Eurimages and Turkish cinema: history, identity, culture

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Chapter 5

RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Ottoman Empire used a governing system based on religious affiliation. The Republic of Turkey emerged from this empire as a centralist nation state, adopting a principle of secularism. The implementation of secularism, however, meant state control, and the use of religion to support a nation building process. Religious identities that exist outside the majority Sunni Islam have been largely ignored or excluded from Turkish national identity in this context.

This chapter discusses the representation of both Sunni Islam and the ignored or excluded religious identities in Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films. After providing an historical background on the establishment of nation-state with regard to religion and secularism, a brief history on the abdication and subsequent revival of Sunni Islam identity during the republican period will be given. This will be followed by a discussion of the representation of Islamic identities found in Turkish cinema due to either commercial or ideological reasons, focusing on Eurimages-backed films of the last twenty years. The latter part of this chapter will provide general historical information on diverse religious identities and the representation of these identities in the films covered in this research, namely Alevism, Christianity and Judaism.

Historical Background

Emerging as a state religion, and in the form of a religious state in the 7th century, Islam deeply influenced the societies where it was embraced. In the Ottoman social structure, communal bonds were determinative and had priority over other social roles, and thus religious leaders maintained an esteemed position in society. In a similar vein, being Muslim was a requirement for achieving higher bureaucratic positions, regardless of the

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76 A shorter, and somewhat modified, version of this chapter is currently under consideration by Routledge as part of an edited volume on religion and cinema.
ethnic origin of the officer. Moreover, since the 16th century, the sultan has also been the caliph, which means ‘the shadow of God on the earth’, who, although being head of religious affairs, did not intervene in religious affairs or explicate Islamic law. Rather, the şeyhülislam (Sheikh of Islam) was responsible for the executive powers of religious authority in the name of the sultan. The post of şeyhülislam was created in 1424, occupying the same rank as grand vizier, i.e. prime minister (Karaman 2008). As Bernard Lewis states, “For the Ottoman, his Empire was Islam itself. In the Ottoman chronicles the territories of the Empire are referred to as ‘the lands of Islam’, its armies as ‘the soldiers of Islam’, its religious head as ‘the Sheikh of Islam’”(1952, 47).

Even though the Islamic religion was deeply influential in social life, and was ostensibly an inseparable part of the state mechanism, the state retained a privileged position over religion in the Ottoman Empire at all times. The sultan had the power to appoint and discharge the şeyhülislam, and therefore religious authority could not contradict state authority. Rather, the state, helped by holding the post of caliphate, took advantage of Islam in order to achieve its political aims: it aroused the Muslim millet against the Christian states in cases of disputes or wars and, at the end of 19th century, supported pan-Islamism ideology in order to keep the remaining Muslim people a unified and cohesive group.

Although Islam was an obstacle to Westernisation, the state’s privileged position over religion provided the basis for the importation of Western military systems and martial technology in the 18th century, which was justified by the ‘sublime benefits of the state’ after the loss of territories in Europe. Western concepts such as positivism, enlightenment and secularism entered through the opened door, especially after the Tanzimat (Reorganisation) movement (1839). With this, the role of religion in public life gradually decreased. Important steps were taken to establish a national education system during the period of constitutional monarchy after 1908, which paved the way for the secularisation of the forthcoming republic. However, despite its decreasing role in public life, Islam remained influential in society and thus the traditional institutions that were based on religion could not be abolished, instead modern institutions were established in junction with them, leading to dual structures.
The republican revolution of 1923 was definitely a move towards the principles of enlightenment and positivism. The 1931 program of the governing Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası), for instance, declared: “The party has accepted the principle that all laws, regulations and procedures used in the administration of the state should be prepared and implemented in accordance with the foundations and the forms that have been provided by science and technology for contemporary civilisation and the necessities of the world” (CHP 2010). The party also declared that the separation of religion from state and mundane affairs was the main reason for progress. Şükrü Kaya, who served as the interior minister between 1927 and 1938, took this one step further when he stated: “Religions have fulfilled their purpose and their functions are exhausted; they are institutions which can no longer renew their organisms or revitalise themselves” (TBMM 1934). The republic distanced itself from religion, as it was considered an obstacle to the implementation of a transition process from the old (Islamic) cultural system to the modern (Westernised) one. To accomplish this transition, three agendas – establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, Westernizing reforms, and legalisation of secularism – were carried out simultaneously.

Islam had functioned to unite and motivate the country’s Muslim people against enemies during the wars which occurred before the establishment of the republic. Yet, as a religion which crossed national borders, it contradicted the secular-nationalist-modern project of the new regime. The cultural identity of the Turkish people had largely been shaped by the Islamic religion in the past, but it had now become an obstacle to the establishment of the concept of secular citizenship. Thus on the one hand what needed to be done was to cut the bonds with Islam through reforms of social life and, furthermore there was a need to get religion under control so as to make it function to promote and support the republican project. Religion needed to be made secondary to the nation-state project, which would operate as a moderate religion integrated into the state structure, creating secular Muslim citizens. This was initiated by establishing The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) which replaced the abolished Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations in 1924.77 The Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) was maintained by succeeding constitutions and aimed to avoid political

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77 The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations (Şer’iyye ve Evkaf Vekaleti) was formed in 1920.
affiliations and remain in harmony with the secular principles of the nation-state, as stated in article 136 of the Constitution of 1982: “The Department of Religious Affairs, which is within the general administration, shall exercise its duties prescribed in its particular law, in accordance with the principles of secularism, removed from all political views and ideas, and aiming at national solidarity and integrity” (BYEGM 2010).

Affiliated to the office of prime minister, the PRA is organised all over the country. As an institution, it administers mosques, appoints local religious representatives, organises Koranic courses, arranges pilgrimage activities, determines the content of the Friday sermons, and issues *fatwas* as and when needed. It also supplies religious services for Turkish communities living abroad. The function of this institution, as a uniting authority, is to enlighten the public on religious matters, make Muslims conscious of superstition and protect them from exploitation of religious feelings, and avoid granting privilege to any religious order or group. The PRA has been the face of Turkish modernisation in the religious sphere: it served as an institutional assistant through the rationalizing and shaping of Islam to make it compatible with positivist enlightenment thinking and thus created an official Islam. The PRA is unique in this sense, as there has never been such an example in any other country nor in the preceding Ottoman period. The institution, however, does not wholly escape criticism. The state’s role in running religious affairs is questionable, given its commitment to secularism. Furthermore, while non-Muslim communities carry the costs of their religious affairs themselves, the cost of the PRA – an institution which has been criticised for not even meeting the religious needs of all Muslims but rather only the Sunni majority – is met by taxes paid by all citizens. Another objection is that state officers who are religiously authoritative are given the appearance of a clergy (though the opposite is claimed by the PRA bureaucrats), which clashes with Islamic principles. Finally, complete freedom and objectivity of the PRA is said to be impossible, since its president is appointed and can be discharged by the governing party (after the approval of the president), and as such, the institution is not separate from politics.

The second set of actions undertaken in the initial years of the republic were the Westernising reforms aimed at modernizing society. These were:
1924 Abolition of the caliphate (which had been in force since the death of the prophet Muhammed and held by the Ottoman sultans since 1517) so as to eliminate a potential source of objections to Westernisation and claims on the sultanate; unification of the educational system, including the abolition of religious education and unification of all the educational institutions from elementary to high schools under the authority of the Ministry of Education, which aimed to give new generations a national culture and consciousness; abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations; closure of sharia courts.

1925 Ban of religious orders; closure of the dervish lodges and cells; replacement of fez with hat; ban on wearing the veil.

1926 New Civil Law (institution of obligatory official marriage, ban of polygamy, equality of women and men in the family); adoption of Western clock and Gregorian calendar.

