

Evaluating Alevism in Turkey

Jamal Shah

Lecturer in Political Science
Government College Takht Bhai, KP, Pakistan
&

Doctorate student in Political Science
Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey.

Abstract

Multiculturalism based on toleration negates the politics of exclusion. Being a permanent phenomenon of the Turkish politics, Alevism, since the past two decades, is a fact requiring genuine solution based on justice and fair play. Alevism cannot achieve it by itself. Though since 1980s and particularly after 1990, there emerged a wave of Alevi's revivalism due mainly to the mass migration of Alevis from rural to urban cities, explosion of media, collapse of the USSR and mass publication of books and journals, this revivalism should not be viewed as a strength vis-à-vis the majority. Due to its internal divisions and disagreements, Alevism does not (and cannot) play a dominant role in Turkish politics. The migration to the urban cities has brought into existence a process of soft and delicate mode of Alevi's assimilation. Alevism gives emphasis on the Kemalist version of secularism and has a number of complaints from the present government struggling for restructuring and remodeling the existing version of secularism. For this purpose the present study tries to give answers to two questions "Is Turkish secularism an acceptable political mechanism for Alevi?" and "Can Alevi as a religious group pose any threat to the social integrity of Turkish society?"

Key Words: Alevism, Turkish Secularism, Kemalism, Haci Bektaş, Cemevi, Dede and Directorate of religious Affairs.

1. Introduction

Though Turkey is an overwhelmingly Muslim society, secularism has declared religion to be private affair for Turks. The re-appearance of a more observable religiosity on the Turkish scene, especially over the past three decades, is the result of many influences: the weakening of the Kemalist legacy, a rediscovery of traditional practices, a growing network of *madaris* (religious schools) and social welfare institutions, the process of democratization and the growth of a more candid religious middle class. It is also the result of a large-scale migration from the countryside to the cities in the past three decades, with a resulting movement of more-traditional and outwardly religious people to Turkey's modern, urbanized west (Rabasa and Larrabee, 2008: 7).

Alevism in Turkey represents a large number of different heterodox communities with quite different beliefs and ritual practices. In terms of language, four groups may be notable. There is a group speaking Azerbaijani Turkish in the eastern province of Kars and who's Alevism differs little from the orthodox Shiaism of modern Iran. The Arabic speaking group living in southern Turkey especially Hatay and Adana is the expansion of Syria's Alevi (Nusayri) community and has no historical ties with the other Alevi groups. Like the first group, its number is small and its role in Turkey has been insignificant. The Turkish and Kurdish speaking groups (the latter further divided into speakers of Kurdish proper and of related to Zaza) are the most important ones which have the capability of forwarding the concerns of the Alevi to the larger society (Bruinessen, 1996).

The Bektashis, as well as the Alevi or the former *Kızılbaş*, are the followers of a well-known saint called Haci, a Turkish dervish (member of the various Muslim ascetic orders, some of which perform rotary dances and strong chanting as acts of ecstatic devotion), came to Anatolia in the year 1230 (Melikoff, 1998: 1-2).

Haci Bektaş was not theologian and had not studied in the *madrasa* (Islamic school of learning) as did Maulana Jelâluddin Rumi, a Persian Muslim poet, theologian, jurist, and Sufi mystic (Iqbal, 1991: xix-xx, and Star, 1997: xi-xii) who was Bektaş's contemporary. Though Bektaş was a Muslim, he did not renounce the ancient practices and customs of Central Asia. He did not like to pray in mosques but would climb a mountain with his *abdals* (a religious devotee). That mountain, called Hirkadağı, (the mountain of the cowl), is located near the present village of Hacibektaş and is an ancient volcano. The *abdals* used to light fires and dance around juniper-trees grown there, performing the *semah* (ritual dance) (1998: 3). Though historical sources are rather scarce, they all describe Bektaş as a Sufi belonging to the Turkmen tribes. His environment was the same as that of the Ottomans who belonged to the Oghuz tribe of the Kayi. That can perhaps explain the connection between the Ottomans and the first Bektashis (1998: 5).

Two distinct groups of *abdals* appear in 13th century: the Bektashis who led an inactive life in organized groups called *tekkes* (building made specifically for meetings and gatherings of a Sufi brotherhood), and the Kızılbaş (pronounced as Kazalbash) means "red head". The name Kızılbaş was given to them because of their headdress: a red bonnet with twelve facets. It was also called Taj-i Haydari "the crown of Haydar" (1998: 7). They were nomads or semi-nomads. Kızılbaş had no specific name for a long time. They are called *zındık*, heretic, *râfizi*, schismatic, and also "Shiite", *mülhid*, and atheist in the Ottoman documents. Later on they became known as *Alevi*. The beliefs of Alevism are syncretic and mixed. They contain elements from different origins, belonging to religions with which the Turkish people have been in contact i.e. Buddhism, Manichaeism, Nestorian or local Christianity.

In the 20th century most of the Alevi became Free-Masons, as sharing the same ideals: non-conformism and free-thinking. They also joined the Young Turks in the Young Turk Revolution (1908). Later on, when the Turkish Republic took the place of the Ottoman Empire, they worked for the cause of Atatürk and supported his efforts for a secular state. The Alevi went even further and compared Atatürk as a reincarnation of Hazret Ali (the third Caliph of Islam) and Haci Bektaş (Öz, 1990: 29).

The majority of the Turkish Alevi are settled in central Anatolia, but there are important pouches of Alevi villages throughout the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal regions and in the European part of Turkey. Kurdish Alevi are mostly settled in the northwestern part of the Kurdish settlement zone with Dersim as the cultural centre and with important pockets further south, east and west. The state's effort to impose Sunni Islam is a major factor contributing to the Alevi revival. When in 1989 the ban on associations was somewhat relaxed, Alevi voluntary associations grew up all over the country. Under the support of these associations, Alevi rituals called *cem* (pronounced as *jem*), which like the rituals of the Sunni Sufi orders had been practically proscribed since 1925, were publicly performed and houses of worship called as *cemevi* were opened. An abrupt tidal wave of publications was set in motion by Alevi intellectuals explaining the history, doctrine and ritual of Alevism and to define its relation to Sunni Islam. Some of the books cited the issues as whether Alevism is a sect within Islam or an essentially different religion and whether this different religion is of Iranian or Turkish origins (Vorhoff, 1998: 28-29, 37-39).

