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English Summary

Compulsory Religion Education and Religious Minorities in Turkey

Starting from late 19th century, this dissertation examines the history of the compulsory religion education in Turkish state education system; discussing it in the context of religious minorities (Jews, Orthodox Christians, Armenians and also Alevis) and secularism principle of Turkey.

In other words, the research looks at education policies and the political debates with respect to the content of the religion courses first introduced in 1924, and then have become continuous sites for power struggles in different time periods. In this history it is seen that in all kinds of debates regarding this religion course which is a part of national curriculum, the views of non-Muslims and Alevis have largely remained peripheral. In addition, the right to be exempted from the course on the basis that one proved that he/she belonged to a religious minority group-with the exception of Alevis, application-wise had many problems. In many places in Turkey the application of this right was at the discretion of the wills of school governments.

In the early republican era, all levels of religious education were officially banned for around two decades between 1930 and 1949. After the Second World War, improving socio-economic relations with western democracies and initiation of a multi-party system influenced the educational structure. In this context, religion education in schools emerged as an important issue. After a long debate on the political level, religion education in state schools was introduced not only in primary schools (in 1949), but also in lower secondary schools (in 1956) and in upper secondary schools (in 1967) on a voluntary basis.

The religious version of nationalism, that has been very palpable in all Turkish textbooks since the establishment of the republic, was crystallized with the compulsory religion courses that were introduced in 1982. Two years after the 1980 coup, the military endorsed a new constitution that mandated obligatory instruction in religion culture and moral education in all primary and secondary schools. That is, in Turkey all school children- except non-Muslim students who have the right to opt out from the course-, from fourth grade until graduation from high school have to take “Religion Culture and Morals course” which has a confessional character. The main characteristic of confessional religion education is implicitly

or explicitly to claim that a specific religion is the only true religion. Moreover the education system is based on the Hanafi-Matrudi branch of orthodox Islam and does not provide any place for the Alevi understanding of Islam.

In sum, it can be argued that the repercussions of the asymmetrical relation that the state had established with non-Muslims and Alevi, -while the republic was first established- can be revealed through looking at the Turkish educational arena; particularly through examining both the history of this religion education and also personal experiences of religious minorities about the course.

Together with the Introduction (Chapter one) and Conclusion (Chapter seven), the dissertation is organized in seven chapters. Beginning with the *Tanzimat* (19th century), the first four chapters track 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 dissertation looks at the education that religious minorities (the Alevi excepted) received in their own millets and later, in minority schools. This material gives the reader background knowledge of minority education programs and shows, 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 examines 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 breathes life into the various arguments developed in the preceding chapters. This is achieved through a series of qualitative interviews conducted as part of the research and which documents the accounts of people who were exposed to compulsory religion education in their youth.

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.