

## Urban Visions and Religious Communities: Access and Visibility

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The following essay is not primarily focused on the Alevi, but on some questions related to the intersection of urban and religious studies.<sup>1</sup> Since urbanity is a vital issue when discussing the Alevi, whether they are understood as a social or religious group, some more general trends in Turkish society could be brought up. Moreover, this essay is an attempt to avoid the tendency to view religious communities as purely and solely religious. Faith is not the only way to explain the activities of pious people. Religion is sometimes so sharply focused that other dimensions of human life tend to fade away. My own interest in the relation between religious life and urbanity emanates from a fieldwork I have recently conducted in Istanbul among some young women in a small, independent Muslim group. Their ability to stretch given social and religious boundaries has made me realize how very direct the impact of the mega-city is on individual lives. Through negotiations within the given system, freedoms and possibilities hitherto unthinkable have been obtained. During the last decade, Islamic women, as well as the Alevi, have gained access to social and political platforms, and thereby a new visibility in society. The young and active in Turkey have developed their own rules in the 1990s.

It is undeniable that Istanbul, like all major Turkish cities, has been exposed to an uncontrolled growth of population, which is often emphasized when the new visibility of Islam is debated. The drastic consequences of urbanization are certainly not only demographic and economic. Istanbul has in the last decade attracted scholarly attention as a mega-city with its new constellations and loyalties between groups.<sup>2</sup> The importance of the local arena—and its relation to the global—is attracting more attention. Istanbul is now part of a worldwide economy and complicated economical networks have been built up throughout the city. The evaluations of the social and cultural effects are topics of constant debate inside and outside Turkey. New city dwellers—often frowned upon by people with a longer family history in the city and used as scapegoats in populist

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Brown noted more than ten years ago that few studies are “particularly concerned with religious dimensions or representations of religion in the spatial or social landscape of urban life” (“The Uses of a Concept: ‘The Muslim City’”, *Middle East Cities in Comparative Perspectives*, K.Brown et al. (eds.), London, 1986, p. 79). And to a large extent that opinion still holds true.

<sup>2</sup> See Ç.Keyder and A.Öncü, *Istanbul and the Concept of World Cities*, Istanbul, 1993; M.Sönmez, “Istanbul and the Effects of Globalization”, *Istanbul* [English ed.] 1996, 101–111; A.Aksoy and K.Robins, “Istanbul between Civilization and Discontent”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 10 (1994), 57–74.

argumentation—have rapidly developed distinct forms of urban culture.<sup>3</sup> Istanbul is now encountering a process of global cultural hybridization, offering its inhabitants and visitors a paradox of given forms and changable personal choices.<sup>4</sup> The city with its ancient history is often conceived by its old inhabitants with a romantic past time glory and with a considerable portion of nostalgia.<sup>5</sup> Today there are apparent dreams of the Ottoman era among various groups, with assiduous attempts to “re-connect with Ottoman culture—aiming to reformulate its cosmopolitan principles in the modern and global context of the 1990s” as Nilüfer Göle formulates the problem.<sup>6</sup> Some secular debaters stress the Ottoman blend of cultures and religions in contrast to later Kemalist centralism, while Islamic writers point to the *millet-system* and the well-structured relations and unquestionable hierarchies between various religious groups and the state. Some participants in the debate on identity and cultural heritage praise how global culture in the cities is now mixed with local traditions from more distant parts of Turkey. But what is hailed as the fruits and benefits of the world city, is not appreciated by, or even inaccessible to, all İstanbul’s inhabitants. Opponents of the enthusiastic view argue that the postmodern city is characterized by lack of planning and structure, and not only by an opportune fluidity and blend of life styles, but also by severe conflicts at different levels of society.

Today the cultural dominance of the urban secular elite is challenged by first and second generation rural migrants and by a steadily strengthening Muslim middle class. The sound of *arabesk* and *ezan* merges in the air of Istanbul.<sup>7</sup> New syntheses are established, where religious traditions have a more evident role than twenty years ago. Michael Meeker has summarized the processes: “The resurgence of Islam in Turkey is better understood as a transformation, rather than a revival, of religiosity”.<sup>8</sup>

It is doubtful whether it is proper to speak of the Muslim movement in the singular as complex as it is. The various Muslim groups involved are certainly not only *şeriat* oriented Islamists. In contemporary Turkey there is a multitude of religious voices: radical Islamism as well as Islamic welfare policy making, increasing interest in Sufi traditions and mysticism, the rise of Alevi consciousness, and interest in the more liberal interpretations of Islam connected to Alevism and the traditional rituals of the Bektaşî order, along with various local and ethnical traditions. However, too often nowadays Muslim activities are entirely identified with the Refah Partisi and its sometimes very hegemonic claims.

3 See Keyder and Öncü, *op. cit.*; K.Robins, “Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe”, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, S.Hall and P.du Gay (eds.), London, 1996; Ş.Tekeli, “Istanbul: The Lost Paradigm for Understanding Turkish Society”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 15 (1996), 119–126.