These developments brought an important change in the nature of Alevism, the switch from a secret, initiatory, locally anchored and orally transmitted religion to a public religion with formalized and written doctrine and ritual. Most of these Alevi authors were not from the priestly caste that had always held a monopoly in ritual competence and claimed superior knowledge of the tradition. The new generation of Alevi has a modern education, and their books mirror their mentalities of educators, all very much in the Kemalist mode. The way they reformulate and invent Alevi tradition is highly suggestive of what goes on in emerging nationalist movements.

The Alevi revival received back-up from secular elements in the political establishment, who had always considered the Alevi as their natural allies against the rise of political Islam. The growing influence of the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan means Kurdistan Workers' Party) among Turkey's Kurds, by the late 1980s, mostly among Alevi Kurds, gave the authorities another incentive to allow and even stimulate the development of Alevism as an alternative ethnic identity. In the early 1990s, the state began to publicly support Alevism and besides other things it started officially sponsoring the annual festival commemorating the Alevi saint Haci Bektash (Ahmad, 1988).

According to Bozkurt (1998: 111-14) for about 400 years, the Alevi have struggled to prove to the state and to the larger society that they are indeed Muslims, but all of no positive results. Now the table is turned. Since 1990, it has been the state and the Sunni scholars who have been trying to prove the Muslim credentials of the Alevi while the opposite opinion is being put forward by Alevi authors of the younger generation. The policy pursued by the Republican government is a type of painless assimilation. The concept of “perverted belief” is now replaced by the concept “ignorant belief”. According to the new move, the Alevi are Muslims. There is no vital difference between Alevi and Sunni. If Alevism is based on the love for Ali and his sons then almost every Sunni is an Alevi. Is it possible for any Muslim not to love Ali and his sons? Alevi and Sunni have belief in the same Book, the same Prophet, and the same belief. There is only one difference between them and it is that as a result of mistaken policies, the Alevi have been alienated and filled with bitterness. That is the cause for their having ceased to perform, and gradually having forgotten, some of the fundamental elements of the Muslim religion, such as ritual prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. Now this policy of exclusion will be abandoned and the Alevi welcomed back into the fold. This can be shown by the introduction of compulsory religious instruction in the schools and building of mosques in Alevi villages.

The second section of the paper throws light on Alevism as a religion. It explains its various beliefs and conceptions, places of gatherings and the role of dede (religious leader) and semah etc. The third section explains the revival of Alevism since 1980s and particularly 1990, showing various factors responsible for its revival. The fourth section answers the question “Is Alevism a Problem for Turkish National Integrity?” After discussing various explanations, the section ends with the conclusion that due to its divisive nature and mild assimilation into the larger society, Alevism is not in the position to threaten the social and political integrity of the Turkish society. The fifth section mentions that the present version of secularism is not acceptable to the Alevi and they struggle to develop it up to the standard of Kemalist secularism. The sixth section gives the conclusion of the paper.

2. Alevism as a Religion

Alevism differs significantly from Sunni Islam. Alevi have their own religious ceremonies called as *cem* which are officiated by holy men called *dede* who belongs to a hereditary priestly caste. In the *cem* religious poems called as *nefes* in Turkish are sung and men and women carry out ritual dances called *semah*. Alevi worship Hazret Ali and the Safavid Shah Ismail and consider them as superhuman. Instead of adherence to the Islamic *Shariah* (religious laws of Islam), Alevi profess obedience to a set of simple moral norms and claim to live according to the inner meaning of religion rather than its external demands.

According to Trowbridge (1909: 344), as Ali is pre-existent, so he is even now existing and manifested and known to his people. To those not his people he is veiled covered. Alevi respect and study the holy books of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad. But they do not depend upon them. Their teaching is mostly oral, transmitting from believer to believer and from father to father. Their sacrifice is not like the sacrifice of the Month of Pilgrimage, when all Sunni Muslims with enough financial capacity must slaughter one animal. Their duty is once in a lifetime, when the dede comes on his circuit. The dedes are their privileged teachers. The throat of the lamb or of the kid must be cut by the dede himself (1909: 346-347). According to Alevism, there is no command concerning polygamy in Ali's teaching and their custom is that a man shall have only one wife. In case of a wife's becoming insane or incapable of taking care of the house-hold, a second wife may be taken but never more than two. In spirit and love there is no distinction between man and woman which make them equal in that sense. In intellect and management, the uppermost and best will command irrespective of the fact whether it is man or woman (1909: 348).

Between the Alevi and the Shia there is a fundamental difference. The latter know Ali as the vicegerent of Muhammad. No other caliph is to be recognized. He is the successor, the executor. On the other hand, the Alevi know Ali as the incarnation of God. According to Trowbridge (1909: 351), Alevi do not regard the Hajj (the pilgrimage) as binding, do not feel bound to offer the Zakat (the legal alms), do not perform the Namaz (Islamic prayers), do not keep the fast of Ramazan (the holy month of Islam) and do not make the saying of the *Kalema* (Creed of Islam) a condition to faith. The Alevi have gathering houses called *cem evleri*, which are a medium primarily of socialization and not of religious practice. They have unique institutions like *on iki hizmet*, *dedelik*, and *zakirlik*.

Although according to the Turkish state the Alevis are Muslims, some Alevi intellectuals maintain that they are not Muslims, and that Alevism may not be a religion, but a group identity. The confusion about Alevism derives from the fact that it has not been established as a formal religion. The Alevis have no sacred books, no systematic theology and no *Shariah* tradition. For them, the important thing is the *tasavvuf*, (internal experience). In this regard, their approach to religion is very much like that of the Sufis (Göner, 2005).