1928 Replacement of Arabic script with Latin alphabet.

1929 Abolition of Arabic and Persian courses in high schools.

1931 Adoption of European weights and measures.

1932 Replacement of Arabic call to prayer with Turkish.

1934 Introduction of family names; ban on wearing religious clothes (except for state religious officers).

1935 Replacement of Friday holidays with Sunday.

All these reforms were implemented in a top-down manner, but were eventually adopted by the masses. Atatürk’s charismatic leadership as a glorious commander against both the forces occupying the country and the caliph-sultan (a representative of the old system and a collaborator with the occupying powers) smoothed the way for the reforms. Otherwise, radical changes of this extent would not have been easy in a country in which the common and dominant identity of the majority of the population was closely tied to Islam.

Thirdly, secularism was adopted as a guiding principle of the new republic, and was legalised over time. The history of Turkish secularisation goes back to the Reorganisation period (1839-1876) when the influence of religion on profane affairs decreased to some extent. The Committee of Union and Progress after 1908 also worked toward the secularisation of the state and education system, though to a lesser extent than
the republic. During War of Independence, Islam was declared the state religion in the Constitution of 1921, and remained so in the next constitution (1924, the first of the republican period). Secularism was first adopted by the governing single-party (CHP) in 1927 as one of the guiding principles (one of the six arrows mentioned in the previous chapter). The article in the constitution that declared Islam as the state religion was annulled in 1928, and there was thus neither a religion of the state nor secularism until 1937, when that principle entered into the constitution. The 1961 and 1982 constitutions confirmed Turkey as a secular country.

Although I use the term *secularism*, what Turkey actually adopted was *laicism*, inspired by the French Revolution. As Niyazi Berkes (1998) states, while the word ‘secularism’ denotes the idea of worldliness, ‘laicism’ rather emphasises the distinction of the laity from the clergy. Secularism, as it is regarded in major protestant countries, theoretically posits a state that holds a neutral attitude towards religions. While respecting people’s right to belief, secularism separates religion from the public affairs of the state. The two institutions of religion and state are presumed separate, and do not interfere with one another. However, it was not thought to be easy to apply that style of secularism - wherein the Church is autonomous - in a majority Islamic country, for Islam itself espouses an entire social system with economic, legal and moral dimensions. Taking into consideration the permanence of the new Western-oriented nation-state project, the republic could neither leave religious affairs in the hands of brotherhoods nor bestow an unlimited autonomy and freedom on the religious authority. Furthermore, the religion and religious authority (PRA) was shaped by the state and located as an administrative function in the organisational chart of bureaucracy. This was, in a sense, the tradition inherited from the Ottoman Empire, where the religious authority was secondary to the state.

A series of factors contributed to the formation of what can be called the ‘Turkish version of Islam’. Although some scholars prefer to call it the ‘state version of Islam’ due to the secular principles and practices of the republican period, I insist on not reducing the phenomenon to the secular state factor as this would mean ignoring the other parameters which are of significance throughout the production process of this unique system. The aforementioned PRA practices and the secular principles of the republic have clearly been
influential. However, it should be mentioned that the former Seljuk and Ottoman states cannot be said to have applied rigid Islamic rules despite the fact that being Muslim was a very determinative component of cultural identity. Furthermore, secular principles gradually entered public life in the later years of the Ottoman Empire (where the religion possessed a subordinate status to the state). Anatolia and its Muslim people were not only geographically but also culturally open to both East and West and were influenced by the both. Close relations with the Christian and Jewish communities definitely influenced the world-view of an ordinary Muslim citizen in Anatolia.

Şerif Mardin states that the specifics of Turkish history contributed to create “a special setting for Islam, a setting where secularism and Islam interpenetrate, which of course is quite different from saying that Islam and secularism have fused” (2005, 148). In parallel with that one can say a Turkish version of Islam or ‘Turkish Muslimness’ can be defined as “tolerant, rejecting any kind of violence, rationalist and Sufi Muslimness against, for example, a rigid, fanatical, literalist, anti-Sufi and anti-traditional Muslimness” (Okumuş 2008, 350). Religious faith is confined to an individual issue, and thus Islam ‘does not’ (or is wished not to) contradict secularism. It has also been practically complementary to Turkish nationalism - even though nationalism is a secular ideology by its nature and Islam was perceived as a possible obstacle in the initial years of the republic - for its uniting power on Muslim people. In Turkey, as the most secular Muslim-majority country, types and levels of religious practices vary according to social classes, geographies, ages and sects. Hence, by the term ‘Turkish version of Islam’, what I refer to is the belief system most likely to be adopted by an average Muslim citizen who is not influenced by fundamentalism.

Notwithstanding the dominance of a moderate form of Islam and the ban of the dervish lodges and religious orders in 1925, the orders subsisted in practice. Broadly defined, a religious order (tarikat) is a number of believers united by the respect that they show for a particular person or lineage, whom they regard as different from other human beings by virtue of their being favoured by God. Perception, practice, priorities and sensitivities of a given religion vary depending on the religious order and each one claims literal adherence to or the ‘real’ follower of Islam. The rebellion against the republican regime by the Nakşibendi order - led by Şeyh (Sheikh) Said who was a local Kurdish
religious leader - brought about the ban of religious orders. Mustafa Kemal’s declaration refers to this rebellion: “The Republic of Turkey cannot be the country of sheiks, dervishes, disciples and followers. The most straightforward and the truest religious order is the order of civilization” (Culture and Tourism 2005). Observing that political opposition to the new regime was taking a religious form, the state turned toward a more authoritarian secularism in the 1930s. The single-party government of the time has been criticised for an alleged Jacobin attitude towards religion, and its practices have been named ‘repressive’, ‘militant’ or ‘aggressive’ by Islamist and liberal circles.

Minority religions on the other hand, as I explained before, enjoyed relative autonomy under the millet system of Ottoman Empire and they have been protected during the republican period by the Treaty of Lausanne. I will cover minority religions later in this chapter, after focusing on Sunni Islam - the majority Islamic sect (mezhep) - in the next section, and Alevism, the minority Islamic belief.

**Sunní Islam**

Relations between state and religion started to change with the shift to multi-party democracy after World War II. The ruling party, the CHP, attempted to placate conservative voters by making concessions on secular principles: the ban on visits to tombs and shrines belonging to religiously respected figures was lifted; elective religious courses were placed on the curriculum of elementary schools; a faculty of theology was opened at Ankara University; and courses for training prayer leaders and preachers started. However, those moves were not enough to keep the CHP in government. A series of factors - the poverty that resulted from the war, demands of the emerging petit-bourgeoisie and the promises of less state intervention in religion - paved the way for the centre-right DP (Democratic Party) to come to power in the 1950 elections. All centre right parties established pragmatic relations with Islam, whilst subsequently begotten religious parties have been overtly sensitive to Islam and its injunctions. Religious orders have hence been a critical subject of Turkish politics ever since, because of the centre right’s pragmatic

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78 As mentioned in the previous chapter, this and many other rebellions in the Kurdish-populated regions have been debated by historians in terms of whether they bear a nationalist or a religious character. The role of local feudal aghas – who have economic interests – in such rebellions should be noted here.
affiliation with Islam and because of the religious parties’ wholesale sensitivity to Islamic doctrine.

The first actions of the DP government were to lift the ban on the Arabic call to prayers and to permit religious broadcasts on the state-radio channel. Thereafter, the status of courses for training prayer leaders and preachers was changed to high-school level: those schools, which had been opened as a result of the law on the unification of instruction passed in 1924, had been closed in 1930 due to a lack of demand. The number of prayer leader and preacher schools (imam-hatip okulları) increased over time and the education system came close to having a dualised structure. In a similar vein, the elective religious courses in the curricula of elementary schools firstly became a norm, and then became constitutionally compulsory in 1982.

