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SECULARISM

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No idea better epitomizes the ethos of modern Turkey than the doctrine of secularism. None of the principles set out to define Kemalism in 1931—republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism, and revolutionism (Zürcher, 1993: 189)—has been more persistently and stubbornly referred to in defense of the Republican regime than secularism. As the authoritarianism of the one-party period was superseded by more liberal and democratic ideas after the end of World War II, secularism continued to serve as the hub around which the Kemalist state elite (the military, the judiciary, and the higher echelons of the civil bureaucracy) guarded its hegemony.

Secularism upholds a reduced role for religion in the political sphere. Political scientists usually agree that this doctrine dates back to the European religious wars. A widely held contention has been that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) marked a new era in which secularism was recognized as a guiding principle in international politics. Common agreement had thus been reached that it was better for state and religion to be separated at the interstate level.¹ Later, secularism also became a leading principle in national affairs. How this principle was given effect in specific cases differed. In post-revolutionary France, for example, secularism came to mean rigorous state control of the church, a specific trajectory in the development of state-church relations referred to as laicism. The manner in which secularism developed in Republican Turkey was similar to (or partly modeled on) this kind of forced secularism, hence the “Turkish” expression *laik* (laic).

Secularism has different meanings in different contexts. However, secularism is also the expression of a universal principle. This complication is pointed out by Joan Wallach Scott in her insightful analysis of the veiling issue in France, a debate prompted by the prohibition of this mode of dress in the country’s public schools.

The invocation of the principle always does specific historical work, so it’s hard to endorse it abstractly. Yet it is precisely the abstraction that provides the grounds for arguing specific cases: keeping creationism out of the public school curriculum in the United States or banning Islamic headscarves in French public schools.

(Scott, 2007: 94)

In this chapter on Turkish secularism, the focus will be on the variety of meanings conferred on this notion by various groups during different phases of the country’s modern history.

Types of secularism

Scott contrasts the “republican model” with the “democratic model” of *laïcité*.² Others have used different terms to express the difference between more authoritarian or totalitarian and more democratic forms of secularism. A recent variant is the notion of “assertive” versus “passive” secularist ideologies, with France and Turkey being described as dominated by assertive *laïcité de combat*, and the United States by passive secularism, *laïcité de plurielle* (Kuru, 2009: 12).

Without discarding any of these distinctions, it is preferred here to conceptualize the differences in terms of “weaker” (or “softer”) and “stronger” (or “harder,” alternatively “heavy-handed” or “hard-core”) forms of secularism, depending on which social and/or political spheres are being referenced by the concept. In its weakest form, secularism holds that religion should be separated from the constitution of the state and the legislative process. A more encompassing and stronger definition holds that religion should also be separated from politics or the public/political sphere, and a still wider and stronger definition claims that secularism means separation of religion from society or the various communities of individuals. To go one step further would mean repressing the practice (and belief) of religion at the level of the individual as well, but in this case atheism would be a more apt description, as, for example, in a communist context. Such an antireligious ideology was applied in the Soviet Union, but not to any significant extent in the Turkish case. Based on these distinctions, this analysis will focus on three forms of secularism: state-oriented secularism (regarding forms of government, law, and education), civil society/politics-oriented secularism (in relation to voluntary associations and political parties), and community-oriented secularism (*vis-à-vis* religious communities).

Three periods of secularism

Three phases in the history of Turkish secularism can be distinguished: 1) the late Ottoman period from the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century to the Young Turk Revolution of 1908; 2) the Second Constitutional Period up to the first free elections in 1950; and 3) the multiparty period.

During the first period, secularism was a by-product of a reform program intent on modernizing the state and its institutions, rather than a program articulated in the name of secularism itself. The scope of this program was also limited essentially to state-oriented secularism. The second period was the period of high secularism, when secularism became an aim in its own right, with the intention of extending its reach to all spheres of society, including religious communities. It was thus an example of combined state-oriented and community-oriented secularism. In the third phase, that period in Turkish modern history when civil society organizations seriously entered the public space, a plurality of voices came to compete. On the one hand, there is an almost totalitarian form of secularism, represented by the state elite, which seeks to control all three social/political spheres—the state, civil society/politics, and religious communities. On the other, there are softer notions of secularism, which leave aside civil society, politics, and religious communities, but accept the values of state-oriented secularism. As Ahmet Kuru has rightly pointed out, these notions of secularism are not “assertive,” but should rather be characterized as “passive” (or “pluralistic”) secularism (Kuru, 2009: 12). The assertive, all-embracing (or even totalitarian) form of secularism is based on the idea that the religious and the secular are absolute opposites. The limited and at the same time passive form of secularism does not assume such a contradiction. “Instead of positing religion as the antithesis of secularism (particularly its democratic forms), it’s useful to see that they also sometimes