4 P.Werbner, “The Making of Muslim Dissent”, *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996), 102–122.

5 N.Göle, “Istanbul’s Revenge”, *Istanbul* [English ed.] 1993, 20–23.

6 Aksoy and Robins, *op. cit.*, 63.

7 M.Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate*, London, 1992.

8 M.Meeker, “Oral Culture, Media Culture, and the Islamic Resurgence in Turkey”, *Exploring the Written*, E.P.Archetti (ed.), Oslo, 1995, p. 31.

The recent religious awareness can loosely be defined as a new understanding of the Muslim heritage with a distinct nationalistic bias. Islamism in this broad sense serves as a link between the various Muslim groups, with more or less radical programmes, and as a basis for networks. In its more pronounced Islamistic form this discourse articulates resistance, cultural as well as political, to what is vaguely defined as “Westernism”. The Islamic activism is in many respects an anti-colonial attempt to meet the problems and challenges of modern society with religious answers. From an Algerian perspective Marnia Lazreg comments on the Islamistic critique of the West: “as a comparative referent point against which to gauge the failures of the state to foster and sustain a coherent culture and economic system”.<sup>9</sup> The situation is the same in Turkey.

The more active Islamic encounter with modernity has led to access and a new visibility in Muslim culture. In the wake of this development the modern Turkish history must be rewritten. Islam is not revitalized, since it was never erased from the cultural map and it was never solely the interest of uneducated rural migrants. There existed an urban Muslim middle-class even in the heyday of Kemalism, but its visibility was limited. It was a muted group, in Edwin Ardener’s terminology, and the activities of both rural and urban Muslims were under the strict control of the centralist state. Today, a redefinition of conceptions of state power and legitimacy is apparent. The modernistic intentions under Kemalism of creating a homogenous Turkish identity had permeated all levels of society, but in the last decade the secular image of a uniform Turkish national identity has been deconstructed. Today, being a conscious Muslim (*şuurlu Müslüman*) has become an accepted and highly publicly expressed identity.

An important lesson to be drawn from urban studies when analysing religious communities is the stress on change and diversity,<sup>10</sup> while continuity and stability are emphasized elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Dynamics and development are as such at the core of interest not only at a macro level, but also in the way individuals relate to changes. Both aspects have been very apparent in the women’s group I am working with. Their lives, the choices they make, and their moves in society today were not possible ten or fifteen years ago. Something apparently has happened.

9 M.Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, New York, 1994, p. 215.

10 U.Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity. Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, New York, 1992.

11 Urban studies is a wide field of social and cultural research. The impacts of globalization and world economy on urban life, especially in the Third world, have been discussed at length. The various attempts to define and discuss postmodernity have also deeply affected urban studies. The frequent emphasis on network analysis—how communication and inter-personal relations are made possible—is of special interest when studying religious groups. U.Hannerz, *op. cit.*; idem; *Exploring the City. Inquiries toward an Urban Anthropology*, New York, 1980; K.Gibson and S.Watson, “Post-modern Spaces, Cities, and Politics”, in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, S.Watson and K.Gibson (eds.), Oxford, 1993; A.Rogers and S.Vertovec, “Introduction”, in *The Urban Context: Ethnicity, Social Networks and Situational Analysis*, A.Rogers and S.Vertovec (eds.), Oxford, 1995.

## The Great Change

Kemalistic modernism was a project of emancipation based on an ideology of progress. Its hope of large-scale industrial development and social reform had many European parallels. A more emphasized market economy has in many countries precipitated the development towards a post-industrial society. For Turkey the break-up and transformation took a dramatic turn after the political turbulence in the late 70s and the military coup in September 1980.

The background to the changes in Turkish society during the last decade is to a great extent centered around one person, the late Turgut Özal, and the economic, social and cultural consequences of his politics.<sup>12</sup> Despite the shifting evaluations of the prime minister, and later president, during his life time, nobody denies the irreversible turn Turkey took after 1983 when civil government was re-introduced. Among other things these transformations and openings made way for new attitudes towards diversity and complexity. State centralism was strongly questioned as ideology and identities other than Kemalistic Turkish -e.a. ethnical, religious, social- were more openly expressed. These upheavals led in some cases to open conflicts and in others to more symbolic confrontations. But the changes also introduced a tendency of greater acceptance—also east among young people. My field-work gives evidence of marked generational differences in attitudes. Although age is hardly a stable category, the younger generations seem more prepared for handling difference without necessarily experiencing it as a threat. Education, more than any other reform, has brought about insights into other people's lives. There is a parallel development between Özal's transnational economic liberalism and the religious movement in all its incarnations. And from very different angles these two processes have brought about a more complex political discourse.