3. The Revival of Alevism

Till 1980s, the existence of Alevism in Turkey was nearly forgotten. During 1970s the majority of its members adopted socialism, giving up their former religiously defined identity. Statements like the entire vanishing of Alevism as a community were frequently heard throughout Turkey. However, during the late 1980s, Alevi revivalism appeared on the Turkish scene. The efforts at community revival were soon accepted by the public making the “question of Alevism” one of the most discussed topics in the Turkish media.

The rediscovery of the Alevi community depends on various factors. Among them sociological and political factors are more important.

- I. From the sociological point of view, the rural exodus, which reached its climax during the 1970s for economic and political reasons, is the most decisive factor. Migration to the cities imposed new urban forms of expression on Alevism which in the past centuries had maintained its existence in remote rural areas of the country. Rapid urbanization led to fundamental changes in the social structure of the group. Thus the great increase in the number of educated Alevi and the emergence of an Alevi bourgeoisie produced a new social stratification (Çamuroğlu, 1998: 94).
- II. The political factors can be further reduced to three essential points.
 - a. The collapse of the socialist block in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. As a result, socialism, which so far had an irrefutable authority as an ideological alternative for the young and middle generations of Alevis, lost its former significance. Being politically frustrated, a large part of the Alevi population began to seek alternative paths. Among them there were a large number of individuals who, as a result of their activities in left-wing parties and groupings throughout the 1970s, had achieved political skill and extensive social networks. In the late 1980s, many of them started to redefine themselves as Alevi (1998: 95).
 - b. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism, or political Islam in Turkey. Because of their significant and wide historical inheritance, the Alevi were put on the alert by the Islamic reassertion, which had gained a new momentum through the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The most important cause for the establishment and rapid growth of Alevi organizations today lies in the defensive nature of the Alevi against the rise of Islamism, which led to various struggles by the emerging organizations to create political unity (Bruinessen, 1996).
 - c. The Kurdish problem is also a factor. Since a significant part of Alevis are Kurds, they became conscious of the fact that through this conflict nationalist tension directly affected their community. This awareness led to various expressions of Alevi ethnicity. Being a Kurd today bears the disgrace of being a separatist, a collaborator of the enemy, repeatedly mentioned in the media as the murderer of babies. Under these conditions, Kurdish Alevis have turned towards the religious elements of their ethnicity, stressing their “Aleviness” in public discourse. Thus the Alevis tend towards the political choice of secularism and express their identity in political terms. When faced with Kurdish nationalism, however, they tend towards the principle of unity and stress their religious identity and affiliation as Alevi (Erman and Göker, 2000: 100).
- III. The Alevi Manifesto, written in March 1989 and published for the first time in February 1990, can be considered as an important milestone in the re-politicization of Alevis in Turkey. It was written collectively and signed by several intellectuals (Alevis and Social Democratic Sunnis), academics, authors and journalists. The manifesto begins with this opening statement: *This manifesto aims to make the problems of Alevism, a branch of Muslimhood living in Turkey, known and to inform the public with the demands of Alevis. Alevis see other beliefs as true, beautiful, and sacred. However, they expect a similar positive sense and approach towards their own faith and culture ... The recognition of the Alevi taught will be a source of peace and prosperity for Turkey* (Erman and Göker, 2000: 102).

- IV. The European Union (EU) regulations in the face of emerging global movements of identity politics appear as one of the important triggering factors. Alevism, a historically non-represented collective identity, now has to be recognized and represented by the state in order to fulfill the demands imposed by the EU (Goner, 2005). The progress reports of 1998 and 2000 of the EU Commission on Turkey mention Alevi and their demands and EU, guaranteeing the “right to have identity” as a human right, forced Turkey to promulgate laws to recognize its ethnic and religious minorities as a condition of being accepted to the EU (Şahin, 2005). Therefore, Turkey’s move for EU membership can be considered as an important factor for Alevi to affect the policies of the state.
- V. Another important act of the state which affected the revival of the Alevi movement, according to Çaha (2004), was the elimination of the laws which ensures the monopoly of the state on TV channels and radio stations in 1989 by the Özal government. This abolition created a new environment for the expression of opinion. State-owned TV channels are restricted to inform the public only about approved issues by the government. However, with this change the publicly concealed issues came to be openly discussed. Although the political agenda of 1990s was more prone to provide space for Alevi identity, this regulation is still important in the sense that representation of Alevi identity is not bounded to official representation only. In a way, this means that Alevi have the power to make their own representation through the media channels.

However, this Alevi’s revivalism is faced with a number of readjustments at the community level.

- I. At the present day it is out of question that Alevism should exclude anyone who heartily approves this way of life simply because he is born of Sunni parents. It has become a fact that “inborn Alevism” is no longer valid as a principle.
- II. The authority of the dede declined during the 70s and 80s. With the adoption of left-wing views by Alevi youth, the dede began to be regarded as part of the system of exploitation. Nor do the dedes possess adequate knowledge to be able to adapt themselves to the changing environment. They are incapable to respond to the demands of a new generation that has embarked on a process of urbanization. The old tales and legends hold no interest for modern Alevi youth, who regard them as mere superstitious fabrications (Shankland, 2003: 132-143). According to Bozkurt (1998: 101-02), as the old dede gradually dies off, no new dede is found to take his place. Young people trained as dedes no longer take any interest in it as a profession. They tend to choose more attractive jobs to earn a better livelihood. Moreover, young dedes who choose another profession are very often suspicious and highly critical of the whole dede institution. Consequently, by the 1980s, dedes possessing any real knowledge of Alevism had almost completely disappeared.
- III. Alevi traditions and ways of life have had to be modified in such a way as to conform to urban life, and the meetings and gatherings that used to occupy the long winter nights have now been replaced by weekend meetings. However, they have not gained any cultural level capable of satisfying the needs of urban life. They still lead a rural life style characterized by exclusion from the outside world, in which interference in each others’ lives, lack of self-control in human relations and gossip give rise to continual resentments and unease.
- IV. *Görüm* is another vital principle unsuited to the principles of urban life. In *Görüm* an individual gives an account of all that he has done throughout the year before the dede and the whole gathering. However, *Görüm* cannot perform the function of a force of law in an environment with modern judicial set up and mandatory relationship with the state. In urban life, it is entirely out of the question that people should exercise personal control over each other.
- V. The most important problems confronting Alevism in the shift from rural to urban life is that of funeral rites. In many cases, either they are not allowed in the mosques or the *imams* regard it as a sin to conduct the funeral rites of an Alevi. Under these situations, the question of funeral rites has become a very pressing problem that has recently led to the Alevi associations taking over responsibility for their performance. An Alevi who has never been inside a mosque is very reluctant to attend a funeral held in one. Furthermore, as most of them have taken part in oppositional activities and may have rebelled against strict religious commandments, they feel very uncomfortable in the mosque.

