

Alevism and Secularism in Turkey

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Alevism is a sect of Islam rooted in Shamanism, Sufism, and Anatolian culture. Alevi practices and temples differ from Sunnism because men and women pray together. Alevi believe in the unity of Allah, Prophet Muhammed (571-632), and Caliph Ali (c. 600 – 661) and see any creation of God as a reflection of him. Unlike the mandatory rules of Sunni Islam, the Alevi doctrine mainly focuses on humanitarianism, love, family, and friendship. These key differences between the two sects combined with the socio-economic conditions of the two groups and the Sunni domination in Islam caused significant grievances to the Alevi identity in the Ottoman Empire, especially during the Yavuz Sultan Selim (1465-1520) period and later in the Turkish Republic. Sunni oppression caused Turkish Alevi to adapt to the Republic's secularism passionately, although, they knew this would further assimilate and eradicate their own identity. The Turkish Republic's new secular and nationalist government did not grant any favor to disenfranchised groups, instead it excluded the ethnic and religious minorities from the society. Turkish secularism, orchestrated with a top-down approach, created a Sunni-centered public control over religious institutions and groups and pushed Alevi to hide, assimilate, and live without performing the doctrines of their religion.

History of Alevism

Alevi are socio-religious communities that live mainly in Turkey and the Balkans. Alevism is a relatively modern concept and a new name for this group. Prior to the twentieth century, Alevi were referred to as Qizilbas. Markus Dressler writes, "The modern debate about Alevism's origins is intrinsically political. Historically, the name Qizilbas designated the mainly Turkmen and Iranian followers of the militant SUB order of the Safawiyya, who wore red headgear, hence the name Qizilbas ("red head")." ¹ Turkey has the biggest Alevi population in the world, ranging in approximately 20% of the population. Many Alevi are native Turkish speakers and the rest of the Alevi speak Kurdish, Kurmanci, or Zazaki. Dressler continues, "About two-thirds of them are Turkish speaking, the others speak north-western Iranian languages, either the Kurdish dialect Kurmanci or Zazaki." ² Even though Alevism is confused with Shiism, Alevi are neither Shia nor Sunni. Nevertheless, Alevi revere Caliph Ali (the cousin of Prophet Muhammed), Twelve Imams, Anatolian saints, and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), the founder of the secular Turkish Republic.

¹ Markus Dressler, "Alevi," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, n.d., pp. 97, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_com_0167.

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Alevi practices differ from Sunni and Shia practices. Unlike other sects of Islam, in Alevism women and men pray together and worship Allah through dance and music. Glenn Yocum writes,

Alevi religious practices differ significantly from those of most mainstream Turkish Sunnis. In particular, Alevi piety is not mosque or rule-oriented. Still, it centers on connection to hereditary leaders (Dedes--"grandfathers"), on music and dance, and attachment to their own saints. Ritually, Alevi do not practice gender segregation. Politically, they have long been associated with Kemalist "secularism" and the Turkish left.³

Many Alevi Saints compose poems and music and worship Allah, Prophet Muhammed, and Caliph Ali. One of the most famous Alevi Saints, Pîr Sultan Abdal (1480-1550), mentions "I am Huseyni, I am Alevi, what do you say" in his popular poetry. He mentions his loyalty to 12 imams, Prophet Muhammed and Ali, talks about his love (to Allah), and proudly says that he is Alevi in his verse:

İmam-ı Ali'dir ayn-ı bekadır / Our imam is Ali who sees everything.
Pir elinden zehir içsem şifadır / I would drink poison from the hands of Pirs (Alevi elders)
Yardımcımız Muhammed Mustafa'dır/ Our helper is the prophet Muhammed
Hüseyni'yim Alevi'yim ne dersin/ I support Huseyni, I am an Alevi, what do you say?⁴

Pir Sultan Abdal lived around the 1500s in Sivas, Ottoman Empire. He is one of the most important figures in Anatolian Alevism. Abdal wrote many religious poems on Alevism that were passed down to the next generations with the help of ashiks who composed and sang the poems. Pir Sultan Abdal's life and actions were not strictly recorded thus his life story was extracted from poems and the Anatolian folk music. Although historians do not know many details about his life, they are precise about his disdain for Sunni orthodoxy and bureaucracy and his support for the Twelver Shi'ism of Safwawiya.

It is strongly believed that Pir Sultan Abdal was persecuted by the Ottomans for his attribution to Islam. Pir Sultan Abdal states,

İmam Cafer mezhebine uyarız /We believe in the sect of Imam Cafer
Kabe'nin yapısı bina yapısı /Kaaba is a building
İman etse asilerin hepsi/ If rebellers all had faith
Beş vakit okunur Ayetü'l-kürsi /They would pray Ayetü'l-kürsi 5 times a day
Kur'an'ın kilidi İhlas-ı şerif /Foundation of Quran is Ihlas-I Serif
Şeriat göğe çekildi / Sharia went into the sky (vanished)
Alem zulm ile yıkıldı./ The realm is destroyed with persecution.⁵

³ Glenn Yocum, "Review: The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (January 2005): pp. 583, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfi067>.

⁴ Pir Sultan Abdal, "Hüseyni'yim Alevi'yim Ne Dersin," *Hüseyni'yim Alevi'yim Ne Dersin*, n.d.

⁵ Pir Sultan Abdal, "Anonymous Couplet", n.d.

In these lines Pir Sultan Abdal is vocal about his support for Ja'farī jurisprudence and Twelver Shi'ism. Moreover, he demands an emphasis on the mortality side of religion from state officials and the public. He critiques the dogmatic interpretation of the Quran and Islam.