Both centre right and far right parties have benefitted from Islam, using it to bring wider appeal to their ideology of Turkish nationalism. A more effective fusion of Islam and nationalism was achieved in the state mechanism through the ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ (Türk-İslam Sentezi) instituted following the military coup of 1980. Established in 1970, Hearths of the Enlightened (Aydınlar Ocağı) propounded this ideology in opposition to the leftist ideology that was gaining support in the universities and among intellectuals. The members of the Hearths of the Enlightened were conservative academics, politicians and businessmen, and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis aimed at a fusion of Turkish nationalism and (Sunni) Islam religion: “Its basic tenet was that Islam held a special attraction for the Turks because of a number of (supposedly) striking similarities between their pre-Islamic culture and Islamic civilization. They shared a deep sense of justice, monotheism and a belief in the immortal soul, and a strong emphasis on family life and morality. The mission of the Turks was a special one, to be the ‘soldiers of Islam’. According to this theory, Turkish culture was built on two pillars: a 2,500-year-old Turkish element and a 1,000-year-old Islamic element” (Zürcher 1993, 303).

This ideology was also embraced by the coup leaders of 1980 and religious courses were made compulsory. The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis appears, for instance, in the ‘General Aims of Religious and moral Education’, which was proposed in 1982: “To learn in basic and middle education enough basic knowledge of Islamic religion and
morals in accordance with Atatürk’s laicist and other principles, along the lines of the general aims of the Turkish national educational policies; thus the populace will obtain good morals and virtues to ensure in them a love of people, religion, morals, Atatürkism, national unity and togetherness” (quoted in Poulton 1997, 182).

The ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ ideology implemented after the military coup paved the way for the growth of legal and illegal Islamist movements throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Perceiving and representing secularism as an anti-Islamic religion, these movements worked towards Sunni Islam’s central role in public space at the least, if not aiming for the fall of the secular-Kemalist state. Although the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis assisted the rise of Islam in Turkey, the Islamists refused such a fusion because of the universal character of the religion, which is conceptually contrary to nationalism.

While the revival of religion and religious orders in the 1950s is indicated by political accounts, the explanation remains incomplete without considering the role of developing capitalism in the country. Starting with the transition from commercial to industrial capitalism in the 1960s, religion gained influence principally within two sectors of society. The first was the labour force, some unemployed, who, maintaining their rural and traditional conservative moral values, immigrated to big cities as a result of industrialisation, but were dissatisfied with the realities of modern capitalism. The second sector was the petit-bourgeoisie and artisans of small Anatolian cities and towns who could not benefit sufficiently from, or were harmed by, the development of capitalism. The solidarity and social bonds that capitalism failed to provide were offered by religious orders, especially to the poor, who were deprived of social security.

In conclusion, with the continual concessions made to secularism for political reasons on the one hand, and capitalist modernisation and social uncertainty on the other, this worked for the revival of the religious orders and contributed to the (re)infusion of Islamic identity in Turkey, particularly in the smaller cities and towns of Anatolia. Recent research has indicated that six out of every one hundred people are members of a congregation or religious brotherhood today in Turkey, and the ratio is higher in the east of the country compared to the West (Türkiye’nin Cemaat Tablosu 2011).

The next section will provide an historical backdrop for Sunni Islam and films in
Turkey, focusing on two Eurimages-backed films, *Takva: A Man’s Fear of God* and *Istanbul beneath My Wings*. The first displays the power of religious orders in contemporary Turkey while narrating the transformation of an ordinary devout Muslim, and the second film depicts Islamic conservatism during the 17th century Ottoman period through the story of the first flying human in history. The two films both draw attention to the role of Sunni Islam in Turkish society in different periods.

**Sunni Islam and Films**

The representation of Islam has found a place in Turkish cinema from the very beginning as an important component of cultural identity. In addition to this, commercial factors (box-office concerns) and the Islamic worldview of certain directors significantly contributed to the increase of religiously themed films.

The signs, symbols and rituals of Islam, such as mosques, prayers, customs, and the religious weddings performed by imams, have been visible to varying degrees in films depending on the aim of the filmmaker, particularly in narratives that focus on rural issues and themes. Apart from their presence in films that focused on religious themes, for many years the imams have been represented in a negative manner by the film industry: they cooperated with the allied powers that occupied the country after WWI and denounced the resistance movement (War of Independence) against this. They also colluded in exploitation through their co-operation with the brutal aghas in the villages, and represented a fanatical, reactionary attitude against modern values and novelties in society. This kind of representation, which cannot be said to be totally false, and has changed in recent years, has been criticised in Islamic circles and claimed to be an exaggeration.

By the 1950s, the film industry started appealing to the religious sentiments of Muslim people for commercial motives. Islamic symbols were shown in melodramatic films in rather irrelevant contexts, juxtaposed, for instance, with belly dancers, eroticism and many other commercially attractive elements. Another use of Islam for commercial motives from the 1950s to the 1970s was in the films that focused on the lives of religiously important figures. The producers aimed to attract the Islamic audience to movie theatres in that way.
A different type of representation of Islamic identity started with the *milli sinema* (‘millî’ is an older word translated literally as ‘national’) movement, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Yücel Çakmaklı, the theorist of the movement, made his first film, titled *Crossroads* (*Birleşen Yollar*), in 1970. *Milli sinema*, according to Çakmaklı, was to be the cinematic narration of national culture and advocacy of the ‘genuine’ culture against the ‘imperial’ values of the West. The ‘genuine and/or national’ culture he advocated was one that was fused with Islamic culture. In that sense, *milli sinema* is different from *ulusal sinema* (‘ulusal’ is the newer word corresponding to ‘national’) which was suggested by Halit Refiğ and some other filmmakers (as also mentioned in Chapter 1). The Islamic filmmakers of the *milli sinema* movement aimed to utilise the power of cinema in order to transmit religious messages. Such films focused on: the changing lives of individuals who, having been on the ‘wrong road’ by displaying Western values, choose the Islamic way at some point in their life to attain peace of mind; the ban on wearing head scarves in certain public spaces; the criticism of secular practices of the state by way of the problems experienced by covered females and graduates of high schools for prayer leaders and preachers (*imam-hatip liseleri*); and the narration of life stories of religiously important figures. Later the terms ‘Islamic-sensitive films’ (*İslami duyarlıklı filmler*) and ‘white cinema’ (*beyaz sinema*) have also been used to describe such films, although Abdurrahman Şen, who coined the term, objected to the limitation of ‘white cinema’ to Islamic films. He did not, however, provide a sharper definition of it except to narrate the stories of ‘this land’ within an aesthetical field, and Islamic films and filmmakers have thus often been referred to by the term. *Abdullah from Minye 1-2* (*Minyeli Abdullah 1-2*, 1989-90) by Yücel Çakmaklı and *You Are Not Alone 1-2* (*Yalnız Değilsiniz 1-2*, 1990-91) by Mesut Uçakan have been the Islamic films that have reached a relatively large audience.

Neither the Islamic films of the *milli sinema* movement and/or white cinema, nor the commercial films which focused on or exploited Islamic themes, can be counted among the outstanding films of Turkish film history. A very fundamental reason for this was the underdeveloped and clichéd characters in the leading roles. *Takva: A Man’s Fear of God*, supported by Eurimages, is an exceptional film in this sense, which successfully focused on the transformation of an ordinary religious individual.
‘Takva’ in relation to Islam, means “fear of God and the avoidance of sin”. The film, directed by Özer Kızıltan (2006), narrates the transformation of an ordinary devout Muslim who somehow finds himself entangled in the power games of a religious order (tarikat-ı aliyye or tarikat), which leads him to develop a mental disorder. It also depicts the social and economic power of religious orders in Turkey in an objective and realistic manner in as much as this is possible.

