

# The Alevi Discourse in Turkey

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt at exploring different interpretations of Alevism and Alevi identities, having emerged as a result of rapid and large-wave migrations, particularly from 1960 onwards, from the countryside to the urban centres of Turkey. Those Alevis, who had become more and more isolated from the larger Alevi community and each other, ended up divided into different religious and ideological sects. Emergence of various Alevi associations and foundations proved unable to prevent such disintegration. On the contrary, it was the newly established Alevi institutions, emerging upon different bases, which actually heterogenised the Alevi phenomenon. Today, each Alevi institution in fact promotes its own particular perception of Alevism; the latter may even vary among family members. Therefore, it will be more accurate to speak of Alevi identities rather than of a single, unified Alevi identity in today's Turkey.

## Keywords

Turkey, Alevism, Alevi Identity, Urbanism

There are numerous approaches in present-day Turkey to the roots and essence of Alevism, many radically differing from each other. The Sunnis of Turkey have two interpretations of Alevism. The first is based on a nationalist approach considering Alevism as the Turkish interpretation of Islam, and the second one, that of orthodox Islamists, regarding Alevism a *rafizi* sect, which deviated from the Muslim dogma. The Alevis themselves, in their turn, have various interpretations of their faith: religious leaders and intellectuals have made declarations, which are essentially in conflict with each other.<sup>1</sup> The internal debates resulted in the situation when, from time to time, Alevi leaders even declare each other *düşkün* ("seceded").<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the previous bibliography on the issue in Varhoff 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Being declared as *düşkün* ("seceded") is a penalty in Alevism. The one who was declared *düşkün*, is not accepted to the congregation for some time, depending on the nature of the crime he committed. At the end of the penalty period, the person is supposed to pass through the ceremony

This difference of opinions among the Alevis separates them from each other not only in terms of religious ideas, but also politically. While previously Alevis were engaged in politics mainly in the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP), today they have settled in the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP), which comes to the foreground with its Islamist stance, and in the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP). However, even among the CHP politicians there is no unified opinion. As a matter of fact, the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, an Alevi himself, has demonstrated violent reactions to the declaration made by the Tunceli delegate Hüseyin Aygün, who is also a CHP member and his own cousin by that. The CHP's Alevi member Sabahat Akkiraz,<sup>3</sup> in reply to Aygün's statement on Alavism being a separate religion, accused him of being a provoker: *To call Alevism a religion is a big mistake and provocation. Now, there is no difference between you and those who called the Alevi people "nonbelievers" in the past.*<sup>4</sup>

The CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu also opposed the words of his cousin Aygün with the following statement:

*Alevism is a belief, it is a part of Islam. We believe in the same Allah, the same prophet and the same holy book. Can it be a different religion? No. But I do not want the subject of religion to be used in politics either. No one has scales in his hands to measure other people's beliefs. So, it is not right at all for a person, let alone a politician, to intervene in the spiritual relations between Allah and his servants. I do not consider it right to use this pure emotion and belief as a tool for politics. Everyone must be able to practice his beliefs freely and everyone must respect others' beliefs. Mysticism in Islam is the area of people who think of religion and who experience the spiritual emotions in a more crystallised manner. We read and learn about that area, we experience it in our spiritual world but we must never use it as a material for politics. If we do, we will do ill to Mevlana, Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, Sarı Saltuk, Aşık Sümmani, Karacaoğlan and Yunus Emre. They never dealt with politics; they kneaded their beliefs with the philosophy of humanity. They showed how a society can be led to a bright future and enlightenment.*<sup>5</sup>

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of "removing the status of a seceded". As a matter of fact, Reha Çamuroğlu, a former Alevi delegate of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, has been declared *düşkün* by the *Alevi Araştırmaları Merkezi* (Center for Alevi Studies). Çamuroğlu stated that he considered the people who declared him seceded as inquisitors.

<sup>3</sup> Sabahat Akkiraz is a popular singer of Alevi folk songs and currently a delegate having serious support among the Alevis.