operate as parallel systems of interpretation.” That is, religion does not have to be an obstacle to a secular political order, democracy, and change (Scott, 2007: 96).

The following account is chronologically structured. The first section lays out the wider historical context, while the second focuses on the confrontations between stronger and weaker forms of secularism as they have been articulated since the end of World War II.

Earlier developments

As mentioned above, secularism was not a salient feature of nineteenth-century reform politics. Still, important steps in that direction were taken during the period. It is thanks to a number of works appearing in the early 1960s that these secularizing reforms of the late Ottoman period have been given due attention. Especially worth mentioning are Niyazi Berkes (1998), *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Şerif Mardin (1962), *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, and Bernard Lewis (1961), *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*.

For a long time, official Kemalist historiography³ represented an almost unchallenged discourse, which regarded the Republic as having a monopoly on secularism and modernity. Without any distinction as to historical period, the sultanate was regarded as a “reactionary” *ancien régime*, distinct in all respects from the new Republic. This ideology disregarded any reforms implemented during the preceding era. Niyazi Berkes, Şerif Mardin, and others were critical of that discourse (or national myth) and provided a more realistic assessment of the contributions of late Ottoman reformers.

Our understanding of early reformers such as Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1809–39) owes much to Berkes’ analysis of Turkish secularism. It was during Mahmud’s reign that the foundations for a more secular form of government were laid (1834).

Mahmud II is most renowned for abolishing the Janissaries (1826), an infantry corps based on the *devşirme* (the system of levying children from conquered Christian countries). More important for the development of secularism, however, was the abolition of two offices, the *sadrâzam* and the Şeyhülislam, both of which stood above all other officeholders, temporal and religious. It was through these two dignitaries that the sultan carried out his dual function as sultan and caliph. Under Mahmud II, the *sadrâzam* was turned into a chief minister over a council of ministers (an essentially executive/administrative post), while the Şeyhülislam was pushed out of the domain of temporal government. The result of this change was that the office of the Şeyhülislam was equated with that of the heads of the *millets* (i.e., non-Muslim communities). His sphere of influence was thus confined to more specifically religious issues, lying outside temporal politics, including reform activities (Berkes, 1998: 98).

Mahmud II thus prepared the ground for the subsequent and better-known Tanzimat reforms (1839–76). During this period, action was taken to formalize and institutionalize reforms that had already been initiated, especially within the fields of government, law, and education. The Tanzimat or Gülhane Charter limited the arbitrary executive power of the sultan, with the sovereign becoming bound by laws made by others (Berkes, 1998: 146). It is true that the laws had to be in accordance with the Sharia, but new laws were not accompanied by a *fetva* issued by the Şeyhülislam. His authorization was no longer required. “Thus, the Charter opened the first formal breach between the ‘temporal’ and the ‘religious.’ The separationism characteristic of the Tanzimat secularism was thus formalized with the Charter” (ibid.: 147).

Secularism also made its mark on education. New schools were established outside the traditional *mekteps* and *medreses*, with two important secularizing consequences. First, the *ulema* lost much of their traditional influence, and second, there occurred a bifurcation between

religious and secular education, which was more visible to the general public than similar separations taking place on the governmental and/or judicial levels.

The French *lycée* in Galatasaray (established in 1868) was one of the first schools to offer multisectarian and multiethnic education. Students from various non-Muslim and Muslim groups studied there under one roof. Religion was dropped from the curriculum and Muslim students would pray in a small mosque attached to the school, while Christian and Jewish students would attend nearby places of worship (Berkes, 1998: 117, 189). The kind of liberal secularism that had afforded Jews equal rights as citizens in France during the Third Republic was successfully replicated in an Ottoman context in this school.