Muharrem, the protagonist, is a single middle-aged devout man who has been working at a sack wholesaler since his childhood as a paid worker, leading a quite and poor life. He does not fail in his Muslim observances: we see him waking up early in the morning, performing the ablution and the namaz (Muslim worship), and praying after dinner at home. He also joins the zikir (trance) ritual in the dergâh (dervish lodge) regularly. He has not slept away from his home throughout his entire life. Observing and appreciating him as a good and honest Muslim, the Sheikh offers Muharrem the administrative duty of collecting the income from the rented real estate properties that are owned by their tarikat and executing the maintenance of those assets. According to the Sheikh, it is not good for the ulema (Muslim theologians and scholars) to deal with profane business. Muharrem is an ordinary person with an open heart and this case is extraordinary indeed, thinks the Sheikh. Thence, Muharrem becomes closer to the tarikat and his disturbing journey shaped in a power-faith dilemma starts. He moves to live in the dergâh and on his first day Muharrem prays to God to not allow him to fail and feel ashamed.

The tarikat owns forty-three houses, thirty-five shops and seven land holdings in different districts of Istanbul. Thanks to the rental income from this real estate, they provide a number of poor youngsters from all over the country with a religious education, including taking care of their board, lodging and clothing. According to the beliefs of the tarikat, all of their assets basically belong to God and they are entrusted to them. Devoting labour to those assets means worshipping God. The Sheikh requests Muharrem to order the maintenance works from the craftsmen who are affiliated with them. In this way it will be an opportunity for a brother to do good and help the development of the dergâh at the
same time. The respect for the Sheikh among the disciples is extremely high; we see them, for instance, bending in front of him and kissing his hand. His assistant, Rauf, even kisses the glass of sherbet before handing it to him. The word of the Sheikh is the law. He serves as a kind of spiritual brokerage and as a local middleman between man and God, to refer to Gellner (2006, 40).

Two profane domains, monetary relations on the one hand and sexuality on the other, distort the world of moral values that Muharrem is used to. Accepting the offer from the Sheikh, he is assigned a dozen suits and pairs of shoes, a quality watch and rosary, an expensive pen, a mobile phone and a car with a driver. These are the symbols of affluence that are meant to exhibit the wisdom of the Sheikh and the ‘abundance’ the tarikat promises. It is not easy for Muharrem to bear those symbols of power and affluence, which he is not used to, from the beginning: “what difficult concerns these are. I was living an ordinary life before”, he says. His working day is divided into two: he works in the sack wholesaler in the morning and carries out his duties for the tarikat in the afternoon. His personality is also divided, and he starts to act as a semi-boss in the workplace, especially toward Muhittin, who is a young man newly hired to assist him and carry out routine tasks when Muharrem is out completing the tarikat’s work. Muharrem projects the crisis and discrepancy in his inner world onto this young colleague.

A contradiction he experiences between two cases in his rent collection duty is the first major breaking point in his world. He witnesses, during his visit, one of their tenants, a mechanic, drinking alcohol, and reports to the Sheikh that the mechanic should leave the shop. However, the Sheikh and brother Rauf do not agree with him: the mechanic is paying the rent regularly and, if he is a sinner, it is his own sin, not theirs. In the second case, the heavy disease of a tenant does not allow him to work, and he is thus not able to pay the rent. The tenant’s covered wife has three children, and has nowhere to turn. Probably for the first time in his life, Muharrem feels the unbearable burden of possessing power and decisive authority: “It is up to you [to take the rent or not] Mr. Muharrem”, the tenant’s wife appeals to him. When Muharrem shares his tendency not to take rent from that poor and religious family, the Sheikh’s response puts him in a difficult dilemma. The Sheikh says:
The rich and the poor at all times have existed since the prophet Adam. However, the number of poor is more than a proper rate this day; poverty is extensive. Muharrem, our religion protects the poor. Your dignified heart is aware of this; that is divine light of yours. If taking rent is not required, don’t take it. Yet, if one of the students has to be dismissed here because of not taking that rent, you choose that student. We cannot be part of that sin. It is your duty with the permission of God. Your dignified heart will make the right decision. Know that, your dignified heart is selected for this duty because it will make the right decision.

Then Muharrem says “believe me Master, those profane affairs are so difficult”. Later we are led to understand that Muharrem has decided to evict the mechanic from the shop but he also experiences an hallucination, an image of the tenant’s wife begging on the street.

Another monetary affair, occurring in the wholesaler in which he works, intensifies his crisis. In a confused state of mind, he sells some sacks to a contractor at a price more than its value. As a ‘good and honest’ Muslim, he is disturbed by the trade and tells this to his boss but partly lies. He pronounces the amount less than he received. The boss does not mind at all and tells him not to exaggerate the case; for the boss, it is legitimate as he already fulfils the economic orders of Islam and, furthermore, the particular case is not a sin according to the Koran. Thereafter, two friends of the contractor visit Muharrem and demand the same amount of sacks the following day. He feels obliged to charge the same, excessive, amount of money the second time. These contractors want to trade with Muharrem because they have heard of his good reputation. Nobody cares about the excess amount of money, except him. He asks himself: “So many lies I have told over and over. So many people I have deceived. Furthermore, everybody is pleased with goings on. How did I do this?”

In addition to the dilemmas he experiences between his past, ordinary and poor, Muslim life and the business affairs that are believed to be Islamic, serving God, by the tarikat’s leader and members, Muharrem occasionally experiences sexual fantasies regarding a particular woman in his dreams. He wakes up, having ejaculated, in a
remorseful and ashamed mood, because he considers himself a sinner, even in his dreams. Banknotes and alcohol accompany the images of the woman. Meanwhile, the Sheikh indirectly asks Muharrem if he thinks of getting married because “marriage is licit in order to meet the necessities of the body and not to fornicate” but he refuses. As his state of mind worsens, he comes to believe that the woman in his dreams might be the ‘evil one’. However, one day he sees her in a shop, covered with a headscarf, and follows her. When she stops in front of the Sheik’s house he asks her who she is, the woman’s reply is traumatic for him: “Don’t you know me, Mr. Muharrem? I am the daughter of the Sheikh”. This is the last episode before he experiences a complete mental breakdown. The Sheikh later exhibits him at one of the gatherings in the dergâh and diagnoses his case as being that of suffering from staying between being one with God and not. Muharrem, however, in the midst of the dilemmas that led to him losing his mind, had bemoaned to Muhittin (his assistant in the shop) about the mood he was in:

I presumed the fear of Him [God] would put me in order. Muhittin, I only wanted to be a good human, only a good human. He exists all the time and everywhere. God exists all the time, everywhere. If you do the things He orders and don’t do the things He refuses, you become a good human in this world and will be at ease in the afterlife. But it didn’t, it doesn’t. The devil exists all the time. Maybe what we call devil is ourselves.

The controversy that emerges in Muharrem as a result of the gap between power and faith stands in the centre of the narrative. The power is exterior, i.e. the power of God as the Highest Being, of the Sheikh and his order, and the administrative or decisive power assigned to Muharrem. His faith, on the other hand, is internal, and has accumulated in him until his experiences executing the administrative post in the tarikat. The contradiction between his internal faith and the external power(s) lead him to suffer from a mental disorder, or to “suffering from staying between being one with God and not”, to quote the Sheikh. In the last scene we see the daughter of Sheikh nursing Muharrem, who is unconsciously laying on a bed in the dergâh.

Apart from narrating the transformation of Muharrem, the film also depicts the political power of the religious orders and the close relations between religion and politics,
which I outlined in the historical discussion of secularism and religion in Turkey. For instance, politicians from Ankara, the capital, visit the Sheikh and request a zikir ritual; that means they know or have heard of him and show respect. In another example, Muharrem does not have to wait in the queue to pay the electricity bills of the state-owned company for the assets that belong to the tarikat, because the branch manager of the company is also a member of, or sympathises with the tarikat, and there is great solidarity among the brothers. Muharrem, however, feels discomfort about overtaking the other customers waiting in the queue and expresses his feelings to Rauf, the Sheik’s assistant. He is then told that their tarikat has to manage those affairs without losing time, since they educate too many youngsters. Thus, his every minute is valuable. He should feel that way. He shouldn’t waste time, wait or be tired. Every single minute he gains is a new opportunity for him to serve God.

