its relation to religious minorities is itself the result of this specific understanding of Turkish secularism/nationalism. In other words, there is a genuine sense in which this is a secularism that historically, has turned a blind eye to the needs of non-Muslims and Alevis. This is why the sixth chapter of this thesis, with its account of minority experience, begins to create a space for voices that until now have been relatively unheard in these debates. In this sense, my modest hope is that religious minorities be included in future discussions concerning the

course. Moreover, the inclusion of minority views must be driven by democratic objectives, rather than by charitable impulses that further entrench asymmetrical power relations between the state and religious minorities.

In March 2008, the Council of State handed down a decision on two lawsuits launched by parents of Alevi children. They argued that it was against the law to force students to take part in classes that did not comply with their own beliefs. In its ruling, the Council of State said, that although the article 24 of the constitution stated that lessons on religion culture and morals were compulsory at primary and secondary schools, the existing lessons could not be accepted as the religion culture and morals courses prescribed by the constitution due to their content. Following this verdict, the Minister of Religious Affairs who was very discontent with the decision claimed that ‘If there are mistakes in the content and the application of the course, they should be corrected. But to argue for the abolition of the course would be like seeking to close a hospital because three or five people have received inadequate treatment.’¹

Following the analogy, I hope that my dissertation showed that in this hospital, it is not coincidence that the patients with similar identities, non-Muslims and Alevis, are ill treated and that it has a historical dynamic which this thesis put into question that inevitably puts the workings of this hospital also on the question for its change for a more impartial treatment of its patients.

¹ "Zorunlu din dersi" [Compulsory Religion Education], *NTV News*. YouTube.com. 8 Mar. 2008. Web. 10 Jan 2011