Secularism as was manifested during the Tanzimat era had the potential for social and political emancipation. New forces were brought into the political sphere, which was opened up to important modernizing reforms. Ottoman Turkey underwent fundamental social and political transformations, which wiped out traditional status hierarchies and sectarian boundaries in law, even if not in society. However, as the old order—*nizam*—started to dissolve, new forms of integration were required. Secularism offered one such solution, at least as far as religious differences between citizens were concerned, but that was not enough.

The insoluble dilemmas involved in building a constitutional regime on the remains of a multicultural (ethnic and sectarian) agrarian empire stood out in clear relief at the time of the declaration of the first Ottoman Constitution in 1876. The opposition was wide-ranging: some people rejected the Constitution on the grounds that it gave too much power to the people; others, because it implied the participation of non-Muslims in the government of an Islamic state (Berkes, 1998: 240). In addition, the Constitution was built on an inner contradiction: representatives from the non-Muslim and/or non-Turkish provinces, with strong interests in provincial autonomy or independence and bolstered by international power groups, formed an important group in the parliament (*medis*). The 1876 constitutional movement was thus overtaken by nationalism. Secularism fell short as a solution to such deep antagonisms. Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) closed the *medis* in February 1878, less than a year after its first session in March 1877. Thereafter he ruled with an iron fist.

In terms of the influence of religion on politics, it is generally held that the Hamidian authoritarian regime was a backlash to the Tanzimat reforms. During Abdulhamid's reign, pan-Islamism became an official ideology and the sultan's role as caliph was emphasized in a way that had not been the case for several centuries. However, on closer inspection, this allegedly reversed secularization occurred on the ideological, not the institutional level. Islam was politicized⁴ and appeared as one among several political ideologies, even though it came to dominate by virtue of its being the ideology of the sultan, and thus the state ideology of the period.

In spite of the authoritarianism of the Hamidian regime, important developments took place in the economy and in literature, the media, and other intellectual activities. A public space existed in which political criticism was anathema, but in which philosophy and literature of a quite secular nature—translated or domestically produced—could be relatively freely circulated and discussed. In this way, the exchange of ideas, secular or religious, expanded. New forms of literature were also introduced: “modes of psychological states, feelings of conflict, doubt, anxiety, and, above all, the practice of philosophizing and moralizing, both of which were the signs of secularization in mind and morality” (Berkes, 1998: 280). Therefore, “[it] is not an exaggeration to say that the secularizing effects of these publications were greater than those of all the Tanzimat publications together” (ibid.: 281).

In 1908, in response to pressure from the Young Turks (also known as the Committee of Union and Progress, CUP), Sultan Abdulhamid was forced to reintroduce, with minor

amendments, the Constitution of 1876. The following year, the sultan was forced from office after CUP leaders managed to crush a counter-revolt. The CUP remained in power until 1918.

With the coming of the 1908 Revolution something made itself felt for the first time: the Turkish masses reacted politically rather than religiously. Unnoticed, the Hamidian regime had served to split the *din* [religion] from the *devlet* [state] in the minds not only of the educated but also of the masses. At last, the masses had entered into a stage where there could be a political association existing apart from the state and continuing when the government collapsed.

(Berkes, 1998: 326)

The leaders of the CUP were men of action, rather than visionary ideologues. Zürcher describes them as “ideologically eclectic” and summarizes their ideas as:

... nationalism, a positivist belief in the value of objective scientific truth, a great (and somewhat naïve) faith in the power of education to spread this truth and elevate the people, implicit belief in the role of the central state as the prime mover in society and a certain activism, a belief in change, in progress, which contrasted sharply with the cautious conservatism prevailing in the Hamidian era.

(Zürcher, 1993: 137)

Even though their decade in power was dominated by ethnic and national conflicts and wars, the Balkan Wars, and World War I, the CUP did not give up on its mission to “save the state” (*devleti kurtarmak*). To that end, reforms were implemented, especially in respect of local administration, police, fire brigades, transport services, secular primary and secondary education, university education, and so forth. Changes were also made to the legal system: family cases, traditionally tried in religious courts, were placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice (Lewis, 1961: 227–30). However, because of the extreme political instability, the concrete achievements remained limited. It was not until the wars, including the War of Independence (1919–22), came to an end, that political visions and reform programs could be brought back on track again. What arose from the ashes of this traumatic process of imperial decline and brutal and costly war was a political leadership that made secularism its lodestar.