4. Is Alevism a Problem for National Integrity?

Alevism is experiencing the rise of a new birth among the plurality of voices, the search for a new identity, the process of general democratization characteristic of modern Turkey and the formation of a civil society. These factors may be the results of the rapid economic, ethnic and political changes now taking place. However, the most important question confronting Alevism today is that of identity and legitimacy. Alevism, which has never produced so much theological material as at the present day, is now engaged in intense efforts to explain itself to itself and to others-the Sunnis.

However, the question is unity and integrity which must be shown in order to gain political and social bargaining. Though there is a great trend of revivalism in Alevism, it has least strength to de-stabilize the political and social structure in its favor due to a number of reasons, in which the internal division is only one. While analyzing the threat of Alevism to the social integrity of Turkish society, I will focus on the fact that Alevism is broadly divided into a number of groups.

The first family, according to Bilici (1998: 60), considers Alevism as a liberation theology and is considered as the materialist branch. It was organized during the process of general modernization in Turkey. Its main support comes from the intellectuals who had formerly played a part in various left-wing factions, parties and trades unions. This subdivision, which had mainly intensified its activities and production of material specifically after the military coup of 1980 and more prominently after the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to appear as a movement. Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Associations, the periodical *Pir Sultan Abdal*, the monthly *Kervan* and the *Kurdistan Alevi Union* in Germany and its organ *Zülfikâr*, all consider themselves as supporters of this Marxist ideology. It thinks that Alevism was the religious belief held by the exploited classes whose interests were totally opposed to those of the ruling classes and states against whom they conducted a continuous struggle. This was, actually, a class war that took a religious form and was conducted under the pretext of a struggle between different faiths and religions. Alevism was a rebellion, a resistance, a confrontation and a flag of freedom rose against the ruling classes who, along with Sunnism, the dominant form of Islam, adopted a feudal structure and established centralized states. The Koran is of no particular significance for this branch of Alevism. Written some 1400 years ago as a book of guidance Koran, according to this group, cannot be taken as a point of departure at the present day. According to them, the Koran is a text compiled by Omar, Usman (the first and second khalifa respectively of Islam) and the Umayyad party in general. It is hardly believable that men responsible for killing members of the Prophet's family could write anything favorable about that family (Bilici, 1998: 61). It shows that this branch is highly suspicious of the correctness of Koran.

The second branch is the one that is to be found chiefly in the heterodox current of Islamic mysticism. It believes that there is no difference in religions and they cannot be arranged hierarchically. The value of an individual, according to this group, is to be judged, not by his piety, but by the love he bears. It is assembled more particularly around the Hacı Bektaş Veli associations and lodges. The basic idea of this group is to view Alevi religious devotion and the love of God from the point of view of the individual. According to this group, the world was formed because God loves to be known. In other words, love is the root and cause of all existence. An individual born in another religious environment and brought up in that particular cultural and religious environment is no worse or farther from God than a Muslim (1998: 62).

The third is a more traditional branch defines itself as an integral part of the Muslim religion and belonging to the *Jaferi* sect and as an integral part of the Islamic religion. It has difference regarding the authenticity of Koran. This family demands for Alevi representation in the Directorate of Religious Affairs and for financial assistance from the state in the establishment of *cemevis* (pronounced as Djemevi and literally means a house of gathering). In this theology, all human problems are related to the real world, and relevant judgments arise from life itself. In other words, the gate of *Ijtihad* (the making of a decision in *Shariah* by personal effort), interpretation and innovation, which according to the orthodox Islam, closed many centuries ago, still remains wide open (1998: 63).

The fourth type, according to Bilici (1998: 64-65), is Shia-inclined Alevism which considers Alevism and Bektashism as two, wholly incompatible movements. According to this branch, the institution of the *dede* which for centuries has exploited the Alevi in both economic and intellectual spheres should be done away with. The *cemevi* assemblies have nothing whatever to do with Islam, they are pure entertainment.

This group stresses that the rules of *Shariah* must also be strictly implemented by the Alevi, and asserts that the Muslim religion must enter every aspect of life and that it comprises commandments and prohibitions that cannot suffer alteration or modification in accordance with time or place. This group agrees with the Sunni in accusing the Alevi of ignorance. They claim that the doctrine of the Twelve Imams which arose in the Arab world reached to Anatolia in a feeble and somewhat corrupted form. It totally rejects any idea of Alevism being connected in any way with the Directorate of Religious Affairs or the establishment of an Alevi Assembly, which it sees as potentially very harmful to the interests of Alevi. It also regards the Turkish-Islam synthesis as pure fascism.

The fifth group, according to Erman and Göker (2000: 105), is the one which has an 'Ultra-Nationalist' approach which is to be considered more as a kind of reaction rather than as an alternative Alevism. However, a certain ultra-nationalist branch naming itself the Nationalist Alevi Youth as a branch of MHP's (Nationalist Action Party) youth organizations, feeds upon anti-Kurdish propaganda in society. Some of the versions of this reaction bear highly Sunni overtones, claiming that the Alevi-Sunni division is artificially which is created by traitors, terrorists and Communists in order to push the nation towards anarchy and disintegration. There should be no religious disputes since we are all Turks and Muslims under one flag. Nevertheless, according to this group, contemporary Alevism is a non-Islamic diversion that should be reintegrated into Sunnism.