<sup>4</sup> See <<http://haber.mynet.com/alevilige-din-demek-provokasyondur-640646-politika/>>.

<sup>5</sup> See <<http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1094991>>.

Alevis have always been among the main defenders of the republican regime, its secular character being opposed to the *shari'a* dogma as the fundament of the Ottoman Empire (Aktay 1999; Okan 2004) However, the problem is that there is a marked difference between the principle of secularism proclaimed in the Constitution and in the reality. Alevis put the problem in the following way: could the Republic of Turkey found a laic government the way Alevis see it?

Contrary to the expectations of Alevis, the Sunni Muslim identity has been accepted as basic since the very first days of the Republic.

The official identity of the Republic was founded on Turkishness with the particular stress on the Hanafi school associated with Turkishness more than any other Muslim doctrine. The Hanafism became in fact the privileged *mazhab* in the state.

The secularisation process of Turkey can be chronologically summarised as follows: the Caliphate was abolished on March 3rd 1924, and Department of Religious Affairs was founded on the same day. A decision on the apparel of religious officials has been made on September 2nd 1925. Dervish lodges and hermitages were shut down on November 30th 1925. The Gregorian calendar was accepted on December 26th 1925. The first Turkish *khutbah* was read on February 5th 1928. The law stating that "Islam is the religion of the government" was removed from the Constitution on April 10th 1928.<sup>6</sup> Arabic and Persian lectures were removed from the school curriculums on September 1st 1929. Department of Religious Affairs prohibited the *azan* to be read in Arabic on July 10th 1931. Laicism as one of the basic principles, was included into the Constitution on February 5th 1937.

Although all these steps were officially declared as the secularisation process of Turkey, each of them, in fact, shaped the official religion of the Republic. Department of Religious Affairs, which is an institution affiliated to the Prime Minister, only spreads the teachings of the Sunni-Hanafi doctrine and gives the *fatwas* accordingly. The rule stating that "only a follower of the Hanafi *mazhab* can be chosen as chairman of Department of Religious Affairs", brings the Republic closer to a Hanafi-centric *shari'a* state excluding the other three Sunni doctrines, all the more—any other religious ideology, from political life. Similarly, there is kind of ideological inconsistency in the situation when universities, emphasising their secular system of education and claiming to be, together with the military,

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<sup>6</sup>Yet, Islam has been accepted as the official religion of the government in the first Constitution.

the defenders of such government, simultaneously contradict to this idea through the ideology of the faculties of Theology, the latter rather representing the mere continuation of the *madrasahs* closed with the foundation of the Republic.

Another issue to be discussed in this regards is the concept of “minorities”. Taking into consideration that the Turkish government insisted (the Treaty of Lausanne) on the population classification according to their religious identities, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the Ottoman Empire of the Tanzimat Reform Era seems to have been more laic than the Republic.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it is the non-Muslims in the laic state who are often reminded, although indirectly, that they are pseudo-citizens<sup>8</sup> either by the government itself or representatives of the so-called *millat-i hakimi* (“governing people”).<sup>9</sup> Among the examples of such policy is the application of the Property Tax<sup>10</sup> in 1942 and the

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<sup>7</sup> According to Oran (2005: 48), the Republic of Turkey is the continuation of the Ottoman Empire in many aspects, and the core of the Ottoman social order is “the National System”, which is based on religion and even its particular doctrine. This system emerged in a year after the conquest of Istanbul, that is in 1454, and existed officially until the Imperial Edict of Reorganisation in 1839.

<sup>8</sup> Today, people with different political and ideological opinions officially have the same status as representatives of different beliefs.

<sup>9</sup> *Millet-i hakime* (“governing nation”) implies Sunni Muslim Turks who are considered as real owners of the country.