Bernard Lewis summarizes the achievements of Mustafa Kemal’s first years as president of the Republic in the following way:

Within four years, in a series of swift and sweeping changes, Kemal repealed the Holy Law and disestablished Islam. The stages are well known—the restriction and then prohibition of religious education, the adoption of European civil and penal codes, the nationalization of pious foundations, the reduction and eventual elimination of the power of the ulema, the transformation of social and cultural symbols and practices, such as dress and headgear, the calendar and the alphabet. The coping-stone of the edifice of legal secularism was laid in April 1928, when Islam was removed from the constitution.

(Lewis, 1961: 404)

To this, Lewis added the struggle with the dervish brotherhoods (*tarikats*), which were prohibited in 1925. To be sure, the basis for this “militant laicism” (Lewis, 1961: 403) had been established

when the caliphate was abolished on 3 March 1924 (ibid.: 264).⁵ As part of the same confrontation, the Şeyhülislam was replaced by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Müdürlüğü, later Başkanlığı).⁶ In this context, mention should also be made of Law No. 556, passed in February 1925, banning the use of religion for political gain (Özoğlu, 2009: 194).⁷

The Kemalist attack on religion sent shockwaves throughout Turkey and the entire Muslim world. Here was a program of secularism that aimed at permeating and controlling the state, including the law (the judiciary) and public education, civil society/politics, and religious communities in one fell swoop.⁸

As a result of the new territorial borders and the atrocities committed during World War I, the non-Muslim minorities had been considerably reduced. Strong emphasis on secularism could have made sense if the purpose had been to design the new Republic as a multiethnic/sectarian society.⁹ This was obviously not the case, however. The heavy stress on Turkish nationalism and the population exchange programs with Greece (*mübadele*) in 1923–24 clearly spoke of different aims.

So, why were these hard-hitting measures in the name of secularism undertaken? There are two possible explanations: Enlightenment-inspired visions and security concerns.¹⁰

Concerning Kemalist visions for a new, modern, and civilized Turkey, the leadership was strongly influenced by French positivism, meaning an intense suspicion of religion and an almost magical belief in science. This *weltanschauung*, allegedly the religion of modern times, was a legacy of earlier Western-inspired reformers, especially certain radical individuals among the Young Turks (Hanioglu, 1995: 203–4). Modern Turkey was to be designed as a truly enlightened and civilized country through the adoption of attributes imagined and favored by the contemporary Westernized Turkish elite.

The security concerns had two dimensions: regional and domestic. The first related to the neighboring Arab countries, which, due to the strong emphasis on secularism, were kept at arm's length. Thus, potential irredentism in the name of pan-Islamism, closely akin to pan-Turkism, was thwarted (Kayalı, 1997: 207–12; Landau, 1981: 72–73). Second, religious brotherhoods were traditionally bound closely together by kinship as well as communitarian ties and represented a social and—potentially—a political force to be reckoned with. In addition, a group of religiously oriented urban intellectuals—representing what Robert Wuthnow (1989) has termed a “community of discourse”—had been in the making since the last decades of the nineteenth century, and was perceived as a threat (Kara, 2005).

Resistance to the Kemalist leadership had two social bases: urban and tribal. Opposition groups and leaders from the Kemalists' own urban classes were drawn together in the Progressive Republican Party (PRP) under General Kazım Karabekir, the outstanding War of Independence leader. The other base of resistance was in the Kurdish areas, where the force of religion was especially strong and tribal relationships were still largely intact. Intertribal conflict as well as efforts to maintain earlier political and administrative autonomy vis-à-vis the central state had been a problem for the rulers even during Ottoman times. “The impact of the state on the tribes is ... much more varied and penetrating than has become clear so far; ... destruction of emirates, punitive campaigns against unruly tribes, forced settlements and the levying of taxes are only a part of the entire spectrum” (van Bruinessen, 1992: 134).

Armed resistance was limited to the tribal areas in eastern Turkey. With the PRP opposition largely thwarted, two alternatives remained for citizens critical of and/or uncomfortable with the secularizing reforms: to leave the country or to come to terms with the existing order by pursuing religious practices in private or, collectively, underground.