From several aspects, the recently visible groups have moved from periphery to centre. The various groups of Alevi and Islamic women share the position of being "other" in relation to mainstream secular society and the traditional Sunni community. The influence of postmodernism on analyses of the living conditions in modern Turkey is also apparent. Intellectuals in general, express a reluctance to accept the claims of Kemalism and other positivistic and universalistic ideologies.<sup>13</sup> To what extent there is an influence of postmodernism on Islamistic theology in Turkey is more of an open question. This is discussed at length by Ali Yaşar Sarıbay in his *Postmodernite, Sivil Toplum ve İslam* (1994) where he argues that postmodernity operates as the conjunction between Islam and civil society. Some Islamistic debaters seek legitimation with the help of arguments influenced by discussions on relativism,

12 F.Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, London, 1993, pp. 181ff; E.Zürcher, *Turkey A Modern History*, London, 1993, pp. 292ff; Keyder and Öncü, *op. cit.*, pp. 19ff; M.Sönmez, *op. cit.*, K.Robins, "Interrupting Identities"; idem and D.Morley, "Almanci, yabancı", *Cultural Studies* 10, 248–254.

13 N.Göle, "Authoritarian secularism and Islamist politics: the case of Turkey", in *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. 2, Augustus Richard Norton (ed.), Leiden, 1996.



Inscription representing *Kelime-i Tevhid* (the unity of God). Glass-painting, Sinan Genim collection, *Camaltında Yirmibin Fersah*, Istanbul 1997, Yapi Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık

he critique of positivism and the development of civil society.<sup>14</sup> Such a position can constitute an intellectual framework for personal faith in a way modernism in Turkey never could. But in the end: will not Marshall Berman and Judith Butler always clash with *tevhid*?

Islamism has challenged the Kemalistic project of modernity and opposed secular conceptions of religion as a private matter; the idea that religion belongs “at home”, separated from public life, labour and production. Instead, a complementary relation between religion and society is claimed. In western Europe, after the French Revolution, the ultimate aim of secularization and modernization was separation between religion and politics. Religion, for the modern and enlightened, should be a matter of private concern, and the constitutional freedom of religion was the icon of the liberal ideas of freedom in general. The method of obtaining privatization of religion in most European countries was through institutional differentiation and through the organization of religion in specific areas of society.<sup>15</sup> This effort has been one of the characteristics of most modernization projects; i.e. to indicate that a modern society is not governed by religious ideas.

14 A.Saktanber, “Becoming the ‘Other’ as a Muslim in Turkey: Turkish women versus Islamist women”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 11 (1994), 99–134; Sarıbay, *op. cit.*.

15 J.Casanova, “Private and public religions”, *Social Research* 59, 17–57.

What can be observed in Turkey today might seem quite paradoxical. On one hand more than ever before, religion is a private matter. As has been pointed out by José Casanova in a discussion on private and public religions, an important turn in the development of politicized religious movements has taken place during the last two decades. Through modernization (urbanization, spread of education, mass media communication technology etc) a greater variety of choices of religious modes of life are accessible for individuals. In her analysis of the development of an Islamic counter-elite, Nilüfer Göle does not hesitate to claim that this complexity enforces a form of secularization within the religious communities: "To the extent that rationality, individualism, and critical thinking emerge as autonomous value references for the Islamist elite formed through modern education, a process of secularization has set in".<sup>16</sup>

In a comparison between the religious life of a rural area in Turkey and Alevi migrant from the same Anatolian village living in Germany, Werner Schiffauer makes some important observations in the processes of change. Personal expression and self-representation become more and more important as a demonstration of certain values which also has a deep effect on ritual life. A complementary relation between religion and society can hardly be claimed by migrant Muslims in the West, instead, an "islamization of one's self" takes place to enforce the visibility of religion.<sup>17</sup> Barbara Metcalf has lately taken up Schiffauer's theme when analysing how Muslim space is constructed for everyday ritual and practice in diaspora communities.<sup>18</sup> Although Schiffauer and Metcalf analyse migrant groups, it can be noted that at a discursive level, many Islamists in Turkey define themselves as being in a diaspora in relation to mainstream secular society. A rhetorical twist is often made in the self-image of the Islamic movement between being the representative of genuine Muslim Turkish heritage and, due to Kemalist politics, over the last seventy years, being forced into a marginal position. The islamization of the self seems to be a likely development within Muslim urbanization projects in general.

In Turkey today, religious groups have a stronger visibility on the political arena and have gained access to instruments of political power. Radical Islamism has come into sight stressing the priority of religion over politics. By no means all are demanding *şeria* as the base for public administration, but there is a certain tendency to universalism and hegemonic claims. Consequently, the local groups of various orientations dwell in between.

16 N.Göle, "Authoritarian secularism". 39.

17 W.Schiffauer, "Migration and religiousness", in *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, T. Gerholm and Y.G.Lithman (eds.), London, 1988, p. 155.

18 B.Metcalf, "Introduction: Sacred words, sanctioned practice, new communities", in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, B.Metcalf (ed.), Berkeley, 1993.

