At the beginning of the 1980s, in the public consciousness of Turkey, the existence of Alevilik, a centuries-old religious community, was nearly forgotten. In the course of the 1970s the majority of its members turned to socialism, abandoning their formerly religiously defined identity. Statements claiming the complete disappearance of Alevilik as a community were frequently heard throughout Turkey. Was Alevilik at this time really extinguished and merely a matter of history? The answer to this question came in a striking way. From the late 1980s on, Alevilik became the object of a dazzling process of rediscovery. The efforts at community revival were soon recognised by the public, and thus the “question of Alevilik” became one of the most discussed topics in the Turkish media.

As the term Alevilik refers at the same time to a belief system and to a particular community, I prefer to use the Turkish term Al evilik instead of Alevism in order to emphasize both the ideological as well as the sociological aspects of the phenomenon. The first visible signs of the revitalisation of Alevilik were the emergence of Alevi periodicals and newspapers, a great number of (mostly apologetic) publications by Alevi authors on Alevilik, and the establishment of community-based associations throughout Turkey and in the European diaspora. They expressed a new and often contradictory understanding of the essence of Alevilik. As a result of these activities, the community experienced a rapid penetration into all realms of the public arena.


1 The term Alevilik refers to a widespread religious community, members of which are to be found primarily in Turkey and in smaller numbers in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Bulgaria, Greece, Rumania and Albania. In spite of its syncretistic belief structure, which shows strong traces of gnosticism, the community recognises itself inside the general frame of Islam. As a community which defines membership through descent and possesses a strong and exclusive collective identity, Alevilik exhibits in some ways the characteristics of an ethnic group as it is regarded in the “formalistic” view of Frederik Barth (Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity, in H.Vermeulen and C.Govers eds., The Anthropology of Ethnicity, Amsterdam, 1994) and his followers.
The rediscovery of the Alevi community depends on various factors at various levels. Among them we can roughly distinguish sociological and political factors. From the sociological point of view, the rural exodus, which in the case of the Alevi reached its peak during the 1970s for economic and political reasons, is surely the most decisive factor. Migration to the cities inevitably imposed new, urban forms of expression on Alevilik which, in the foregoing centuries had maintained its existence in remote rural areas of the country. Rapid urbanisation led not least to fundamental changes in the social structure of the community. Thus the great increase in the number of educated Alevi and the emergence of an Alevi bourgeoisie resulted in a new social stratification.

In very broad terms, the political factors can be reduced to three essential points. The first is the collapse of the socialist block in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. As a result of this development, socialism, which in the previous two decades had an indisputable authority as an ideological alternative for the young and middle generations of Alevi, lost its former importance. Politically frustrated, a large part of the Alevi population began to seek other paths. Among them there were a great number of individuals who in the course of their activities in left-wing parties and groupings throughout the 1970s had gained political experience and extensive social networks. In the late 1980s, many of them began to redefine themselves as “Alevi”. Looking back they regarded the neglect of Alevilik in favour of socialism as a failure. They discovered Alevilik as an ideology, which they now regarded as being even more just, egalitarian and libertarian than socialism. Their motto became “From now on we will strive for Alevilik”. The “return” of these circles to the community to which they had belonged led to a rapid introduction of modern terms and methods into Alevilik.

The second and perhaps most important factor was the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, or, more accurately, of political Islam in Turkey. Because of their considerable and extensive historical inheritance, the Alevi were put on the alert by the Islamic reassertion which had gained a new impetus through the Islamic Revolution of Iran. I am of the opinion that the most important motive for the establishment and rapid expansion of Alevi organisations today lies in the defensive instinct of the Alevi against the rise of Islamism, which led to various efforts by the emerging organisations to create political unity. How deep-rooted this fear is can be seen in the fact that even organisations with differing understandings of the nature of Alevilik were able to exhibit a common political attitude. A massacre of participants in an Alevi cultural festival in Sivas on 2 July 1993 by Islamists aggravated this traditional tension and strengthened the tendencies toward the politicisation of the Alevi community.