The poet Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873–1936), a devoted patriot during the War of Independence and the author of the Turkish national anthem, went into voluntary exile to Cairo in

1926, where he lived until the last months of his life (Durbaş, 2008). Another author, also an active participant in the War of Independence but later critical of the regime, was Halide Edip (Adivar) (1882–1964). As an intellectual trying to reconcile traditional and religious values with modern principles, she was uncomfortable with the Kemalist secularist policies. “Halide Edip found much in the Ottoman Islamic culture that needed to be preserved and incorporated into the body of a tolerant nationalism” (Seyhan, 2008: 45). The kind of secularism she embraced was not hostile to religion. Owing to her and her husband’s critical attitude toward Kemalist authoritarianism, both of them left Turkey on their own initiative in 1926 for France and the United Kingdom and did not return until 1939, one year after Atatürk had died.

A person who stood up against official, assertive secularism without choosing a life in exile was the poet Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–83). It should be remembered, however, that when he entered the political arena, Atatürk was no longer alive. In 1943 he founded a publication, *Büyük Doğu* (Great East), through which for many years he pursued his campaign (*dava*) for Islam. However, *Büyük Doğu* was repeatedly the object of state persecution (under Clause 163 of the Penal Code), and Necip Fazıl himself was imprisoned several times, though usually for short periods.¹¹

Necip Fazıl appealed to people from different walks of life who had come to question hard-core Kemalist secularism. In his own mind, he was obsessed by the existing pressure on religion (especially in education and the media), but otherwise he was no friend of liberalism and democracy. As the years went by, his political sympathies became increasingly right-wing and nationalist (specifically through the Nationalist Action Party). Even so, he came to serve as a mediator between those leading conservative and liberal intellectuals who had, during the earlier years of the Republic, advocated a softer or weaker form of secularism, and among those political parties that struggled to do so after the end of the 1960s. By the 1970s and the establishment of pro-Islamic parties,¹² the initiative in the struggle against hard-core secularism had passed from a select group of individual actors to collective mass-based organizations.

This transition has important bearings on how to view the relationship between secularism and democracy. During the 1980s, partly as a result of the anxiety (or even scaremongering) that Turkey would turn Islamist like Iran (Khomeini) or Pakistan (Ziya-ül Hak), the hard-core variant of secularism became an exalted, almost sacred notion. If historically secularism has been described as the principle that protects the public/political sphere from a dominant religion (Scott, 2007: 97), then in the Turkish context it was religion that needed to be protected from excessive forms of secularism. In other words, hard-core secularism had grown into a principle that obstructed rather than promoted a free public sphere. What is at issue here is not secularism as such, but its effect on the development of democratic institutions and practices.¹³

Stronger and weaker forms of secularism

In the struggle against pro-Islamic groups, secularism (*laiklik*) has been ceaselessly applied as a rhetorical weapon. “*Laiklik elden gidiyor*” (secularism is about to perish) or “*Türkiye laik, laik kalacak*” (Turkey is and will always remain secular) are frequently repeated slogans. The wider historical and sociopolitical contexts of secularism, however, have rarely been the focus of the public debate. The manner in which secularism has been invoked in various court indictments does not bear witness to any strong determination to reach a deeper understanding of how the political implications of this principle, as set out in Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution, must change as society itself grows more and more complex, globalized—and secularized.

When Necmettin Erbakan, for many years the unchallenged leader of the pro-Islamic political movement,¹⁴ elaborated on *laiklik*, he would question the very use of this foreign term in

the Turkish Constitution. The Turkish practice of *laiklik*, according to Erbakan, was nothing other than *din düşmanlığı*, that is, hostility to religion.¹⁵ Erbakan, on the other hand, was accused of “*şeriatçılık*” (advocating Sharia law), regarded as the utmost offence against the secularist order.

This exalted discourse, marked by a hostile and polarized rhetoric, was bolstered by a couple of especially sensitive issues. Indeed, the secularism debate took its shape from a limited range of controversies, three of which will be mentioned here: the legitimacy of political parties promoting Islamic values; religious education in public schools (specifically, *imam-hatip*, or prayer leader and preacher schools); and the headscarf issue. Each of these controversies had its own characteristics, and these characteristics were important in the development of secularism in postwar Turkey.