The sixth group considers a Crude-Marxist/Atheist claim on Alevism. The distinctive feature of this group is its criticism of the religious, conservative, anti-modernist aspects of Alevism, calling for a disappointment of the teachings and rituals, and the filtered version will be a folkloric, egalitarian native socialism. It argues that Ali was a practicing Sunni and was as cruel and bloodthirsty as other fundamentalist followers of the Islamic *Shariah*. It argues that Alevi *Shariah* was as bad as the Sunni one, and ends up with offering an 'Alevism without Ali'. With this call for the abolition of the 'cult of Ali' from Alevism, a hot debate has begun where some Alevi Kemalist-traditionalists have reacted against the anti-religious interpretations of Alevism.

According to Çamuroğlu (1998: 96), recently, some members of the traditional religious elite began to describe Alevism as the real Islam. They argued that since Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the central figure of Alevi religious teaching, had also fulfilled the five *farz* (mandatory basic fundamentals of Islam) laid down by Islam, the Alevi should do this in the same way. While coming close to the orthodox Islam, the defenders of this view were faced with the difficult choice of deciding for the Sunni or the Shia path of Islam. According to the religious inheritance of Alevism, which shares some of its main symbols with the Shia, they were actually more willing to accept Shia as the right way. Another group consists of a coalition of the so-called modern and traditional circles inside Alevism. They want to keep those features of Alevism which are considered authentic. Thus they stay at an equal distance from both positions defining Alevism as a "secular belief" and as the "real Islam".

Now all Alevi, except the members of the "Shia-inclined" group, attend the *cemevi*, perform the ritual dance, hold gatherings and perform the other religious activities. They form a mosaic that is very far from presenting a uniform appearance. It is here that their weakness lies. The Alevi are confronted with a paradox. Either they must sketch out a systematic theology and define their position in written terms, or withdraw from the religious-metaphysical dimensions of their traditions and so begin to find themselves increasingly isolated within a closed ethno-political arena. In the villages the *dedes* say "We cannot answer these questions, what are we to do?" We are confronted with the problem of establishing a theological structure. As far as purely theological attitudes are concerned, Alevism is still engaged in attempting to emerge from long years of constraint. That is why most modern written materials are in the nature of attempts to gain legitimacy by dealing with questions such as "The Origins of Alevism", "The Problems of Alevism", "What is Alevism-Bektashism?" Now according to Bilici (1998: 68) two main problems may be mentioned.

- I. On the one hand, Alevi sources are very scattered, mixed and complex while, on the other, the Alevi communities themselves have many different heads and dimensions. The Alevi, whose culture is predominantly oral, cannot find satisfaction in written sources which stem mainly from the Bektashi tradition.

- II. In general, the Alevi have not yet acquired a sufficient body of knowledge to be able to read and explain the fundamentals of Islam (the Koran, the Hadith, jurisprudence and philosophy). They did not attend *madaris* (religious schools). On the other hand, the number of Alevi attending school has shown a rapid increase, and in the last two decades the need has been felt for this new learning to be set down in writing. Consequently, everyone has quite naturally begun to explain his own Alevism by adding the many new influences which he may have come across with. This has led to the provision of schools in which Alevism might be taught appearing on the agenda of discussions in the *vakifs*, the *cemevis*, the associations and the Alevi Representative Assembly.

In practice, however, the rituals and practices of the Anatolian Alevi are those of tight, closely knit but far-flung communities which have developed a complicated and varied *modus operandi* with the surrounding Sunni villages, so much so that it is not always possible to be clear where Alevism stops and orthodox Islam begins. In fact individuals may take different lines on just this point. That is not to say that there is no sense of being an Alevi; there is, and a very powerful one, but the point is that the every-day boundaries are unclear (Shankland, 1998: 21). Migration, modernization, industrialization are all taking place very fast. The previously largely isolated communities are simply no longer so. Social ties, where they were once confined for the majority of the villagers to their immediate community and neighbors, now spread across the country, and even internationally. Though the two communities (Alevi and Sunni) lead such separate lives, there are highly significant points in common. They are aligned to the same state, the same nation, speak the same language, and share an immense amount of practical and local knowledge.

Again, the Alevi community is split into a majority of Turkish-speaking and a minority of about one third of Kurdish speaking, Kurmanji and Zaza-speaking groups, all united in the use of Turkish. As Turkish nationalism has often set the tone in the recent discourse on Alevism, Alevi of Kurdish origin who did not agree with assimilation reacted by presenting a diametrically opposed position. According to them the origin of Alevism is traced to Kurdish culture (Vorhoff, 1998: 47).

Furthermore, the *Demokratik Barış Hareketi* (Democratic Peace Movement) was founded as a specifically Alevi party. The founders of this party declare that their door is also open to the Sunni, in exactly the same way as the leaders of the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) declared that their door is open to the Alevi. Alevi activity is in the left-wing political tradition, but the present Alevi leaders are intent on purging the movement of extreme left wing elements and positioning the Alevi once more on the centre left. It should also not be forgotten that a certain number of them are approaching to the centre right. Sunni Islamism, on the other hand, is traditionally placed on the right, but, under the *Refah Partisi* government (June 1996-June 1997), the *Refah Partisi* itself was obviously moving towards the centre and taking up a new position there. The leadership of Sunni Islamism, in the form of the *Milli Nizam Partisi* (Party of National Order), the *Milli Selamet Partisi* (Party of National Salvation) and the *Refah Partisi*, has moved from its traditional base among the *Ulema* and the sheikhs of the various religious orders to professional politicians with a secular background and education. We are now witnessing a struggle for power between the traditional politicians and the new young Islamists. The same is true for the Alevi. Before the *dedes* were able to recover from the loss of status resulting from the influence of the Marxist left in the 1970s, a group of Alevi intellectuals presented their claim to leadership. A large proportion of these are ex-leftwing militants who have found their Alevism since the middle of the 1980s (Çakir, 1998: 77-78).