Fig. 19. Takva: A Man’s Fear of God (Takva): Muharrem and the daughter of the Sheikh (Dir. Özzer Kızıltan, 2006).

In conclusion Takva: A Man’s Fear of God displays how Sunni Islamic identity has been visible and influential through religious orders in a constitutionally secular state that distanced itself from religion as a founding ideology, and despite the word of Atatürk which denotes that Turkey cannot be a country of ‘sheiks, dervishes, disciples and
followers’. The film’s portrayal of the predominant power of religious orders in a contemporary situation is achieved not through narrating it didactically but rather by focusing on the transformation of an ordinary devout Muslim.

Two other Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films represent how religious bonds influence mundane affairs, which should normally be separate in a secular state. While Sol and Halil of Split (Canan Gerede-2000) wait for the court’s decision as to who their daughters will stay with, Halil invokes the assistance of his Sheikh and the court decides accordingly: the daughters stay with the father. Thus we understand that the judges of the court are under the influence of the Sheikh. In The Master (Bahadır Karataş-2009), on the other hand, Doğan’s brother-in-law benefits from his relations with a religious community in order to become the holder of a franchise, which is implied through an Islamic bureaucrat in Ankara. These two examples exhibit how Islamic bonds assist, and indeed impede, people – they do so by violating the principles of equality and equity in a constitutional state, for the religious orders work in favour of only their members.

**Istanbul beneath My Wings**

The post of şeyhülislam (Sheikh of Islam) and the relations between the state and religion during the Ottoman era has been briefly explained in the historical discussion. To recall, the sultans did not intervene in religious affairs or explicate Islamic law though they were literally the figurehead of religion as the caliph. The şeyhülislam on the other hand, who had a very important rank similar to that of prime minister, could not controvert the sultan’s authority. This hierarchy enabled the adoption of many Westernisation movements in a ‘state of Islam’.

Islam was highly influential in the Ottoman society and it was consistently referred to as a source of restrictions and conservatism. *Istanbul beneath My Wings*, while narrating the story of first flying man in history, mirrors the above-mentioned role of şeyhülislam in the Ottoman state structure and Islamic proscriptions in the 17th century. For instance Sultan Murat IV, upon witnessing Hezarfen Ahmet Çelebi (the man to fly) and his assistant (Lagari Hasan) examining a corpse, brings the ulema (Islam experts)
together and asks:

*Sultan:* Answer me! Does our religion allow such scientific studies on dead bodies?

Şeyhülislam: God forbid. Our religion orders us to surrender the dead to God who gives and takes lives in the world. Even though some physicians have the cunning inclination to practice their art on dead bodies, this inclination is evil temptation.

*Sultan:* I see. How do we punish those who commit the sin?

Şeyhülislam: With death penalty.

During the trial, the rational mind of Hezarfen Ahmet Celebi encounters the Islamic conservatism of Şeyhülislam:

Şeyhülislam: Now let’s take this matter of flying like a bird. Has the Almighty God given you wings? No! The wish to put on wings and fly is defying God’s will, isn’t it?

Ahmet Çelebi: Almighty God didn’t give us wheels. But mankind has invented and used it for his travels. God gave us neither wings nor wheels. But he gave us brains so that we can think.

Şeyhülislam: Enough, you impertinent man! Do you mean that I have no brains?

Ahmet Çelebi: Not at all, my lord. I am referring to those who are unable to use the brains that God gave them. When we use our minds and knowledge, mysteries are solved, mankind progresses and our sufferings lessen.

Şeyhülislam: Sir, of all the nonsense you spout, only the following make sense: “The mind that Almighty God granted us”. But, people like you use your minds to serve your personal pleasures instead of serving God. Therefore you do not deserve to have your lives spared. Instead of being good subjects of Islam, they are bad seeds who deviated from God’s purpose.

Ahmet Çelebi: My lord, each seed is created differently as a unique individual whereupon the community is formed. Individual is the essence of the community. Wasn’t our prophet Muhammed an individual too?

Şeyhülislam: You impertinent fool! Stop profaning the sacred name of our
prophet! What do you mean by saying the individual is essential? The individual exists for the good of the community and the state. You must not ask what the state will do for you, but what you can do for the state. Otherwise there would be chaos, as everyone would have something to say.

*Lagari Hasan:* Let them!

*Ahmet Çelebi:* Is that bad? Mankind progresses only thru the personal progress of each individual’s mind. Therefore, my lord, let everyone have something to say!

At this point Lagari Hasan intervenes and proposes the benefit of flying for military goals. He reminds the court of the siege of Istanbul by Sultan Mehmet II, and the siege of Vienna by Sultan Süleyman, and imagines how easily the flying Ottoman soldiers would dominate their enemies. At that point Sultan Murat IV, who has been monitoring the trial behind a window, intervenes, and allows the two scientists to continue their work on flying but forbids the examination of corpses. This can thus be seen as an example of the superior authority of the state (sultan) over religion (*şeyhülislam*) in the Ottoman Empire, as is previously mentioned.

In addition to *Istanbul beneath My Wings*, Islamic conservatism is represented in three other Eurimages-backed films. Eflatun Efendi, of *Waiting for Heaven* (Deriş Zaim-2006), who is the chief miniaturist of the palace, sketches the portrait of his dead son in a Westernised style. His assistant, Gazel Efendi, invoking the Islamic ban on portraits, says: “Gazel Efendi. Forgive me. Drawing in the style of the infidels only heightens your suffering. If only I hadn’t encouraged you”. In *The Master* (Bahadır Karataş-2009), the mayor orders the removal of a statue of a naked woman, which he perceives to be ‘obscene’ as his morality is, to a large extent, defined by the Islamic worldview. The last example of Islamic conservatism comes from *Waiting for the Clouds* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu-2005). Two men in the town are talking about the ‘infidelity’ of Ayşe/Eleni – who is actually Christian. According to these two, Selma, Ayşe’s elder sister, might also be an ‘infidel’:

- What about Selma?

- How should I know?
- She’s six feet under our cemetery now.
- Let’s dig her up and check.
- How can we check? Women can’t be circumcised.
- We’ll see if the earth accepted her or instead she grew horns.
- At best she has a God.

Besides the above-mentioned scenes that display Islamic conservatism, numerous audio/visual representations of Islam have found a place in Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films. These include depictions of worship, rituals, symbols, concepts and elements of the predominant Sunni sect of Islam. To borrow Billig’s concept of ‘banal reminders of nationhood’ that I referred to in the previous chapter (such as the flags that are not flagged), those signs which are in the background can be called ‘banal reminders of religion’, as cultural signifiers in a Muslim-majority society. The details are explained in Appendix-I. The next section will cover Alevism as the minority Islam belief and its representation in cinema.

Alevism

A very different comprehension and practice of Islam to that of the Sunni majority in Turkey is offered by the Alevi sect. To clarify the distinction between the aforementioned religious order (tarikat), which was represented in Takva: A Man’s Fear of God, a sect (mezhep) is a much larger religious group, sometimes referred to as a denomination, distinct from the larger religious body and has followers in a much wider geographical area. Like the Catholics and Protestants in Christianity, Sunni and Alevi beliefs compose different sects of Islam in Turkey. Spread across a wide geographical area from Central Asia to Africa and Anatolia, Alevism has been shaped by the cultural peculiarities of its adoptive peoples. Alevis exist in various regions of Turkey and – though the overall estimations vary between 10% and over a quarter of the country’s inhabitants – they are mostly estimated to compose about 20% of the country’s population (Poulton 1997; Erman and Göker 2000; Öncü 2006).