## Small Groups, Big Issues

In most cases, interest groups established post-1983 function as non-governmental organizations (NGO's). The veritable explosion of NGO activities over the last decade has caused a certain confusion in public discourse as regards the groups' relation toward the state. This was apparent during the preparations for the UN Habitat conference in June 1996. When groups representing very different concerns and strategies in policy making had to co-operate, they discovered—what sociologists had pointed out before—the similar conditions they were acting under. Rather than only stressing ideological differences, it can be worth noticing the shared social conditions of the NGO's. Binna Toprak has outlined three major similarities concerning new mobilization: the legal infrastructure (the legislation for foundations with non-commercial cultural or social activities), changes in economy (much more private money available to support the NGO's) and, finally, an open political challenge against the establishment outside the party system. Thousands of groups registered as active have had a determining impact on the formulation of political arguments. The changes during the Özal regime and onward brought about spheres of social autonomies and initiatives of a kind that had never been seen before in Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

Most religious groups in contemporary Istanbul can be defined as belonging to this variety of NGO:s and many of them are constituted as foundations, *vakıfs*. The increasing number of “covered” NGO:s, (*çarşafli* NGO) as one journalist has named them,<sup>20</sup> run by Islamic women concentrate their activities on small scale community work, far from the eyes of the general public. The women offer basic religious education programmes and elementary social welfare such as the supply of food, clothes, school grants, legal advice etc. They perform voluntary work at all levels of society and, if not in direct power, they seek to exert influence on local society. An apparent process of formalization of religious activism has taken place, i.e. a transformation from private to public. For covered women, the establishment of a *vakıf* is often the only way of taking part in political discussions. Through the *vakıfs* they gain not only stability and structure, but also public recognition and opportunities to address wider audiences. This change has meant a shift from meetings in family houses or apartments in accordance with very traditional patterns, to the conquest of spaces like university campuses and the modern media. Nilüfer Göle has noted the Islamic groups' “attempts to reappropriate control over the orientation of the cultural model problematizing the relations of domination in spheres of lifestyle and knowledge”.<sup>21</sup> These changes are dramatic for women's ways of gathering and have raised questions about access to urban space. To whom does the city belong? According to whose rules are the lines of division drawn? Greater and greater parts of the city have become accessible, and women have started to move

19 S.Zubaida, “Islam, the state and democracy: contrasting conceptions of society in Egypt”, *Middle East Report, November-December 1992*, 2–10; B.Toprak, “Civil Society in Turkey”, in *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. 2, Augustus Richard Norton (ed.), Leiden, 1996.

20 A.Ulusoy, “Haldun Hoca'nın çarşafli NGO'su”, *Aktüel* 276 (1996), 20–27.

21 Göle, “Authoritarian secularism”, p. 41.

over great distances to be able to reach the groups of their choices.

Islamism in Turkey has become a public drama and street culture is filled with signs and symbols indicating various religious positions. Wearing a headscarf or the participation in the activities of a certain *vakif* is a *dava*: a mission within one's own society.

At functional and symbolic levels several similarities between the Alevi groups and the Islamistic groups I know from my field-work can be noted. According to Alberto Melucci,<sup>22</sup> there are three basic requirements for the establishment of a distinct group in a social movement. There must be a conception of solidarity, around which a collective identity is constructed and maintained through mutual symbols (be it headscarves or *cem* ceremonies). The interest of the group is focused on a social conflict and defines a mutual enemy (be it the secular establishment or the Sunni élite). The third characteristic is the struggle for social change (be it an Islamistic utopia or liberal equality demands). Neither women's groups, nor the Alevi communities fall into the official Turkish categories of religious groups; for the hitherto "invisible" groups the NGOs represent new fields of possibilities and new contact zones with the rest of society. The NGO's have freer forms of organization and not always very clear relations to the state and the Directorate for Religious Affairs (DIB: *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). The Alevi have never been officially recognized as a specific community in any form sense. Until the 1980s they remained generally marginalized and were looked upon as a threat by both secularists and representatives of mainstream DIB-Islam. Not surprisingly Alevi culture has flourished in diaspora, especially in Germany.<sup>23</sup> The impact of urbanism on Alevi culture is great. Activism in local society is to a large extent organized through NGO's giving voice to attitudes and interests from other strata of society, to former outsiders such as the Alevi. Symptomatically, it is the Alevi in urban areas that have become visible over the past decade. It would be incorrect to view the formation of the new NGO's as a protest against the state alone. As pointed out by Sami Zubaida, the new groups display a complex attitude towards the state, combining protest and dependence.<sup>24</sup> Individual choices of what group and what symbols to use, is a mode of controlling the complexity of modern society. In most groups there is a subtle relation between choices and individual freedom on the one hand, and conformity on the other. Both of these are related to the privatization of religion.<sup>25</sup>

22 *Nomads of the Present Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, London, 1989.