The third political factor responsible for the Alevi revival is the Kurdish problem. Since an important part of Alevis are Kurds, they became aware through this conflict of the fact that nationalist tensions directly affected their community. This awareness led to various expressions of Alevi ethnicity according to the dominant discourses in the country. Thus, when faced with Islamism, the Alevi tend towards the political choice of secularism and express their identity in

2 As it is neither possible to make an accurate statement about the real size of the Alevi, nor the Kurdish population in Turkey, the proportion of Kurds among the Alevis as a whole can only be estimated at between 10 to 20%. 
When confronted with Kurdish nationalism, however, they tend towards the principle of unity and stress their religious identity and affiliation as Alevi. The great uneasiness the Alevi felt in the face of the growing Islamisation of Turkish culture and society led them to search for ideological alternatives to it, which many find in the universalist ideology of Enlightenment. Confronted with post-modern ideologies, however, which have gained in importance among Western intellectuals, Alevi community leaders, who until very recently took part in movements of Third World socialism, became paralysed. Since the ideology of Third World socialism involves Westernisation from above, it has strong parallels to Kemalism. The representatives of the Alevi community movement, who were ideologically still bound to the idea of universalism, became increasingly aware of the contradiction between their claimed universalism and the particularistic character of the Alevi revival in which they were active. This resulted in a state of political irresolution. In the course of these developments, the formerly commonly held religious identity and the new ethnic-political identity turned against each other.

In the 1980s, in the midst of this confusion, when Alevis from every stratum and ideological orientation felt themselves struck with a deep sense of solitude and alienation, they began to appear in the public sphere. Their activities were directed to the revitalisation of various aspects of Alevilik and led to the beginning of what we can call the Alevi rediscovery movement. In its first phase it expressed a sort of compulsory unity of different political aspirations, and social and religious positions. At this time, Alevi established close connections with various sectors of the society and political circles. But the impossibility of maintaining the initial picture of unity soon became generally recognised. Efforts were now made to define the direction of Alevi revival. Due to the heterogeneous character of Alevi society, however, these efforts resulted in the establishment of axes based on sociological, political and cultural criteria. In addition, contradictions between the traditional and new community leaders and their political and social preferences created the present-day image of a chaotic Alevilik.

In the course of the rediscovery process, Enlightenment theory, positivism and Marxism began to play quite different roles in Alevi society than they had in the 1970s. At that time, these ideologies, while defended by a great number of Alevis, were no identified with Alevilik itself. On the contrary, their protagonists emphasised the necessity of abandoning Alevilik in favour of new, secular ideologies and identities. Today, however, they argue that “true Alevilik” means nothing but a democratic, progressive and secular system of thought. Alevilik interpreted as such appears as a slightly different version of the Declaration of Human Rights.

For centuries, Alevilik could maintain its semi-syncretistic religious structure within the framework of oral tradition. Under urban conditions however, as orality could no longer play its former role in passing on religious traditions, we observe the emergence of new political and divergent religious preferences. Within the present process of rediscovery, neither the traditional nor the new Marxism-oriented circles could maintain

their former positions. In the following section, I would like to discuss some aspects of the main discourses inside the Alevi community which reveal these contradictions.

Recently, some members of the traditional religious elite began to describe Alevilik as the “real Islam”. They argued that since Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet and the central figure of Alevi religious teaching, had also fulfilled the five *farz* laid down by Islam, the Alevi should do this in the same way. While coming close to the orthodox understanding of Islam, the defenders of this view were faced with the difficult choice of deciding for the Sunni or the Shi’i path of Islam. According to the religious inheritance of Alevilik, which shares some of its main symbols with the Shi’a, they were actually more willing to accept Shi’a as the right way. But in the face of the political disadvantages arising from traditional Turkish-Iranian rivalry, they at last seem to favour Sunnism.

An important group of the new circles defines Alevilik as a “secular belief” supported by folkloristic features. They intend to free traditional Alevilik, which depends on the doctrine of a trinity in the form “Allah-Mohammed-Ali”, from its “superstitions”. These circles define Alevilik as an ethno-political entity lying largely outside religious contexts.