Concerning political parties, the first pro-Islamic party, the National Order Party, was set up in January 1970, only to be banned a little over a year later following the military intervention in March 1971. The National Salvation Party was established in 1972 and closed down in 1981, along with all the other parties of the day. The Welfare Party survived from 1984 to 1998 and was succeeded by the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2001.

The overarching trend in the development of these parties has been from emphasis on the religious freedom of the community of believers to advocacy on behalf of the liberties of the entire citizenry. As the leader of the Welfare Party, Necmettin Erbakan spoke in favor of practicing Muslims. For him, it was the well-being and freedom of the like-minded that mattered. Other groups demanding individual rights and liberties, such as the Alevis and Kurds and/or non-Muslims, were not part of his or his party’s agenda. The situation changed in 2002, however, when the JDP formed the government and especially in 2007 with the commencement of its second term in office. However, between the era of Necmettin Erbakan and that of JDP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan another critical period of military repression had intervened. That episode is directly related to the controversy over the prayer leader and preacher schools.

In the relatively liberal atmosphere of the Özal era,¹⁶ religious education had gained new momentum. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of students in *imam-hatip* schools increased from 238,000 to 496,000 (Özdalga, 1999: 424). Particularly noteworthy was the marked increase in the percentage of girls, from 15 percent in 1985 to 42 percent in 1996 (Özdalga, 1999: 428). This was clear evidence that students were choosing this form of education not only to become *imams*, a male occupation, but also to gain a general education that included more adequate religious instruction. This infuriated those in secularist circles, who saw this trend as translating into special or “backyard” (*arka bahçesi*) support for the Welfare Party, which was indeed gaining ground during this period. With the local elections of 1994 and the general elections of 1995, the Welfare Party emerged as a major player in Turkish politics. That Erbakan should, on top of all this, become the prime minister in a coalition government in June 1996 was to these circles simply intolerable. His opponents struck during the notorious meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) on 28 February 1997, and the special focus was the prayer leader and preacher schools.¹⁷ The already shaky coalition government was not able to resist the pressures and less than four months later the government was dissolved. This process goes under the name of the “1997 postmodern coup” in Turkish politics.

This event was an important turning point. Repression against Islamic circles increased, not least over the headscarf issue, but the meeting also served as a wake-up call for the pro-Islamic groups themselves. They revised their thinking on a number of important issues relevant to any future democratizing process. Religious freedom would not be achieved without taking the whole spectrum of individual liberties into account, preferably in a European Union (EU)

context. Since this change also allowed for the creation of a freer public space, it had important consequences for the notion and practice of secularism as well.

No other issue has been more closely linked to the debate on public space than the headscarf issue. Nilüfer Göle (1991) was among the first to point out that the headscarf signified a different way of becoming modern and taking an active part in public life from the one advocated by secular feminists. The kind of visibility chosen by those who wore headscarves recognized gender differences instead of challenging (or denying) them as was done by secular feminists. This recognition, however, was not the same as abandoning aspirations to a professional life on a gender-equal basis. On the contrary, the headscarf opened the way into the public sphere for religiously minded, conservative women (Göle, 1991: 88–95).

The course of events in Turkey since the 1990s suggests that it is the desire to overcome hard-core secularism that has triggered the development of wider democratic reform. A change of political course toward softer secularism has emerged in parallel with the further development of democratic institutions and practices. It was in this softer, less assertive form that secularism was first introduced into late Ottoman society. After almost a century of heavy-handed, authoritarian secularism, Turkey now seems to have the chance to come full circle and return to more liberal practices. This time, however, Turkish society is built around much more complex domestic and global configurations.

To be sure, resistance to assertive secularism is not confined to Islamic circles. Sometimes secularism is also criticized from a “purist” perspective, which holds that “real” secularism can only be achieved if the state withdraws from the religious field altogether. The argument is that as long as the state controls and dominates religion, secularism cannot be genuine. Most often the object of this critique is the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), the institution administering mainstream religion in Turkey today.