<sup>10</sup> The Property Tax is the extraordinary wealth tax that was imposed by law act number 4305 on November 11th 1942. The official justification of the Property Tax suggested that government would impose taxes on “the high level of profitability created by extraordinary war conditions”. However, the then Prime Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu proposed a different justification at the CHP group meeting: “This law is also a reform law. It gives us the possibility to become economically independent. We have an opportunity that will make us get our economical independence. By removing the foreigners controlling our markets we will hand over Turkish market to Turkish people... This law will be enforced with all its power on the people who have become rich thanks to the hospitality shown by this country but avoided to fulfill their duties during that fragile time”. Three commissions established in Istanbul published the tax lists that had accrued by December 18th 1942: 87% of the accrued taxes were imposed on non-Muslim citizens, whereas 7%, on the Muslim citizens. The remaining 6% of the tax were on other items and they were mainly imposed on non-Muslims either. A huge amount of immovable property belonging to non-Muslims changed hands in December 1942 and in January 1943. 67% of the sold properties were purchased by Muslim Turks, whereas 30%, by official institutions and organizations (see <[http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varl%C4%B1k\\_Vergisi](http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varl%C4%B1k_Vergisi)>).

Christian pogroms on September 6th and 7th in 1955<sup>11</sup>—as a result of both many non-Muslims left the country.

Another example materialising this approach in Turkey, which is a country where religious belonging of the citizens are considered more important than all the other affiliation, concerns population exchange. As a result, Orthodox Christians living in Anatolia were replaced with the Bosnians, Pomaks, Albanians and Muslim Turks from the Balkans (Oran 2005: 57).

One of the factors, which made Alevis welcome the Republic with enthusiasm is the popular belief about the Alevi origin of the founder of the republic, Kemal Atatürk. The following statement of the Alevi writer Cemal Şener summarises this situation: "Atatürk was not a pious but laic and democratic person. This is because he had an Alevi-Bektaşî spirit and he is of Turkmen origins. If there is a laic republic in the Islamic geography, this is because Mustafa Kemal has such an origin. He was not pious and he had a belief of God as laic people had."<sup>12</sup> His lifestyle was closer to Alevi-Bektaşîs rather than to Sunnis."<sup>13</sup>

Alevis even deify Ararurk as incarnation of Hacı Bektaş Veli (Işıklı 2006: 194). This belief is so dominant that many Alevis hang his picture side by side with those of Ali and Hacı Bektaş in their houses, mausoleums and in the *cemevis*.<sup>14</sup> However, in fact, Atatürk and his regime delivered a major blow to Alevism,

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<sup>11</sup> During and after these pogroms, which started in the evening of September 6th and continued for 9 hours, from 13 to 16 Catholics and at least one Armenian lost their lives, and 32 Catholics were heavily injured. Besides, 4,348 offices, 110 hotels, 27 pharmacies, 23 schools, 21 factories, 73 churches and graveyards, as well as more than 1000 houses belonging to Christians were damaged (see <[http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/67\\_Eyl%C3%BCl\\_Olaylar%C4%B1](http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/67_Eyl%C3%BCl_Olaylar%C4%B1)>).

<sup>12</sup> Atatürk could hardly be of the Alevi origin. The fact that he was first sent to a local school (*mahalle mektebi*), in which the Qur'an and Sunni Islam were taught, proves that at least his mother was a Sunni Muslim. On the other hand, his statements he made both during and after the foundation of the Republic, speaks of his Islamic identity or at least of his desire to demonstrate it. As a matter of fact, he considered the religion as one of the virtues that shapes a nation. "Our nation has two assets, the religion and the language. No power can erase these virtues from the heart and spirits of our nation" (apud Özakıncı 2001: 15). However, Atatürk's approach to the religion was, of course, different from that of an ordinary Muslim. Being a representative of the generation of enlightenment and, above all, the architect of a newly founded country, he tried to form an auditable "official religion/Islam" as the previous governments did. His preference can be clearly understood from the speech he gave in Balıkesir on 07.02.1923 (See Işıklı 2006:188).