23 R.Mandel, "A place of their own: contesting spaces and defining places in Berlin's migrant community", in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, B.Metcalf (ed.), Berkeley, 1996.

24 Zubaida, "Islam, the state and democracy".

25 P.Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, London, 1994.

Although visible and sometimes vociferous, these groups have limited direct political power. As an alternative to party politics, they are focused on activism and mobilization to solve concrete problems in local communities. By support from grass roots, the NGOs claim to build civil society in a nation with weaker and weaker infrastructure. They replace, or rather fulfil, the obligations of the state and the municipalities. In relation to this aspect there is a certain risk of liberal romanticism, especially when discussing womens' groups, and it must be remembered that many of the religious groups can be quite authoritative. The Islamic NGO's have been successful in presenting themselves as focusing simultaneously on practical problems as well as eternal.

#### Claiming Space and the Localization of Religious Activism

The Islamic vision of the future is remote from life as it is lived in the mega-city, where many women have to work outside the family. Most women use the complicated communal system of transportation with overcrowded buses and ferry boats that makes it hard to preserve the ideal norms. Women are constantly exposed to the male gaze.

As mentioned above, the development of urban culture in Muslim cultures is in some respect comparable to the establishment of the Muslim diaspora communities in the West.<sup>26</sup> In her discussion on how social space for religious activities is created among Muslims in diasporic cultures, Barbara Metcalf shows a pattern applicable to analysis of womens' religious activities in Istanbul. First, there is a certain objectification, a new stress on personal appearance, stressing individuality as part of modernity and quickly readable signs on the body. Secondly there is also a greater stress on what is conceived to be normative practice, collective rituals, that signify the transformation from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, with new bonds and new loyalties. Thirdly, there is "a more dispersed leadership", where women have appeared in leading positions (at least among other women) to an extent that would not have been possible a decade ago.

Even though it has been said many times before, the discussion of spatial dimensions in a Muslim context must begin with a consideration of the ideal normative separation between men and women. Islam is a very body sensitive religion with a high sense of spatiality. The position of the body, when in prayer or elsewhere, what is coming in and out of the body, as well as the proper places for male and female bodies to dwell, have their formal rules. Henrietta Moore has noted on gender division and bodies that: "More recent feminist work in anthropology has stressed the importance of understanding gender as embodied, and the consequent dangers involved in ignoring the role the body plays in the construction and experience of gender and gender categorization".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Metcalf, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> H. Moore, "Epilogue", in *Carved Flesh, Cast Selves: Gendered Symbols and Social Practices*, Vigdis Broch-Due et al (eds.), London, 1993, p. 279.

The basic dichotomy between public and private/domestic domains is apparently stronger than Muslim religious behaviour, and much space in secular Turkey is still gendered according to this pattern. Instead of claiming Muslim origins for the (ideal) separation it is possible to view the division as part of a complicated eastern Mediterranean hierarchical system of age, social status and gender, visible from individual clothing to the construction of major cities and urban planning. But religion has been an effective way of giving legitimacy to spatial separation. Important feminist critique has been expressed in this issue regarding the risk of arguing in circles: women are defined by domestic space and vice versa.

This hierarchical division could be found all over the eastern Mediterranean area—a least a generation or two ago—among Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. However, the discussion of the relation between sex/gender and space can not simply end with this observation, since conceptions of properly gendered space are coming into focus with a new emphasis in contemporary Islamic discourse. When women want to gain influence and power within the Islamic groups they have to make careful choices and select strict strategies on how to balance public visibility and preserve the separation. But politics is in itself dealing with other people; it is by definition a public activity. The new female religious groups interact and communicate in their local districts and they have constructed zones and claimed space entirely intended for female activities. The urban lifestyle expedites the process of establishing new meanings to old places.

Some urban planners stress the immense changes in Istanbul, not only in terms of the uncontrolled growth of population, but also the destruction of the historical city in terms of segregation and separation of functions. Others stress the positive effects of the postmodern city on women's possibilities to establish religious networks.<sup>28</sup>

In their article on urban rituals, Heidi de Mare and Anna Vos take up a discussion over 'the city's topology of significance' and its production of meaning; how the city is read by its inhabitants and visitors: "the city's toponomy, the nomenclature of streets and squares—reputation of particular city districts—urban facilities—the attribution of sacred and profane values".<sup>29</sup> The vicinity of my own field-work, Fatih, can serve as an example of the importance of such a local structure. The social and cultural construction of a landscape like Fatih, a district in old Istanbul, has formed a very different estimate among the citizens of Istanbul concerning the lives of men and women in the area.<sup>30</sup> The area around Fatih Mosque has for centuries maintained strong networks between those institutions where men practise their religion in public, such as mosques, dervish lodges, religious schools and theological seminars, while women's activities were traditionally kept within the *haremlük*. The contemporary challenge of the modes of religious life is therefore also to a great extent a challenge of urban space. The district's history involves much of the Muslim identity of the city and its inhabitants, and takes its name from

28 K. Robins, "Istanbul between civilization and discontent", *City* 5–6 (1996), 6–33.

29 H. de Mare and A. Vos, "Urban rituals in Italy and the Netherlands", in *Urban Rituals in Italy and the Netherlands*, H. de Mare and A. Vos (eds.), Assen, 1993, p. 11.