A third group consists of a coalition of the so-called modern and traditional circles inside Alevilik. Their attempts are directed at keeping those features of Alevilik which are considered authentic, including its heterodox and syncretistic structure. Thus they stay at an equal distance from both positions defining Alevilik as a “secular belief” and as the “real Islam”. Hence, this group has had to manage under the most difficult conditions, as, under urban conditions, maintenance of the oral transmission of an eclectic theosophy. This became nearly impossible, but led to the emergence of new questions of how to create an Alevi theology. Should Alevilik try to establish a theology for itself? Or should it set the goal of reforming Islam in Turkey by building a bridge built on Sufism between Alevilik and Sunnilik?

It seems that the latter two groups will become the most influential in defining present and future Alevilik. The adherents of the first mentioned group are likely to become integrated either into the Sunni or Shi’i community. It seems that a new Alevilik will emerge as a result of the activities of the latter two groups. Their answers to the questions, which cut both groups vertically, require confrontation with tradition. The answers will determine the frame of a new Alevilik.

The most important question regards the definition of an Alevi. Traditionally, membership in the Alevi community was determined by descent. For those circles who want to establish an ethno-political movement, reliance upon a descent-determined community as a ready socio-political base makes the realisation of their political aspirations easier. This attitude, however, involves a principal difficulty. As this group defines Alevilik in terms of universal values, it has to justify why it should be treated as a separate entity by individuals or social movements outside the community, which likewise refer to the Universal Human Rights Declaration.

The second group, which I call the coalition of “traditional” and “modern” circles, has the same difficulties, resulting however from other considerations. This group, while defining Alevilik as a belief system, easily distinguishes Alevis from non-Alevis, but at the same time suffers from the fact that an important number of Alevi are not attached to Alevi beliefs. Since they define Alevi beliefs as universal, in principle everyone should be acknowledged as Alevi who defines himself or herself as such. Does this also mean...
that in some cases individuals with Alevi origin would not be acknowledged as Alevi?

The same subject raises, especially for the second group, another important problem. A liberalisation pertaining to the origin of and connection to the lineage is directly related to the position of the members of the Holy Lineage, the dedes themselves. The term dede refers to the spiritual leaders of the Alevi. They obtain their spiritual power by claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammed through one of the twelve Imams. As such, they are accepted by their adherents as being innocent by birth, a belief of obviously Twelve Shi’i character. As the traditional spiritual leaders defined through descent from the Holy Lineage, the dedes now see their positions endangered by the possibility of “self-ascriptive” Alevis, since they could also generate “self-ascriptive” dedes. For them, to stress the importance of descent and thus that of lineage, is a matter of maintaining the source of their legitimacy as unquestioned authorities. At this point, the relation between Alevilik and Bektaşilik appears in a new light. As a Sufi order, Bektaşilik shares the basic beliefs and symbols of Alevilik but, in contrast to it, membership in the order depends on voluntary association. Until very recently, Alevi and Bektaşi expressed sharply different social, cultural and religious identities. The Bektaşi Order traditionally had its adherents among the middle- and lower-class urban and semi-urban population. In the course of the recent Alevi revival movement, which is mainly an urban phenomenon, a convergence towards Bektaşilik became more and more apparent. This approach can be seen as part of a political strategy to strengthen its own position by gaining allies. From the beginning, it became usual to speak of “Alevi-Bektaşilik” as one and the same phenomenon; for the sake of unity the shared principles came to the fore, while the differences were overlooked. At this point, however, the emergence of serious problems might be expected in the future, especially concerning the question discussed above, i.e. the legitimacy of leadership. As Bektaşilik determines its spiritual leaders by election, it rejects the Twelver-Shi’i principle of hereditary leadership (imamet).

Another important point directly related to this question must be considered. Until recently, the Alevi movement was one of “organising one’s domestic life”. This meant that it was merely engaged in the internal affairs of the community, such as the building of new community structures and institutions. Due to recent socio-political developments in the country, however, the Alevi movement has become more outward-orientated today its representatives address non-Alevi and intend to make Alevilik a centre of attraction for them. This fact requires a particular form of address. Alevis occasionally brag about a Sunni Muslim or a Christian converting to Alevilik. The outcomes of such events, however, are still not clear with regard to their general acceptance.