Thus the foregoing discussion and the available literature show that there are potential differences and disagreements within the spectrum of Alevism. They are experiencing a sort of mild and soft assimilation culturally, if not religiously, and have adopted a highly secular stance, therefore, we can put the thesis that the existence of Alevism is not a threat to the social and political integrity of Turkish society. Again, many of the Alevi have felt able to identify strongly with aims of the republic and have prided themselves upon their loyalty.

5. Alevism and Turkish Secularism

Though Ataturk was successful in his efforts that Islam could not be used in the political process to jeopardize his position or his reforms during his lifetime, Islam did not evaporate but only lay dormant. The religious orders were not destroyed but only forced to go underground. Among the military, the intelligentsia, and in the major cities, the reforms had a wide impact, but not with the peasantry in rural areas or with the new rural migrants to the big cities (Robbins, 1991: 38-39).

For the first time, the Alevi Turks got a chance to improve their position in society, and to a large extent they supported Atatürk in his secularization process. The elimination of all Sunni Muslim establishments and the separation of the religious institutions from those of the state put the Alevis formally on an equal footing with the Sunnis. Though the Alevis also found their religious institutions, the *tekkes*, suppressed (1991: 8), their pro-government attitude was the dominant one, and through applying the *taqiyya*, (the practice where adherents conceal their religion when they are under threat, persecution, or compulsion) they could in secret continue to be true Alevis.

The Alevis supported the establishment of the secular republic. The republic severed the ties to Sunni Islam as a state religion and ended formal discrimination against Alevis, though the Kemalist policy of closing down the places of worship of religious sects adversely affected their religious practices too. This is why some Alevis perceive Atatürk as the most important political figure in Alevi history (Öz, 1990: 29). However, despite its secular nature, the republic maintained the privileged position of Sunni Islam as an essential feature of the Turkish identity and continued to regard the Alevis as outsiders. In general, Alevi intellectuals and community leaders are secular in their behavior. The majority of them support the CHP, although they have an uncomfortable relationship with Turkey's secular establishment and the nationalist right, many of whose members tend to associate Alevis with leftist politics. In the July 2007 parliamentary election, the Alevi Cem Foundation leader, Professor İzzettin Doğan, called on Alevis to vote for the CHP or other secular parties because, he said, the AKP intended to overthrow the country's secular order (Rabasa and Larrabee, 2008: 22-23).

The Alevi admiration for Atatürk goes further than appreciation for the reforms he instigated when he created the Turkish nation. Many regard Atatürk as a creator of an ideal way of life, and often lament on the elections in 1950 which led to the demise of the CHP. Some *dedes* even say that they love him as much as they love *mehdi*, the twelfth, vanished *imam*, who is supposed to return one day to rule.

However, they are undecided. There are more practical reasons for such ambivalence. While the Republic remains secular, it has gradually supported more and more of the practice of Sunni religion. There have been the supporters of the early Republican reforms in all walks of life, but they remain muted by the vigor and variety of supporters of orthodox religious practice. As the CHP, or the secular left have never won a majority since the commencement of free elections, the Alevis fear that the state is now inevitably influenced by religious affairs, and that its officials are no longer influenced by the secularist message. Almost any action or activity that the state may follow is, therefore, potentially suspected by them. In times when Sunni Muslims rediscover religion as a tool for political demands and attack the existing secular system because it restricts religious liberty, the great majority of Alevi saw the Kemalist Republic as an assurance of their survival, though they still have to suffer discrimination occasionally, and though some of the Kemalist reforms have dealt the Alevi religious system some serious blows.

One of the most deep-rooted approaches within Alevi thought has been to support returning to secularism in the Republic as it was originally imagined. This would remove the need for any public acknowledgement, and at the same time enable them to live freely. Şahin Ulusoy, an ex-member of parliament, an *efendi* (title of nobility which means a lord or master in Turkish) from Hacibektaş, and a prominent member of the Alevi community, said that the only practical way to achieve civilization is through the separation of religion and state, and that one of the reasons for the comparative underdevelopment of the Arab countries is their inability to make this distinction. He suggested that the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) is against the principles of secularism on which Turkish Republic is based, something that is guaranteed in the constitution, and thus the DRA should be closed down. In a strictly argued passage, he further suggested that as much as the DRA overlooks the immensely different varieties of Islamic thought, it can be said to represent no one group (Shankland, 2003: 162). Şahin Ulusoy while hinting at the problems faced by the Alevis said:

Chairmen, honorable members, according to the 1990 census our population is 56 million. As against this, again according to official figures, there are 66,674 mosques, 383 *imam-hatip* [religious] schools, 22 Faculties of Theology, and 4,446 Koran courses. However, of our population 20 million [i.e. the Alevis] do not go to mosques; they have other places of worship. They know that their great figures within Islam, their beliefs are cursed, made fun of in mosques and that they are not treated with respect or love (2003: 162).

He went further and mentioned that Alevi children, while attending schools and prayers that are purely based upon the Sunni model, are beginning to suffer from psychological problems, causing rifts within families, which is the most important of the social units of the nation. He further suggesting that compulsory religious education should be done away with and that the DRA should be abolished, thus leaving religious education to parents, and in the hands of the respective diverse religious groups in the country. Though time and again interrupted by the members of the assembly, Şahin Ulusoy continued his speech and said:

Long experience has shown us that this organization (DRA) has not shown any tolerance towards other beliefs. They insult, deny and, even using the strength that they have gained from the state and has time and again attempted to assimilate us. However much we all are bound to this nation and people's indivisible unity, however much respect we possess for it, and however much we see it as our security in this future, we must by abolishing this body achieve a nation with a more modern and scientific order, one that is more appropriate to the secular system that is found in the developed countries. These are painful truths . . . We ask the government, and our great assembly, to withdraw compulsory religious lessons, so contrary to the universal principles of the constitution, to leave them to parents and to individuals, to withdraw government funds where they are being used as propaganda for one viewpoint only (2003: 163).