A definition of the Alevi way of Islam is not easy to provide, even for Alevis
themselves. Literally expressed, it is the way of the people who are attached to Ali, who was the fourth caliph after Prophet Muhammed; Ali and the twelve imams are sacred in Alevi belief. To love Ali is to love God and to love God is to love Ali. Although they are called the Shi’ites of Turkey in some sources, the only similarity to the Shi’ite Islam of Iran and the Jafari sect in Turkey is their respect for Caliph Ali and the descendants of Prophet Muhammed. The Bektasi order is the most extensive branch of Alevi Islam. While some Sunni Muslims perceive it to be non-Islamic, others categorise any sect which does not fall into Sunni Islam under the umbrella of ‘Alevism’. Depending on the point of view, it is named as ‘a sect in Islam’ (religious term), ‘Turkish way of Islam’ (by Kemalists) or ‘a philosophy of life’ (by left intelligentsia) by different circles. Some even call it ‘Anatolian enlightenment’. I use the term sect for Alevi belief because of its popularity as a word among people in Sunni and Alevi communities and religious scholars. The definition of Murtaza Demir – who is the chairman of Pir Sultan Abdal Foundation for Culture and Education (Pir Sultan Abdal Kültürl ve Eğitim Vakfi), an Alevi organisation - gives general insight into Alevism, denoting it as a secular and humane belief which does not discriminate against women:

We predominantly live in Anatolia. We are no different than Turks and Kurds in terms of our roots. Our notion of God and conception of belief, however, is totally different from those static worshippers and dogmatists. We keep away from ‘essential’ and mathematical pre-acceptance of belief, believe that heaven and hell are in this world, respect and love the human being as one of God’s titles. We are attached to God not modally but at heart. We believe in God not as an entity to be frightened of but to be loved. We sincerely accept that women should have the same rights as men. We reject the primitive understanding which considers woman as a commodity, which insults and packages her in veils, burkas or turbans, and which regards polygamy as the ‘command of God’. (quoted in Çalışlar 2009, 136)

Suffering from the state’s hostility in the form of either slaughter or mistreatment in the Ottoman era, the Alevi community has been ignored throughout the republican era. In the name of national unity, they have been counted in the Turkish-Sunni identity, and thus subjected to assimilation. The curriculum of the compulsory religious courses lower
than that of the university level installed after the military coup of 1980 excluded Alevism in this context. The ban of religious orders and closure of the dervish lodges in 1925 also adversely affected the Alevi community. Mosques have been built in their villages throughout the republican period despite them not going to those places for worship. Cemevi (assembly house), where they worship instead, has not been recognised by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA), nor their belief as a separate sect of Islam. Moreover, they were disallowed from worshiping overtly until the beginning of the 1990s (Cafer Solgun, quoted in Çalışlar 2009, 106).

It was illegal to be organised in a society or foundation under the name ‘Alevi’ for many years due to the ‘divisive act’, until the Supreme Court decision allowed the use of the word in the case of Alevi-Bektashi Federation (Alevi Bektaşı Federasyonu) in 2002. The first Alevi organisation, however, was established in 1963 (Hacıbektaş Turizm Derneği/Hacıbektaş Tourism Association) and the first political party in 1966 (Birlik Partisi/Union Party). The number of organisations and publications increased dramatically after 35 citizens – including artists, authors and poets - were killed during a festival in Sivas, a central Anatolian city, in a hotel fire started by a fundamentalist Sunni Islamist group in 1993. This was not the only violent incident aimed at Alevi citizens: fatal acts of aggression by extreme-right nationalists in Kahramanmaraş (1978), in Çorum (1980) and in Istanbul (1995) were backed or condoned by the state. Although this seems somewhat paradoxical because of the state’s ignorance, or, in some cases, condoning, of aggression toward them, the Alevi community has consistently supported the republican regime and held esteem for Atatürk, as their national status, in the republic, officially rose to ‘equal citizens’ from ‘subjects of the caliph-sultan’, an administration under which they were exposed to consistent persecutions (in the Ottoman period). Their struggle for identity, nevertheless, has endured, and they have mostly supported Kemalist and/or left-wing political parties.

Regarding the PRA, a state institution financed by taxes collected from every

79 A very important occurrence in Alevi history – different in character to the aforementioned aggressions - is the rebellion in Dersim, a region in Eastern Anatolia, and its repression by the state (1937-38). Having an Alevi-majority population, the people of Dersim consistently suffered oppression and persecution during the Ottoman period and maintained a kind of autonomy, which did not quite fit the centralist nation-state structure of the republic. The measures taken to keep the region under control caused a vehement uprising and drastic reaction from the state forces, which in the end left thousands dead and in exile. The name of the province was changed to Tunceli by the end of 1935.
citizen but serving only Sunni Muslims, the Alevis propose two alternative solutions: that it should either be abolished since there is no base for an official religious bureau in a secular state, and each religious group should organise and finance itself, or every religious group in Turkey should have proportional representation in the PRA in accordance with their populations, but not in a hierarchical order. As Ali Balkız, the chairman of the Alevi-Bektashi Federation, has stated, they demand recognition by the state:

(Alevis) call for: ‘Alevi’ printed on the religious section of their identification cards [instead of only Islam]^{80}; the abolition of the compulsory religious courses; the same status for the cemevi that is given to the mosque. They do not wish mosques to be built in Alevi villages and Sunni imams to be appointed for those mosques. They call for Madımak [the hotel in which 35 citizens were killed in 1993] to be turned into a museum and they wish not to be prevented from promotion because of being Alevi. They demand to be able to become generals, governors, and deputies… (quoted in Çalışlar 2009, 36)

Based on face-to-face interviews in twelve cities of Anatolia, the survey on diverse identities in Turkey implemented by Binnaz Toprak (2008, 52-76) et al. outlines the extensive discrimination and prejudice against Alevis by Sunni Muslims. Accordingly: food prepared by an Alevi is believed to be forbidden by religion and thus not consumed; they are not believed to be ‘virtuous’; the marriages between Alevis and Sunnis are very limited; a woman married to a conservative Sunni man is usually forced to fast and to perform the namaz; Alevi employees and trades-people are discriminated against and they feel forced to go to Friday prayers and fast during Ramadan, or appear to be fasting, though their belief does not require that they do so; their villages and districts are not properly served and demands for worship places are not met by the municipalities; they have to hide their identity because of the above-mentioned reasons.

Like the state, Turkish cinema has also substantially ignored Alevi identity. When a filmmaker has needed to display a religious sign or focus on a religious theme, this in most cases has been one belonging to Sunni Islam. The reason behind this might be

^{80} The European Court of Human Rights decided in 2010, upon an application by a Turkish Alevi citizen, that a ‘religion’ section on identification cards infringes the principle of the freedom not to disclose religious beliefs and thoughts (AIHM 2010).
the extensive prejudice against Alevi identity among the Sunni majority and the desire not to lose this mass audience. *Ali (Hazreti Ali)* by Tunç Başaran, for instance, is one of the few films that addressed an Alevi audience. It was made in 1969, during a period when it was popular to narrate the lives of religiously important figures, and focused on the life of Caliph Ali who is respected by Alevis. Regarding the Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films, four out of fifty-nine films represent Alevi identity, which is quite a high percentage when compared to the cases in Turkish film history.

**Summer Love**

Focusing on the romantic first love of a teenager girl for a boy who is a few years older than her, *Summer Love* (2001) by Barış Pirhasan, a Eurimages-backed film, puts both the Alevi identity and the prejudices against Alevi communities on display. Esma is sent to her relatives living in a village in Eastern Anatolia by her parents in Ankara for the summer holiday. She gets closer to her aunt Saliha there and shares her feelings for Hüseyin - a boy in the neighbouring village. She sadly learns, however, at the end, that Hüseyin does indeed love her aunt. The population of the village of Esma’s relatives are Sunni while Hüseyin’s village is a member of Alevi community.