30 T. J. Barnes and J. S. Duncan, "Introduction: writing worlds", in *Writing Worlds. Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, T. J. Barnes and J. S. Duncan (eds.), London, 1992.

Fatih Sultan Mehmet, Sultan Mehmet the Conquerer. The Fatih Mosque was constructed after 1453, as a contrast to the Byzantine parts of Constantinople with Hagia Sofia as its centre. Today, the district is known to secular people as an icon of Islamism and has developed its own system of symbols and signs in the streets. The anniversary of the conquest, May 29 in the secular calendar, is celebrated in religious circles with a special hymn that hails the patron of the district. Refah Partisi has over the last years organized huge meetings at gigantic football stadiums in commemoration of the hero and the party mirrors its contemporary projects in legendary history. As Kirsten Hastrup writes in *Other Histories*: “The recollection of events also follows the logic of social significance. Like the narratives of culture, the story of the past is therefore a selective account of the actual sequence of events, but it is no random selection”.<sup>31</sup>

#### The Authority of the Past: the *Yurt* Model vs the Medine Model

A more than seventy year old ideological conflict has been fought between the image of Ottoman cosmopolitan Istanbul and its rival, national Turkish Ankara. In the late 1920s a new republican capital was established in the heart of Anatolia, with the degradation of Constantinople as a consequence. The conflict has been fuelled over the decades in both political and literary discourse. Istanbul soon became the symbol of foreign exploitation and deprivation while Ankara represented the solid base of the Turkish heritage on which national modernity was to be built.

In the writings of Ziya Gökalp from the first decades of this century, an ideological web was spun around resistance towards both oriental and occidental influences. The deals were pictured in accordance with conceptions of the ancestral Turkic nomads ‘Among the ancient Turks, sovereignty belonged to the tribe (...) Equality was a strongly established institution’.<sup>32</sup> In Kemalistic rhetoric, the independence and free minds of these ancestors, moving easily over the steppe, was contrasted with the image of narrow-minded Muslim orthodoxy as well as cosmopolitanism and its incarnation Constantinople. Despite the modernization projects, the fundamental vision of the ancient Turks was on a pastoral, not an urban model. It is therefore interesting to observe the contrasts in the contemporary Islamic vision of Medine, the good society as represented in the Koran and the hadith. The Islamistic answers to the problems of modern society are legitimated through the visualization of this legendary utopia. Sacred history is, Sami Zubaida writes, “the original period of Islam in which the Prophet ruled and organised the affairs of the Islamic community with divine guidance”.<sup>33</sup> Hence the boundaries between yesterday, today and tomorrow become fluid. The vision of the Islamic historical utopia is woven around the lost harmony of Medine, *dâr-al-hicret*, the city of migration. This utopia is to a large extent an urban vision. By analogy, the living

31 “Introduction”, in *Other Histories*, K.Hastrup (ed.), London, 1992.

32 Z.Gökalp, *The Principles of Turkism*, Leiden, 1968; pp. 103ff; original edition: *Türkçülüğün Esaslari*, Istanbul, 1923. Istanbul.

33 S.Zubaida, “The city and its ‘other’ in Islamic political ideas and movements”, in *Middle East Cities in Comparative Perspective*, Kenneth Brown et al (eds.), London, 1986, p. 333.

conditions of the twentieth century can be interpreted in the light of the early *ümmet*. The upheaval of time brings the historical utopia to life.

The Medine model is the rhetorical pattern for Refah Partisi vision of future society which is as vague as the descriptions of the city in the holy scriptures. The Koran and the hadith dwell in great detail on certain points, but there is no really full-fledged social context. It is the authority of the past, to speak with Andrew Rippin, that is needed for the construction of solid arguments.<sup>34</sup> Rather than concrete solutions, vivid imagery is constructed around concepts like *hicret*, *cihad*, and the initial struggles of Muhammed and his faithful followers. The legends of the first generations of Muslims, *salaf*, are considered an authoritative source for practice and guidance. Despite the set-backs experienced by the historical characters, the *hicret-metaphor* in the texts promises ultimate victory. The scenes visualized are the first decades of Islam when the new religion was established in developing urban centres, but the imagery is easily applicable to modern experiences. A central concept in historical descriptions as well as contemporary arguments is *câhiliyye*, the age of paganism and ignorance. The conception of this pre-Islamic period is in everyway a contrast to the utopic Islamic society. It is used as a technical term both for a historical era as well as in an abstract sense. As one of the most important Islamic philosophers, widely read by Turkish Islamists, Said Qutb writes in *In the Shadow of the Quran*: “Modern-style jahiliyya in the industrialized societies of Europe and America is essentially similar to the old-time jahiliyya in pagan and nomadic Arabia. For in both systems, man is under the domination of man rather than of Allah”.<sup>35</sup>