It is important to note that the DRA manages only the Sunni branch of Islam. It does not serve or organize other branches or religions which shows that the Turkish state, although secular, does not treat all religions with equality. Christianity and Judaism are not managed in the same way as the Sunni branch of Islam by the DRA. They are self-governing but subject to Turkish laws and regulations, particularly those pertaining to minorities. The DRA has two functions (a) the administration of Turkey's mosques and the production of religious knowledge to explain Islam in the best way to people; (b) to supervise the muftis (religious scholars) who give legal opinions. There is a mufti in each of Turkey's 82 provinces and 900 districts. All muftis and imams are state employees. They are educated in the *Imam-Hatip* schools, state religious-education institutions.

The curriculum in Turkey is completely directed towards the teaching of Sunnism. This state of affairs reveals the basic inconsistency in the principles of secularism adopted during the early age. The religious institutions established by the state were arranged entirely in accordance with the Sunni school of theology and with the beliefs of the *Hanafi* sect in particular. The Republican administrators and intellectuals, who tended to regard modernity as synonymous with uniformity, also adopted a dogmatic approach in the field of religion. Thus according to Bilici (1998: 71-72) while wishing to remove religious commandments affecting legal and commercial transactions from the political sphere, they preferred uniformity and conformity in belief and ritual. Along with civilian, military and university bureaucracies endowed with the mission of modernizing society by means of commands from above, there emerged and proliferated by its side a religious bureaucracy. There are also media groups, pious foundations, associations and holdings, members of political parties, religious orders and other religious movements and important pressure groups parallel to these, who now support the imposition of uniformity in religious matters. In such an environment, it is very difficult for the Alevi to make their voices heard. However, the DRA can no longer deny the existence of an Alevi and Bektaşî theology. In any case, its position as a self-regulating assembly may at any moment expose it to the attacks of the media. Thus, instead of declaring openly, on the basis of the Koran and the Hadith, that Alevism is incompatible with Islam and that those who defend that belief are heretical, the majority has attempted to assimilate it by choosing one of the two following courses:

- I. To regard Alevism as a type of folklore or "sub-culture" within the synthesis formed by "God, the Book, the Prophet, the Nation, the State, the Fatherland and the Flag", thus denying it any significance on the theological level. As opposed to those who say that the Alevi should be represented in the DRA they prefer to regard Alevism as a mere sect or religious order, and oppose its representation on the grounds that the DRA is superior to all the various sects and religious orders (Bolay, 1995: 3).
- II. To assume the position of a referee sifting the good Alevis from the bad on the grounds that Alevism is being used as a tool by atheists, materialists, Marxists, Christians or Jews (Bilici, 1998: 72).

The Alevi in general, however, have little respect for DRA, and the dialogue initiated by the DRA in 1992 to discuss these topics proved abortive due to a very hostile reaction on the part of broad sections of the Alevi community.

Thus the most important point in the Alevi political agenda is the preservation and *development* (emphasis added) of the principle of secularism in Turkey. They continue to struggle with Sunni fundamentalism as the state had never declared itself against faith absolutely. It means that state has been gradually accommodating successive moves towards re-Islamification after the transition to democracy in 1950. This re-Islamification has continued until the present, albeit within a Turkey that is growing steadily more diverse as it modernizes. Further, because it had also decided right from the start that the basis of its reformed Islam was to be, generally speaking, Sunni practice. That is why it was able to take certain formal steps in that direction for example granting permission to build mosques, printing Korans, and facilitating the pilgrimage to Mecca, which gradually resulted in a huge increase in public orthodox activity. This has had the effect of pleasing some, and displeasing others, particularly the Alevi community (Shankland, 2003: 15).

Again, in almost every part of Turkey, religious instruction has been entrusted to the *hocas*, (religious teacher and Imam of a mosque) most of whom have been trained in the *İmam-Hatip* (religious vocational) schools and in institutions of higher religious education. The Alevis criticize that these *hocas* are all people whose attitudes and viewpoint have been shaped and consolidated in their youth. In the classroom they are used as a tool of religious indoctrination. The most important opposition to this policy of Alevi assimilation in education is concentrated on the issue of compulsory religious instruction. These instructions, Alevis say, are being employed as a planned attempt to mould the minds of the younger generation. But even the abolition of religious instruction as a compulsory lesson, according to Alevis, is no real solution to the Alevi problem. It is necessary that the Alevi should arrange separate education of Alevi religious instruction and it is also vital that these lessons should be taught by an Alevi teacher. However, answers must be found to problems such as the lack of qualified Alevi teachers, the lack of a curriculum and the lack of class text-books. Alevi teachers in every branch should be obliged to follow a certain course of instruction, while a group of academics should be chosen to draw up the new curriculum and prepare the necessary text-books. This would comprise one phase in the attainment by Alevi youth of an individual identity and attitude. It is the duty of the state to approach each doctrine with neutrality. Any violation of this impartiality can destroy any validity of the secular principles and give rise to severe social unrest.

According to Bozkurt (1998), one can see no sign in Turkey of the type of secular environment that can be observed in the civilized countries of Europe. As far as concrete implementations are concerned, the most striking example of erosion and assimilation of Alevism is found in the construction of mosques in Alevi villages. The Alevis have never accepted the mosque as an institution, but this policy is being implemented with the support of certain Alevi who derive considerable personal profit from the scheme. The construction of mosques in Alevi villages and the appointment of *hocas* paid from the state funds is simply an attempt to bring about the complete dissolution of Alevism. How is talk of secularity and the continual stress laid on the danger posed by the fundamentalists to be reconciled with such slogans as carrying the mosque to Europe? Is a policy of religious proliferation consistent with the secular state? Mosques are being built in a number of Alevi villages, with the pretext that there is a “lack of *hocas* to bury the dead”. Alevis demand the abolition of compulsory religious instruction in schools. Instruction on Alevism should be available on a voluntary basis. They also demand the putting of an end to the construction of mosques in Alevi villages. As for the mosques already built, the *hoca* should be dismissed and the buildings converted into Alevi meeting houses (*cemevis*) (Bozkurt, 1998: 113-114).