Esma and her Sunni Muslim relatives call the neighbouring Alevis ‘red turbans’ (*kızılbaşılar*). The term ‘red turban’ is normally a word historically assigned to the Alevi community and there are various stories of its origin. However, its usage by prejudicial Sunni conservatives refers to all the perceived negative aspect of Alevi culture today. For instance during a talk between Esma and her aunt about Hüseyin, Saliha even says that they are members of different religions, which is a representation of the fact that some Sunni Muslims perceive Alevism to be non-Islamic, as discussed above:

*Saliha:* Listen carefully. There is no laughing matter. You’re not the same age or religion.

*Esma:* Why not the same religion? Aren’t they Muslims? They shout ‘Allah Allah’ from the rooftops as well.

Then Saliha corrects herself:

*Saliha:* Did I say they weren’t Muslims?
This objection of Esma comes after she joins a cem ritual; until then she knows almost nothing about Alevism, as we understand in a talk between her and her Alevi friends. One of her friends informs Esma that they don’t have hodjas or imams but there’s dedes (religious leaders) instead and Esma is told about Ali, the 12 imams and Karbala – the key elements of Alevi belief. All Esma knows about them is that they are ‘red turbans’. Esma defends herself on the grounds that she failed the religion course in school. Upon this the others make fun of that, implying that Alevism is not taught in religion courses or only prejudices about Alevis are given in those courses.

The film also shows a cem ritual, the collective assembly, at length where we witness many details. All the families of the Alevi community are gathered, they worship in the way their belief requires, some of them play the bağlama (Turkish/Alevi folk instrument) and some others dance the semah where both women and men participate. As shown in the film, cem ritual is very different from the Sunni Muslim practices.

Similarly, we see a cem ritual in the Eurimages-backed The Road Home (Semir Aslanyürek-2006); when Mahmut, the protagonist, visits the Alevi master (pir) after returning from war. Besides this, The Road Home also exposes Sunni prejudice in a scene which alludes to the misbelief that ‘Alevis are not virtuous because they put out the candle and engage in incestuous sexual affairs’: learning that Mahmut is from Antakya (a southern city close to Syrian border where the Alevi population is dense), one of the soldiers in the front tells him what he has heard by saying “some people do that candle thing there”.  

The other two Eurimages-backed films that represent Alevi identity are Tales of Intransigence (Reis Çelik-2004) and Istanbul beneath my Wings (Mustafa Altıoklar-1996): in the former film, we see the portrait of Ali on the wall of Şahsenem’s house, and in the latter Bekri Mustafa represents the Bektashi culture, which is a branch of Alevism.

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81 The phrase “candle went out” (mum söndü) alludes to an accusation about a holy moment of some cem rituals in which twelve candles (representing the Twelve Imams) are doused with water. For centuries it has been widely spread among Sunnis to demean Alevis by accusing them of having (incestuous) sexual affairs after blowing off the ritual candles. However, this is a rumoured belief which does not exist (Alevi 2012). Alevis are quite sensitive about this prejudice among Sunnis. A famous showman in 1995 (Guner Umit) and another one in 2010 (Mehmet Ali Erbil) made jokes about the ‘candle thing’ in live broadcasts, and both were fired by their TV channels following the serious extent of the reaction by Alevi citizens.
Christianity

I explained in the previous chapter that the *millet* system adopted by the Ottoman state was based on religious affiliation and that word was synonymous with community. Accordingly each community had a kind of limited autonomy and a religious leader’s function was to ensure his community’s obedience to the sultan. While the secular republican regime abolished the system based on religious affiliation and rendered individuals as equal citizens of the same imagined community, the equal treatment of non-Muslim minority groups was mainly provided by the protective articles of Treaty of Lausanne (articles 37-44). One may argue that the acceptance of Turkishness and Sunni Islam as the basis for national identity and integrity on the one hand, the Treaty of Lausanne on the other, contributed to the isolation of Christian minorities.

Notwithstanding the fact of bearing Turkish passports and serving their legal obligations (tax payment, military service, etc.), the general perception is that the Christian minorities have not been accepted in the Turkish identity and not seen as ‘genuine’ citizens, but rather as a fifth column, the extension of the external powers of their kin states (Greece and Armenia) inside the country. The support by Ottoman-Greek citizens of the Greek army that invaded Western Anatolia after the WWI, and the desire of some Ottoman-Armenian citizens for an independent state in Eastern Anatolia nourished feelings of hostility against these two minority groups, which have not ceased even years after the establishment of the republic. I outlined in the previous chapter some of the lived experiences which worked against them, such as the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, the *capital levy* of 1942, the riots on 6-7 September 1955, and the exile of Greeks from Istanbul in 1964.

Besides the problematic situation of the Christian minorities in relation to national identity, it is not easy to say that they are not under oppression in terms of religious freedom, especially in the smaller cities of Anatolia. For instance, research by Toprak et al. (2008, 103-07) suggests that both the religious commissaries and the ordinary Christian worshippers feel intimidated to speak about their problems and they lead an invisible life in small cities. The fatal aggression experienced by Christian priests
and missionaries in recent years probably reinforced this feeling.82 On the other hand some churches in Anatolia that had been out of service for many years have been renovated and opened for worship recently. In larger cities such as Istanbul the situation appears less problematic. However, the status of the patriarchate has been a controversial issue for a long time. The state accepts the patriarchate in Istanbul as an institution of the Republic of Turkey and the patriarch is the head of Greek-Orthodox community. Accordingly, only Turkish citizens can serve at the post of patriarch and as bishops, and this issue is one of internal affairs. The patriarchate, on the contrary, claims that it is universal and the ecumenical authority for Orthodox Christians all over the world, i.e. the equivalent of the pope of Catholicism.

Since questions related to ethnic and religious identities have not been asked in the censuses since 1965, it is impossible to give exact figures for the membership of the various religious communities in Turkey today. Nevertheless, an approximate estimate of the number of Christians is as follows: 65,000 Armenian Orthodox, 15,000 Syriac Orthodox, 3,300 Jehovah’s Witnesses, 3,000 Protestants, up to 3,000 Greek Orthodox, and additionally small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian, Chaldean, Nestorian, Georgian, and Maronite Christians (U.S. Department of State 2010).

Christianity, though, has been represented in quite a high number of Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films, considering these communities compose in total less than 1% of the country’s population. Some of those representations are in transnational stories of a non-Turkish individual or context. A great majority of representations of Christianity relate to Greek-Orthodox identity. Various symbols and acts, from church to praying practices and the patriarchate, are observable in these films as part of the filmic subjects’ religious identities, presented in a neutral manner to meet the requirements of the story. Older Turkish cinema, however, in some cases represented Christianity in a rather negative light, as in the symbols of the ‘enemy-Byzantium’ in the historical B-films for instance. In Eurimages-backed films, a Christian symbol is used as a contrastive element in only one scene of Split (Canan Gerede-2000): the Muslim Halil pulls off his Christian wife’s (Sol) cross necklace while they are making love. The director is not on Halil’s side.

82 Some of the recent aggressions against Christian religious figures include: Father Santoro was killed in Trabzon (2006); Father Francini was wounded in an attack in Izmir (2007); three missionaries were killed in Malatya (2007); Bishop Padovese was killed in Iskenderun (2010).
here, but depicts the act to give the spectator an idea about his personality and religious fundamentalism at the beginning of the story. All other Christian representations in Eurimages-backed Turkish initiative films can be found in Appendix-I.