Although human, Muhammed serves with his authoritative behaviour as an example for mankind. The aim of Muhammed’s migration to Medine, when the people of Mecca had turned their backs on him, was to build a community in accordance with to the law of God. The new religion demanded attention, belief and knowledge, and the limits *hudutlar*, were staked out in line with Muhammed’s revelations. The very exact language of the Koran and the hadith on human relations is the language of the ancient Arab nomads. The rules have almost the character of a contract between God and man. It is apparent that the image of society is based on the presumption of rather complex social relations. It takes social and economical differences, gender relations, the presence of other religions as well as the significance of foreign powers into consideration. *Hudut* is such a highly spatial concept, an individual is either inside or outside, and it is used both in an abstract metaphysical sense and in a more concrete and legalistic mode. A comparison with another spatial concept, *haram*, should be taken into consideration.

34 A.Rippin, *Muslims, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, The Formative Period*, London, 1993, pp. 65ff.

35 Quoted from E.Sivan, *Radical Islam*, New Haven, 1985, p. 24.

If Mecca is the geographical and ritual centre of religious life, Medine, as described in the Koran and the hadith, signifies the core of righteous religious and social life. A hadith from the Bukhari collection states that Medine purifies people to perfectness, according to the saying of Muhammed: "Medine is like a furnace, it expels out the impurities (bad persons) and selects the good ones and makes them perfect".<sup>36</sup> In theology and pious argumentation the Medine model corresponds with God's intention regarding his creation. Muhammed's love for Medine, the faithful, is repeated, and the city called sanctuary. When reading these holy texts it is apparent that the vision expressed reproduces to a very great extent images of urban life. It is a society with extensive outside contacts, inhabited by traders and travellers, and also by people of different beliefs. Although a fierce argumentation against Judaism and Christianity is at hand in the Koran the tone of criticism and rejection is different from the extremely aggressive anti-Semitism of this and the last century, that plays such a prominent role in contemporary Islamist discourse.

The norms of Medine keep people within *hudut*. Inside there is permanent order and justice, whereas the outside is characterized by *fitne*, disorder and disobedience. This dichotomy and terminology is frequently used in contemporary Islamist rhetoric. In scatological theology *fitne* is one of the certain signs of the impending Day of judgement. The idolatrous cults of paganism, *cahiliyye*, is compared to the materialism of our own time which draws people's attention away from God. In sharp contrast to the Islamist notion of harmonious and homogeneous Medine, stands contemporary Istanbul, the equivalent of Babylon, a cursed place according to the hadiths.

Babylon, as an urban metaphor, represents the illnesses of society, the image of the human body in deprivation. Refah's promise of a just order, *âdil düzen*, includes social reforms that will be the medicine for a good and healthy society. And following the paradigm of tradition: it is very vaguely described as Refah's alternative economic plan for Turkey, with few—if any—proposals for the national economy. The vivid organic (body and family) imagery, both in repudiation and panegyric is striking. The family metaphor lies more or less open in Refah's rhetoric. It has an underlying reference to the Ottoman *millet* system, in which everyone knew their proper place, their in-given positions, and in this discourse the party's chairman Necmettin Erbakan plays the role of chastising caring patriarch.

Much of the media's interest is centered around Refah's charismatic leader. Necmettin Erbakan's personal background is of significant importance in an urban perspective: he is a native of a smaller town in Anatolia and a social climber, and in his rhetoric he is not a son of some modern Babylon. He fits into Nilüfer Göle's model of the rising Muslim middle class and the social mobility of the new Islamist elite. An engineer himself Erbakan has, since the late 60s, been a spokesman for Anatolian businessmen and entrepreneurs. Much of his agitation has been aimed at cosmopolitan Istanbul, a westernized city with international networks. Basically, Necmettin Erbakan is a protectionist, which is in line with his nationalistic world view and vociferous anti-western rhetoric. His vision of Turkey as the leading Muslim country in the world is his rather chauvinist message to small people outside the

36 Al-Bukhārī, *Sahīh Al-Bukhārī*, Beirut, vol. 3:30, p. 107, 1989.

city centres. Whether they live in the shanty towns or in the countryside, Islamistic rhetoric promises to open the city gates, the road to the New Medine.