Thus exploring the available literature concerning Alevism and the aforesaid arguments I expound that though Alevis have supported Kemalist secularism wholeheartedly, the state has become far more active in supporting Islamic religion, and in particular a Sunni form of Islam, than was envisaged by the Republic’s founders. This made the Alevis to reject the present brand of secularism in Turkey, in other words the prevailing version of secularism is unacceptable to Turkish Alevis. This means that many Alevis fear that the state may once more become an instrument of prejudice, just as it was in Ottoman times. They claim, further, that the explicit recognition of their distinct religious tradition is the only way to avoid marginalization within modern Turkish society.

6. Conclusion

Alevism is the religio-cultural reality of Turkish society. Till 1980s it was in search of identity. Before that time it was a neglected phenomenon in Turkish politics. However, the rapid growth of media, mass communication, the collapse of the USSR, vast degree of Alevis’ migration to the urban cities and increasing publications of books, journals and magazines concerning Alevism brought Alevism once again to the fore front of Turkish politics.

On the other hand, Sunni Islamists endeavor to stress their majority status and underestimating the strength of the Alevi presence. The Sunni Islamists combine the superficial attitude towards the problem with the denial of Alevism which it imposes with a deliberate policy of assimilation. The important aim of the Sunni Islamists is to reduce Islam to a single interpretation (that of Sunnism), and call upon all Alevi who regard themselves as Muslims to attend worship in the mosque. The process of opening mosques in Alevi villages shows this trend.

The numerous debates, blaming and criticisms within Alevi politics show that there is a constant struggle over the definition of the Alevi identity and its boundaries. The aim in these debates is not only to exclude Sunni, atheist and nationalist interpreters; those Alevis who are authorized to speak about and politicize Alevism also try to show that 'we' are right but 'they' are wrong. Thus, within Alevi politics, different groups constantly produce definitions both for 'other' Alevism and for themselves, trying to establish a monopoly over the right definition.

Alevis generally support the Kemalist version of secularism. They gained from the early republic's struggle for secularism but feel the prevailing version of secularism unacceptable because it does not secure their position. In order to revive Kemalist images of secularism, modernism and progress, the Alevi population allied with the secularist Sunnis and rapidly developed itself into a 'counterforce' against Sunnism. Therefore, Alevi politics tended to lay stress on its difference vis-a-vis the rising Sunnism, abstaining from challenging the Republic's political-economic institutions, and offering a reformative scheme for some of its religious and cultural institutions. However, both central Right and central Left Alevism reproduce the affirmative discourse of their politics in their attempt to show that there is no actual Alevi-Sunni split and that religious groups in Turkey are united under one Flag, one Book, one Vatan (motherland), and one State.

I also think that as Alevis are highly divided on religious lines, experienced mass migration to urban cities, became highly secularized, giving more emphasis on material side rather than religious side and are assimilated enough as a result of urbanization, they can pose no threat to the social and political integrity of the Turkish society. In the cities by encountering with Sunnis every day, Alevis have chosen to be on the side of the dominant ideology because it is the easier way. However, it is also claimed that although Alevi identity became more visible, this visibility became possible only through the "assimilation" of Alevi identity which makes Alevism closer to Sunni Islam and mainstream politics.

Acknowledgement

The author highly appreciates and acknowledges the most needed help and guidance of Professor Dr. Aylin Özman Erkman, Department of International Relations, TED University Ankara, Turkey and Dr. Bican Şahin, Associate Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Hecettepe University, Ankara, Turkey, in the preparation of this paper".

References

- Ahmad, F. (1988). Islamic reassertion in Turkey, *Third World Quarterly* 10, 750-769.
- Bilici, F. (1998). The function of Alevi-Bektashi theology in modern Turkey. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (59-73). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Bolay, S. H. (1995). Günümüzde Alevilik ve Bektaşilik, Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı.
- Bozkurt, F. (1998). State-community relations in the restructuring of Alevism. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (100-114). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Bruinessen, M. V. (Jul. - Sep., 1996). Kurds, Turks and the Alevi revival in Turkey. *Middle East Report on Minorities in the Middle East: Power and the Politics of Difference*, 200, 7-10.
- Çaha, Ö. (2004). The role of the media in the revival of Alevi identity in Turkey. *Social Identities*, 10, 325-338.
- Çakir, R. (1998). Political Alevism versus political Sunnism: Convergences and divergences. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (74-79). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Çamuroğlu, R. (1998). Alevi revivalism in Turkey. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (93-99). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Erman, T & Göker, E. (Oct., 2000). Alevi politics in contemporary Turkey. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36(4), 99-118.
- Göner, Ö. (2005). The transformation of the Alevi collective identity. *Cultural Dynamics*, 17(2), 107-134.
- Iqbal, A. (1991). *The life and work of Jalal-ud-din Rumi*. Islamabad: Pakistan National Council of the Arts.
- Melikoff, İ (November, 1998). Bektashi/Kızılbaş: Historical bipartition and its consequences. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (1-9). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Öz, B. (1990). *Kurtuluş savaşında Alevi-Bektaşiler*. İstanbul: Can Yayınları.
- Rabasa, A. & Larrabee, F. S. (2008). *The rise of political Islam in Turkey*. Arlington: RAND Corporation.
- Robbins, P (1991). *Turkey and the Middle East*. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Şahin, Ş. (2005). The rise of Alevism as a public religion, *Current Sociology*, 53, 465-485.
- Shankland, D. (1993). Alevi and Sunni in rural Anatolia Diverse paths of change. In P. Stirling (Ed.) (1993). *Culture and economy: Changes in Turkish village* (46-64). Huntingdon: Eothen Press.
- Shankland, D. (1998). Anthropology and ethnicity: The place of ethnography in the new Alevi movement. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (19-27). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Shankland, D. (2003). *The Alevis in Turkey: The emergence of a secular Islamic tradition*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon.
- Star, J. (1997). *Rumi: In the arm of the beloved*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Trowbridge, S. V. R. (Jul., 1909). The Alevis or deifiers of Ali. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 2(3), 340-353.
- Vorhoff, K. (1998). Academic and journalistic publications on the Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey. In T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, & C. Raudvere (Eds.) (1998). *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives* (28-58). Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.