Judaism

The Ottoman state is seen as the protector of Jews, in history, who suffered from the persecution carried out in Christian Europe. Large numbers of Jewish groups immigrated to the Ottoman Empire before and after their expulsion from Spain in 1492, as well as from other countries, which led to the composition of one of the largest Sephardic communities in the world. They were mainly domiciled in Istanbul, Salonika and some Anatolian towns. Similarly, many academics and intellectuals who had to leave Nazi Germany in the 1930s came to Turkey and worked as scholars in Turkish universities.

Although Jews were the most self-contained community and those who spoke the minimum level of Turkish during the Ottoman period (Koloğlu 1999), they were integrated into the nation-state project to a much greater extent than the Christians after the establishment of the republic: “On 15 September 1925, Bejerano [the Chief Rabbi] voluntarily renounced the Jewish millet’s special status as guaranteed under Article 42 of the Lausanne Treaty, instead opted for ordinary Turkish citizenship” (Poulton 1997, 279). However, the ‘Citizen, Speak Turkish!’ campaign, at the end of the 1920s, which was aimed at the minorities and implored for them to speak not in their mother tongues but in Turkish in public spaces, overshadows the general idea that the Jews of Turkey voluntarily integrated themselves into the nation-state project as a whole; there seems to have been a degree of compulsion. Today the mother tongue of almost all of the Jews in Turkey is Turkish, besides a European language, most commonly Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). There was never a neighbour-kin state which could nurture feelings on the Jews’ part and they did not collaborate with the allied powers which invaded Anatolia after WWI but supported the War of Independence, so the Jews of Turkey in general have not been perceived as ‘untrustworthy’ in the same way that the Greek and Armenian minorities have been.

Unlike most of Europe, Turkey has scarcely seen officialised, state-sponsored
anti-Semitism in its history. For instance, ghettos which isolate Jews from the rest of society were never in operation in the Ottoman state. On the contrary, Jews were considered by the empire to be ‘the faithful people’. Research conducted by Toktaş (2006) consisting of face-to-face interviews with members of the Jewish community in Istanbul shows that, while there has never been official anti-Semitism at the state level, some individuals do exhibit such discriminative prejudices. However, a report by the World Jewish Congress in 1938 (La Situation Economique des Juifs Dans le Monde) points out that the policy of Turkey in favour of nationalising the economy through state capitalism in the post-war period had adverse effects on the Jews; although Turkish citizenship was legally sufficient to allow them to engage in business with the state or to work in state institutions, what was required in practice was to be a Muslim and Turkish citizen (Bali 2005, 173-77). According to Rifat N. Bali, a Jewish researcher, the general opinion that there exists no anti-Semitism in Turkey stems from the expressions of eminent businessmen who are known as representatives of the Jewish community, for they undertook the mission of promoting Turkey (309).

An example of anti-Semitic prejudice is the incidents of 1934. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, propaganda about Jews increased in some of the media and caused violence against the property of Jewish citizens in a few provinces of Thrace. Thousands of Jews had to sell their real estate and move to Istanbul after this. The state did not tolerate the violence and the media and provocateurs responsible for the incidents were penalised (Toktaş 2006). In the capital levy of 1942 and the incidents of 6-7 September 1955, on the other hand, Jewish citizens were also adversely affected, not for being Jewish but for being members of a non-Muslim minority group. Other than being exposed to prejudices similar to other non-Muslim minorities, the Jews of Turkey have occasionally received negative reactions due to their relatively wealthy position in society and also as a result of the anti-Semitic propaganda of the extreme religious right. Anti-Semitic propaganda carried out by religious right media and political groups in recent years resonate with a certain group of people – who have Islamic sensitivity – due to the disputes in the Middle East and the Israel-Palestine controversy. However, despite the absence of anti-Semitism at the state level, in practice it is almost impossible, and highly unexpected, for a Jewish citizen to achieve a high position in the state bureaucracy.
The Jewish population in Turkey has fluctuated depending on international political situations. It increased during WWII, for instance, and decreased after the establishment of Israel, because of emigration to the new state. The Jewish population is estimated at between 20,000 and 25,000 today (Epstein 1989; Toktaş 2006; U.S. Department of State 2010).83

Regarding Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films, the representation of Jewish identity is low and indirect in comparison with other non-Muslim groups, i.e. Christians. In Istanbul beneath My Wings (Mustafa Altıoklar-1996), besides an Italian, a Spanish and an Armenian scholar, Evliya Çelebi also takes sketches and notes to Mr. Itzak - who is a Jew - for translation, which are in an unknown language and probably about flying. Another representation about Judaism occurs in Honey (Semih Kaplanoğlu-2010): a group of women are gathered to commemorate the Prophet Muhammed’s ascension to heaven and they mention the names of some other prophets as well, among those named is Aaron, a prophet of the Jews.

Conclusion

Aiming to go above and beyond ‘contemporary civilisation’ as a modernised and radically secular state, the republican regime adopted secular principles which preceded and contributed to the formation and permanence of a relatively democratic order in a Muslim-majority country. However, though secularism requires the segregation of state affairs and religion, the state made use of religion for the reinforcement of Turkish national identity and integrity; hence one can say that the republican regime absorbed the Ottoman tradition of the state’s priority and superiority over religion. The Presidency of Religious Affairs was formed in this respect and could not escape the criticism of imposing a ‘moderate and secular’ Islam on the one hand and excluding non-Sunni identities on the other. Thus the practice of the republican regime has been described not as secularism but rather as the promotion of a ‘state-Islam’.

Following the transition to a multi-party democracy, Sunni Islam became a central subject of politics, and the religious sentiments of the voters have been exploited

83 Toktaş refers to: Karimova and Deverell.
for political ends. Social uncertainty brought about by the growing capitalist economy in the 1960s and the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis - which proposed a fusion of Islam and Turkish nationalism adopted as the official ideology of the state by the military coup leaders of 1980 - paved the way for the Islamist movements and religious orders to gain power and Islamic identity to become more of an issue. Non-Sunni identities, on the contrary, have been ignored or excluded. Of these, Alevism, which suffered persecution during the Ottoman period, has been ignored by the state in the republic though Alevis have officially become equal citizens of the country. They have also been subjected to extensive prejudice and discrimination by some conservative Sunni Muslims. Regarding non-Muslim identities, Christians have not been perceived as ‘genuine’ Turkish citizens due to political-historical factors, whereas Jews have been more integrated into the nation-state and have not been considered to be as hostile as the Christians. However, both have had to endure inequities, which have stemmed from their being of a different religion in a Muslim-majority country.

Various audio/visual representations of religious identities may be found in a relatively high number of Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films. Out of these, Sunni Islam has unsurprisingly been the most common. The representation of Alevism has been relatively high, compared to older Turkish cinema, but is still low in proportion to their population. Christian representations, on the other hand, have been quite high in number – sixteen films – especially in proportion to their population. Jews have been indirectly represented in only two films. The number of depictions of religious identities in films is shown on the graph (see figure 20).

The Sunni Muslim identity has been backgrounded in forty-three out of fifty-nine Eurimages-backed films via a variety of prayer practices, symbols, rituals or symbols as the most extensive cultural signifiers of the majority religion. In particular two films problematise different aspects of Islam religion, filmic time of one is today and the other is in the past. Takva: A Man’s Fear of God (Özer Kızıltan-2006) displays the profane affairs of a specific religious order and portrays an ordinary devout man who is entangled in the power games therein. Istanbul beneath My Wings (Mustafa Altıoklar-1996) exhibits the religious conservatism in the 17th century Ottomans. Of the four films that represent Alevi identity, Summer Love (Barış Pirhasan-2001) and The Road Home (Semir
Aslanyürek-2006) draw attention to the Sunni prejudices against Alevi community, display their religious ritual and inform about their belief. When it comes to non-Muslim identities, they have been represented neither in positive nor in negative ways by the filmmakers in the films, but rather neutrally depicted or backgrounded in accordance with the requirements of the stories.

![Fig. 20. The number of Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films in which diverse religious identities have been represented or problematised (minimum numbers out of 59 films).](image)