There are very few studies of this institution,¹⁸ partly due to its low profile, for secularism has been almost as invisible at the institutional level as it has been raucous on the discursive level. However, Turkish secularism can hardly be understood without taking this institution into consideration. The Diyanet has tempered both assertive secularism and exaggerated forms of religious zeal: it recognizes, as well as contains religion.

The Diyanet oversees approximately 80,000 mosques and employs 84,000 officials (Gözyayın, 2009: 191). Its field of activity is more or less defined by four of the five pillars of Islam—ritual prayer (*namaz*), fasting during Ramadan (*oruç*), pilgrimage (*hac*), and almsgiving (*zekat*)—as well as sacrifice (*kurban*). To this have been added education (Qur’an courses), seminars and conferences, and various publishing activities. Over the years, the Diyanet has become more elaborate and pervasive in its role and organization, reaching down to the district (*ilçe*) levels. Since 1979, the Diyanet has also operated abroad (Gözyayın, 2009: 307–22), particularly in such countries as Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Bulgaria, and the Central Asian republics.¹⁹

The strongest criticism of the Diyanet has come from Alevi circles. The Alevis are an Ali-oriented (Shi’a-like) sect, who originate from the rural parts of central Anatolia. They constitute about 15 percent of the Turkish population (Shankland, 2003). The Diyanet has played a stabilizing role with respect to Sunni Islam, but in relation to the Alevi community it has failed to fulfill its mission as a secular—or neutral—institution. Alevi grievances are concentrated on the lack of representation within the Diyanet, the total silence on Alevism in public school education, and the unwillingness to allow special houses of worship (*cemevi*) for Alevis. The fact that the concerns of the Alevi community have since the early 1990s become part of the public debate is further illustration of the multitude of voices involved in the controversies over secularism.

Conclusion

Perceived as a political doctrine dealing with the relationship between the state, religion, and civil society, secularism has generally been studied by historians, political scientists, and sociologists. Since the early 1990s this situation appears to have changed. More ethnographically and anthropologically oriented scholars have entered the field, setting a different agenda.²⁰ Just as the study of Islam has turned its attention from doctrine or ideology to “living Islam” (Saktanber, 2002), so the study of secularism has come to focus on “living secularism,” that is, the “state secularism of everyday politics” (Özyürek, 2006).

No doubt these studies offer new insights into the daily uses and meaning of such well-known symbols of secularism and nationalism as flags, posters, pins, clothing, and other personal emblems. Thus, the politicization of daily life is given due emphasis.

However, while these studies offer new perspectives on how “the political” penetrates our daily lives (Foucault, 1979), they overlook the constitution of “real” state power (Weber, 1978). There is no place for innocence in studies where the role of “the state” is involved. If state symbolism has merged with civil society, as in the case of the Kemalism of the 1990s (Özyürek, 2006), there are more straightforward lessons to be drawn from the history of Mussolini’s Italy than from Foucauldian post-structuralism.

Whatever the lack of theoretical sophistication in Niyazi Berkes’ (1998) study of Turkish secularism (originally written in 1963), it offers a well-reasoned historical analysis of a social, political, and cultural transformation stretching over more than one and a half centuries. As such, it retains its place as *the* standard work on Turkish secularism.

Notes

- 1 For a critical discussion of these contentions, see Shakman Hurd (2008). According to this author, religion has played a greater role in international politics than either the doctrine of secularism or the political analyses of it have admitted. “I have challenged the assumption that since the Westphalian settlement religion has been marginalized and privatized in international relations, rendering it largely irrelevant to power politics. I argue instead that the modern forms of secular authority ... emerged out of a profoundly Christian Westphalian moral order” (ibid.: 152). In the wider international perspective she applies, including also the Muslim world, religion has certainly played an important role. In that respect, her analysis is commendable. In a more limited European perspective, however, the secularism thesis still seems to hold true.
- 2 The Stasi report of 2004 (Bernard Stasi, *Laïcité et République*) represented the first, while a confederation of societies of teachers, the League of Education, in a plan from 1985–90, represented the second (Scott, 2007: 121).
- 3 One of the main normative sources is Mustafa Kemal’s speech or *Nutuk* from 1927, in which he gave his version of the War of Independence and the establishment of the Republic. For an interesting analysis of the close identification of the narrator, Mustafa Kemal, and the nation, see Hülya Adak’s article: “National Myths and Self-Narrations” (Adak, 2003).
- 4 For an extensive as well as deep historical and sociological analysis of this process, see Karpat (2001).
- 5 Lewis: “The abolition of the Caliphate was a crushing blow to their [the *ulema*’s] whole hierarchic organization. It was accompanied by a series of others, abolishing the ancient office of *Şeyh-iül-İslâm* and the Ministry of *Şeriat*, closing the separate religious schools and colleges, and, a month later, abolishing the special *Şeriat* courts in which the theologian-judges had administrated the Holy Law. The new order was confirmed in the republican constitution, adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 20 April 1924, which affirmed the legislative authority of the Assembly and reserved the judicial function to independent courts acting ‘in the name of the nation’” (Lewis, 1961: 265).
- 6 Erik Zürcher comments: “The establishment of these [to this was also added the Directorate-General of Pious Foundations, EÖ] clearly shows that the Kemalist perception of secularism meant not so much separation of state and religion as control of the state over religion” (Zürcher, 1993: 195).
- 7 This law was replaced by the notorious Clause 163 of the Penal Code in 1936.