<sup>13</sup> C. Şener, "Atatürk ne Dindardı ne de Ateist", *Radikal newspaper*, October 8, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Although mausoleums and the *cemevis* (or *cemxanahs*) were officially prohibited, they functioned under different institutional names in traditional Alevi areas, where the Alevis built a majority.

which could have resulted in its complete elimination. The shrine of Hacı Bektaşî Veli, the holiest point for the Alevis in Anatolia, was turned into a museum, and could be no longer visited as a place of worship and pilgrimage. On the other hand, the Alevi *Dedes* (grandsires),<sup>15</sup> the real bearers and masters of Alevism, whose status had been recognised even during the Ottoman period and whose position had been strengthened by the Sultan's imperial orders, were officially deprived of their functions with the foundation of the Republic. Moreover, Alevi intellectuals, who greeted the Republic with fervour, considered both some Alevi essential religious elements and the *dedelik* institution as outdated and thus set the Alevi identity at stake and seriously damaged it.

Since historically Alevism was mainly shaped as an oral tradition, an important part of its cultural memory is fixed in its ceremonies and rituals. Various events, such as commemorations, sacrifice ceremonies and the *cem* ceremonies, which have the power of adding value and meaning to the people who organised them. All ceremonies are repeated, what makes us think the past continues naturally without an interruption. Rituals, transmitting and transferring the knowledge, protect the identity with regular repetition, reproduce the cultural identity and thus guarantee the temporal and spatial unity of the group.

However, since Alevi mausoleums and shrines were shut down with the foundation of the Republic, the organisation of ceremonies became problematic as well, what created another gap in the Alevi identity and resulted in its cultural dissolution. The process accelerated in the 1960s with the Alevi migration to urban centres. Alevis, who became more isolated from the community and each other, have divided into different religious and ideological trends. Emergence of various Alevi associations and foundations did not prevent such disintegration—on the contrary, the newly established Alevi institutions emerged upon different bases what heterogenised the Alevi phenomenon. Each institution has in fact its own particular perception of Alevism. For example, the definition of Alevism on the web site of *Cem Vakfı* ("Cem Foundation") brings it closer to Sunni Islam.<sup>16</sup>

The *Hacı Bektaş Veli Kültür Derneği*, contrary to the *Cem Vakfı*, approaches Alevism as a mixture of various religions, in particular Sufi ideas, ancient Anato-

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<sup>15</sup> The Institution of grandsires (*dedelik*) is one of the most important religious structures in Alevism. The *dedes* who are believed to be of Ali's kin, stay at the top of the Alevi religious hierarchy (See recently Thörne 2011).

<sup>16</sup> See <<http://www.aleviislamdin Hizmetleri.com/?p=151>>.

lian beliefs, Hittite and Mesopotamian beliefs, Shamanism, Mazdakism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, as well as Jewish, Christian and Islamic ideas. They characterize Alevism as *Hak Yolu* (the Path of God).<sup>17</sup>

The *Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği*, another Alevi institution, states that Alevism is an independent faith outside Islam, close rather to socialism than to a religion.<sup>18</sup>

Some Alevi leaders, while defining the Alevi identity, apply to history and social memory. Among the historical references are Caliph Ali, Hacı Bektaş, Pir Sultan Abdal, the Kerbela incident and the massacre of Sultan Yavuz, in addition to the violent attacks against Alevis from the recent history, such as the Çorum, Maraş, Sivas and Gazi incidents. However, the attempts to shape an Alevi identity referring to history, depend on different interpretations of the mentioned events. For example, the execution of Pir Sultan is among the strongest markers, which has turned into a myth as part of identity. However, in this particular case, one Alevi institution can approach Pir Sultan as a bearer of an ideology similar to socialism, while another, as a real representative of the Alevi faith, the former giving Pir Sultan the status of an intermediary leftist leader, while the latter, that of an Alevi religious hero who rebelled against Sunni Islam.