As a result of this process of opening outward, Alevilik will face an important problem concerning its religious choices. As long as Alevilik depended on oral tradition, it could maintain various antagonistic religious ideas. The most striking example regards the theory of imamet versus that of velayet. A decision in favour of the theory of imamet will undoubtedly bring Alevilik closer to Shi’ism. At present, the possibility of favouring

4 Here I refer to the Sufic concept of velayet as defined by Muhyiddin ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240). According to Ibn al-’Arabi, a person can reach perfection by individual efforts and thus become a veli or a Perfect Man/Woman (insan-l kâmil) who possesses direct knowledge of God. In this conception of velayet the principle of descent is irrelevant.
the theory of *velayet* seems to be more realistic. In this case, Alevilik will be dominated by its Sufi tradition. The choice the Alevi will favour in the future will undoubtedly have political consequences, as Sufi and Twelver Shi’i concepts have had completely different attitudes towards political power.

At this point it is necessary to make some remarks on the historical emergence of Alevilik. Until the 16th century, we cannot speak of the existence of the religious group which later came to be known as Alevilik. There were various heterodox groups in Anatolia with more or less close relations to one another. With the emergence of the Safavi Dynasty, however, two differing tendencies became influential inside these groups. Beside the various Sufi, *tasavvuf*-influenced beliefs which existed all along inside these heterodox groups, a more juridical, fikih-oriented understanding became visible due to the Safavi influence. We have at present no proof of Shi’i traces in Anatolian heterodoxy. A principle like *teberra*, withdrawing, for example, or themes like the Twelvers’ *di vezdeh imam* and the martyrdom of Hüseyin at Kerbela are nearly impossible to find in the *nefes*, hymns, before the 16th century. It seems that Alevilik, which did not make a decision between its *tasavvuf* inheritance and that of the historically more recent theory of *imamet*, will be forced to make this choice due to the restrictions of the newly emerged written tradition nearly 400 years after the beginning of the Savafi indoctrination.

Let us turn back to the present development. It seems that the most divergent tendencies within the rediscovery movement are those on the political level. The overwhelming majority of the Alevi population is strongly opposed to the Islamist movement, including the idea of an Islamic state. More narrowly, an important majority supports social democratic policies. But recent developments, especially as a consequence of the massacre at Sivas, led to the emergence of new political alternatives. A proposal for the foundation of an Alevi political party, which did not generate much interest in previous years was put on the agenda. On the other hand, the overall nationalist discourse in the country, first of all in connection with the Kurdish problem, increasingly affected both Kurdish and Turkish Alevi. A considerable number of Kurdish Alevi took sides with the Kurdish movement. Among a section of the Turkish Alevi, a new tendency can be observed reflecting Turkish nationalist and even racist attitudes. Both of these political choices are completely alien to Alevi traditions. The stressing of a merely ethnic/national identity, be it Turkish, Kurdish or Zaza, until recently did not play a role in Alevilik, as its members defined themselves by religious categories. In nation-oriented discussions of Kurdish or Turkish Alevi, common symbols tend to be divided along ethnic lines. Thus, the patron saint of Alevilik, Haci Bektaş, appears at the same time as the patron saint of Turkish nationalism. On the other hand, those who insist upon their Kurdish identity as prior to Alevi identity, take the 16th century poet and rebel Pir Sultan Abdal as their symbol.

Thus, all the important questions in the history of the Alevi in particular and that of modern Turkey in general are combined in the rediscovery movement inside present-day Alevilik. The problems affecting society as a whole have increasingly become the problems of the Alevi community itself. Answers sought to these questions are not sought in an empty arena. The community in question is not a minor one, with approximately 15–20 or, according to other estimates, 6–10 million adherents, it represents at the very
least 10%, more probably 25% of the entire population. Therefore, answers to the questions discussed above may require the interference of the political forces in Turkey and may even reach international platforms.