- 8 Erik Zürcher gives the following description: “In the secularist drive which was the most characteristic element of Kemalist reform, three areas can be discerned. The first was the secularization of the state, education and law: the attack on the traditional strongholds of the institutionalized Islam of the *ulema*. The second was the attack on religious symbols and their replacement by the symbols of European civilization. The third was the secularization of social life and the attack on popular Islam it entailed” (Zürcher, 1993: 194–95).
- 9 During the Tanzimat period, for example, secularism had served the purpose of allowing students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds to attend the same educational institutions.
- 10 To be sure, the explanations discussed here are not exhaustive. One also has to consider, for example, the confusion over ultimate sovereignty in a situation where there was both a president elected by parliament and a caliph with his roots in a royal dynasty. İsmet İnönü noted in his memoirs: “We encountered the greatest resistance when we abolished the caliphate. Abolishing the sultanate had been easier, as the survival of the caliphate had satisfied the partisans of the sultanate. But the two-headed system could not go on for ever. It nourished the expectation that the sovereign would return under the guise of caliph ... and gave hope to the [Ottoman dynasty].” Quoted in Mango (1999: 403).
- 11 See Necip Fazıl’s autobiographical novels, such as *Başbuğ velilerden 33* (Number 33 of the Leading Sheikhs), *O ve ben* (He and I), *Rabıta-i Şerife* (The Noble Connection), and *Tasavvuf Bahçeleri* (The Gardens of Mysticism), all published by Doğu Yayınları, İstanbul. See also Özdalga (1994) and tr. wikipedia.org/wiki/Necip_Fazıl_K%C4%B1K%C4%B1sak%C3%BCrek.
- 12 The National Salvation Party during the 1970s, and during the 1980s and 1990s the Welfare Party.
- 13 Scott remarks: “Perhaps it’s the democratic outcome I’m interested in more than the principle of secularism itself” (Scott, 2007: 94).
- 14 Necmettin Erbakan was the leader of the National Order Party (1969–71), the National Salvation Party (1972–81), and the Welfare Party (1984–98). When the Welfare Party was closed down in 1998, Erbakan was banned from politics for five years. After the Justice and Development Party was formed in 2001, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the circle closest to Erbakan carried on in the Felicity Party. See Özdalga (2002).
- 15 See, for example, an interview: www.videoislami.com/view/1632/erbakan-laiklik.
- 16 Turgut Özal was prime minister in 1983–89 and president from 1989 until his death in 1993.
- 17 Previously students would enter these schools after five years of obligatory primary school education. Through the NSC memorandum compulsory school attendance was prolonged to eight years, in itself a praiseworthy reform, but from the point of view of religious education this had negative consequences, since it would be only after having fulfilled these obligatory eight years that students were allowed to enter the prayer leader and preacher schools.
- 18 İftar Gözaydın’s (2009) *Diyanet* is one of the few.
- 19 See the website of the Directory of Religious Affairs: www.diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyanet-Isleri-Baskanligi-AnaMenu-yurtdisi-teskilati-58.aspx.
- 20 The works by Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) and Esra Özyürek (2006) are examples of this change from political to cultural perspectives in the study of Turkish secularism.

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