Separation among Alevis has grown so much that Alevi ideologists have started to debate whether Alevism should be discussed "beyond Islam or within it", each bringing their own arguments regarding the roots of Alevism and interpretations of the Alevi narratives. This means that social memory as basis for identity is as variable as the identity itself; it is constantly reinterpreted, redefined and even reinvented in different situations according to new realities and current needs.

The niche of Alevism in or outside Islam is the ranging mark of the whole amplitude of opinions on the roots of Alevism among the Alevis themselves (see Özel 2006). Çınar, for example, claims (ibid: 9-10) that Alevism has a two thousand year history, and, thus, the term "Alevi" has nothing to do with the name of Ali. He derives it from the Turk. *alev* ("flame") with the suffix *-i*, interpreting the term as "belonging to flame, light", or "one who comes from the light" and referring to the name *ışık* and *ışık taifesi* ("tribe of the light"), the community itself had allegedly used before the 16th century.

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<sup>17</sup> See <<http://www.hacibektasderneği.com/alevilik-bektasilik-nedir.html>>.

<sup>18</sup> See <<http://www.pirsultan.net/kategori.asp?KID=4&ID=25>>.

Şener (ibid: 31-34) considers Alevism as part of Islam, associating it with Caliph Ali, and relating some Alevi elements, especially in family structure, attitude to women and the perception of hell and paradise to early Islam.

Erden (ibid: 38) dates the emergence of Alevism back to 2500 years ago, making special stress on the authentic culture of the Turkmen Oghuz tribes, local Anatolian substratum and other civilisational elements (e.g. Sumerian).

Bermek (ibid: 44-47) puts Alevism within Islam with a proviso that the Sunni faith is not the only possible way of Islam. Moreover, he considers Islam as superior to other religions, “since Mohammad came together with such an analyst as Caliph Ali, and Ali was able to explain the core of this faith to masses”.

Özel (ibid: 52-55) suggesting that Alevism should be regarded both outside and inside Islam, specifies the phenomenon as the pure Turkish interpretation of Islam. In his opinion, it is not Islam that contains Alevism, but it is Alevism that contains Islam, alongside with its other constituents—elements of Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Shamanism.

Atıcı (ibid: 61-66) believes, Alevism is the core of Islam, at the same time, however, placing Alevism closer to Sunnism.

Genç (ibid: 71) approaches Alevism as a system of Anatolian beliefs influenced by Islam.

Demir (ibid: 79-81) defines Alevism as heterodox Islam, also emphasising its pre-Islamic elements.

Kaygusuz (ibid: 92-101) states that Alevism is a syncretic religious system based on the esoteric interpretation of Islam.

Finally, Yıldırım (ibid: 113) suggests that Alevism is a “unique” religion, quite different from Islam and typical exclusively to Anatolia.

This wide variety of opinions among the Alevi intellectuals virtually manifests two extreme trends within the internal Alevi discourse in Turkey, one melting Alevism inside Islam, and the other alienating it from the religious context and turning it into an ideological system.

#### CONCLUSION

Despite the myth of Ataturk's Alevi origin spread among Alevis, and the fact that they even approached him as an incarnation of Hacı Bektaş, actually, Alevis were among those who welcomed the Republic with the particular stress on its secular character. A laic state, be it even atheistic, seemed to be less dangerous to the Alevis, than an empire governed according to the *shari'a* rules (Aktay 1999; Okan 2004). Many Alevi intellectuals expected the laic regime of the Republic to



be a real chance for the promotion of their religion. Moreover, they almost considered themselves both the founders and owners of the Republic. However, in reality, the laicism project has done the ill service to Alevism: Alevi milieu was disintegrated, the communities deprived of their spiritual guidance, polarised in religious and political terms. The Alevi identity varies sometimes even among kins, so that the identity issue can be presently approached only as the diversity of Alevi identities in Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> We leave aside the dogmatic aspect of the problem: the contamination of Alevism, a Shi'a trend, with the Bektashi order is another symptomatic sign of the erosion of Alevi milieu in Turkey (see Olsson, et al.)