#### Some Concluding Remarks: Coping With the Demands of Urban Life

To conclude: The hegemonic tendencies among the Islamistic voices raise questions as to how much space there is for more independent and free thinking religious groups. Will they be let into the visions of the postmodern Medine? It must be noted that in the legendary history of the Alevi there is no such urban model as discussed above, but an egalitarian pastoral. Confrontations with both the Islamistic Medine model and Turkish mainstream society are therefore inevitable. Alevi share the image of the Turkic conquest of Anatolia with the Kemalists, but the interpretations differ when it comes to the legacy left by the free men of the steppe founded as it is in another meta-history. “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives” as Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*.<sup>37</sup> The transmission of the legendary history of Hacı Bektaş Veli connects past and present and is an essential part of Alevi discourse. Many pilgrimages and festivals focused on the person and the place, his village in Anatolia, have undergone a quite distinct revival.

In a rural Anatolian perspective it was the digressing religious beliefs and—perhaps more importantly—practices that differentiated the Alevi communities from the surrounding Turkish Anatolian villages. Most Alevi recognize themselves as the keepers of a considerable cultural and religious heritage older than Islam which gives them an identity as outsiders in opposition to the authoritarian modernist project. From a contemporary perspective the Alevi groups share a position of opposition: towards the Sunni *ümmet* and to the political establishment in general. It is most disputable whether the Alevi can be considered as an ethnic group in any formal sense of the term, and here are various emic definitions of what the *Alevi toplumu* really is. To some groups the religious identity is indispensable, while others, with politically radical preferences (*toplumcu*), have a rather negative attitude towards religion—and the contrast between groups is even sharper if we turn to the diasporic Alevi communities in Germany and the Netherlands.

Rather than compressing all Alevi into one unifying definition it is interesting to focus on the options shared by all kinds of religious groups and their conquest of the modern city. The urban condition has had a profound impact on the conditions of religious life, regards both access and visibility. For the Alevi groups the struggle for ritual space has some important features in common with the more independent Islamic women. Alevi NGOs strive for spatial platforms for their engagement and activities to a large extent in novel urban surroundings. “[A] city is a place of discoveries and surprises”.<sup>38</sup> It

37 New York, 1991, p. 204.

38 Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity*, 1992, p. 173.

is an environment where identities and histories are discovered and traditions constructed, and the city is also the place where surprising discoveries are made as regards the strength of these novel traditional positions. Therefore the experiences of urban modernity in a megapolis like Istanbul are significant from three major aspects.

Firstly, at individual level, many migrants express life in the city in negative terms as a radical “uprooting”. It is often said that there is no longer any easily grasped identity. There are new constellations of the family in terms of economy and power which affect the “traditional” gender system and thereby ritual life. The outcome is both uncertainty and the opportunity for personal choices. The situation bears an obvious ambiguity—stress on the personal project and at the same time acceptance of the requirements of mass communication.

Secondly, at the communal level, new harsh living conditions are generally shared by members of a local community. The construction of the *gecekondu* complexes are unstable in more than one sense. Consequently new institutions are needed to replace support from the larger family, broken up in the context of the megacity, as is the mastering of new discourses and new sets of signs and symbols.

Thirdly, at state level the secular hegemony is now openly questioned by more and more groups outside the political establishment. The keywords for the 90s have, for different reasons, so far been difference, ambiguity, individuality and a new understanding of subjectivity. The political and religious life of the last decade has presented a multiplicity of new forms of activism that develop political discourses as well as the infrastructure between the groups.

Nevertheless, additional questions in relation to these mainly positive changes must also be raised: who has the possibility of grasping them, who has access to the social spaces where the opportunities can be seized? The evaluation of the contemporary political blend by the intellectual élite, frequently influenced by postmodern ideas is mainly positive. Many of them conceive themselves as world-citizens who reject the stable categories of modernity and positivism. The contrast between this postmodern optimism and attempts to create unifying ideological systems such as Islamism, Alevism and nationalism is quite striking.

When it comes to visibility, recognition of the Alevi minority by DIB has been on the agenda for several Alevi groups. The status of the Alevi meeting places, *cemevis* as a spatial and symbolic indication of Alevi presence, is comparable to the formation of *vakıfs* for circles of self-contained religious women, as is the Alevi stress on their particular outline of Islam in contrast to traditional orthodoxy, and the women’s attempt to form new interpretations.

Finally, visibility is also a question of political factors outside the parliamentary system. The riots in Alevi areas and the recent clashes on the university campuses show a significant shift in the focal point of conflicts. Conceivably, it is no longer only a Islamism vs secularism conflict, but a regression to political struggles similar to the skirmishes fought in the 70s.

When summarising the urban context and living conditions in postmodern cities, Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson express an optimistic attitude when they write on contemporary urbanism: “No one political solution will emerge which will be universally just. Power will be continually contested, and new and different strategic alliances will

emerge at each point of resistance. Rather, postmodern politics allows for optimism and possibility, since it celebrates struggles and new possibilities at many sites—both marginal and mainstream—recognizing the victories are only ever partial, temporary and contested”.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> S.Watson and K.Gibson, “Postmodern politics and planning. A postscript”, in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, S.Watson and K.Gibson (eds.), Oxford, 1993, p. 262.