Differences in Alevi and Sunni Practices

In Sunni Islam, there are five mandatory rules to follow. Those five rules are the profession of faith, praying five times a day, giving alms, fasting, and completing the pilgrimage to Kaaba. In Sunni belief, an individual cannot be entirely Muslim if they are not performing those five rules. Additionally, in the Sunni doctrine, there is segregation between women and men. Women cannot perform their prayers in the same part of the mosque as men do and also have different responsibilities than men. While prayers are in Arabic and mosques are the sacred temples for Sunnis, Alevi do not use Mosques since the Caliph Ali was brutally killed in a mosque. Alevi do not perform the daily prayer that Sunnis perform five times a day, do not fast during Ramadan, or make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Instead, Alevi pray through a ritual called Ayin-i Cem, where women and men pray all together and worship god by dancing and singing. Ayin-i Cem is performed in Cem Evi known as the Cem House. The language in this ritual is not Arabic like the Sunni practice, but the language of the individuals present at the ritual. Also, Alevism does not strictly prohibit alcohol consumption or require head covering.

In Sunnism, the Qur'an is the primary source of learning, and it is forbidden to act against it. Although Alevi believe that the Qur'an is the main source of knowledge, many think that it sometimes contradicts itself since it has been changed from the original writing. Even though Alevi also believe in the Qur'an, they do not unconditionally practice the things that the Qur'an mentions. In Qur'an's Surah An-Nisa 34, it is told that,

Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them 'first', 'if they persist,' do not share their beds, 'but if they still persist,' then discipline them 'gently'. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great.⁶

Just like the Surah An-Nisa 34, some surahs from the Quran contradict Alevi practices. In Alevism, women and men are equal and one is not superior to the other. Before the Ayin-i Cem starts, Dede, who leads the ritual, asks if there is anyone who is not loyal to their jobs, to their religion, to their children, wife, or husband. If someone comes forward, Dede focuses on solving the problem before the ritual starts. Dede makes sure that everyone is feeling safe and that there are no more problems between people who are attending the ritual. This practice is a must for Alevi since it helps the Cem happen in peace while strengthening community relations.

⁶ *The Qur'an*, n.d., p. An-Nisa 34., Mustafa Khattab, tran.

Alevi Identity in the Turkish Republic

The Republic of Turkey was founded by Atatürk and his associates. The main principles of the republic were based on the principles of secularism. Through secularism and nationalism, the republic combined all ethnicities, traditions, and religions under a new supra-identity, Turkish, that was initially planned to represent everyone's voices. Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş explains,

When Turkey was founded as a nation-state from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, new laws of the Republic aimed to construct a secular public sphere and integrate all ethnic, cultural, and religious communities into a single national identity in the form of a secularized Turkish nation. The Turkish version of secularism not only focused on emancipating the state from religion but also on transferring religious authority from multiple religious institutions and groups to the single hand of a centric state.⁷

To achieve this secular system, an institution called the General Directorate of Religious Affairs (GDRA) was formed to regulate religious activities. Since the majority of Muslims were Sunnis, the GDRA was overseeing their activities. Soner and Toktaş claim that "Rather than breaking all state ties with religion, Turkish Republican secularism instead created a strong linkage to religion through the GDRA and created a Sunni-centered public control over religious institutions and groups."⁸ This granted power to the GDRA to create a space for Sunnis while ignoring the religious needs of minority groups. Soner and Toktaş state, "To the extent that the GDRA was organized according to a Sunni interpretation of Islam, it turned the Sunni-Islam faith into the official religion."⁹ With the formation of the GDRA, power was granted to one specific group, excluding many others and minorities like Alevis. Thus, there was no room left for Alevi culture and traditions to bloom and grow.¹⁰

In the late 20th century, as identity politics gained more importance and became more of a worldwide problem, Alevis held onto their identities and tried to protect their culture as the Sunni oppression continued. Sunni Islam, which gained more power through secularism, threatened Alevism and many more minorities. In 1993, a group of Sunni people set the Madimak Hotel on fire, where many Alevi intellectuals, writers, and journalists were inside, celebrating the Pir Sultan Abdal Festival. Many people were injured, and thirty-five were killed. The attack was not

⁷ Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): pp. 420, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214>.

⁸ Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): pp. 420-421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214>.

⁹ Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): pp. 421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214>.

¹⁰ Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party's Alevi Opening," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): pp. 421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604214>.

recognized by the government as an anti-Alevi attack and the perpetrators were not punished accordingly. The Sivas/Madimak Massacre forced many Alevi to hide their identities. Despite approximately 20% of the Turkish population being Alevi, many still hide their identity not to be targeted by radical Sunni groups.

Secularism in Turkey

Secularism, *laiklik*, in the Turkish Republic was adapted from French *laïcité* and was orchestrated with a top-down approach. Similar to the French concept, Turkish secularism is formed around the idea that state affairs should be void of any religious influence. This in practice orchestrated itself as a ban on the appearance of religion in the public sphere. Head coverings and hijabs were banned in universities, and state and military buildings. The formation of the GDRA was aimed at educating people about Islam and “to carry out work on Islamic belief, worship, and ethics, enlighten society on religion and administer places of worship in line with the principle of secularism, by staying out of all political views and thinking and aspiring to national solidarity and integration.”¹¹ This led to an unfair allocation of the state’s political and economic resources among religious groups. Sunni Islam became the unofficial “official” religion of the state. The orchestration of secularism in Turkey pushed Alevi and other minorities to hide, assimilate, and live without performing the doctrines of their religion.

This French-based laiklik seemed like the best way to govern the new republic to the founders, but it eradicated people’s history and prevented religious and cultural freedom in modern Turkey. From a more personal account, as a young Alevi, I can say that this assimilation policy alienated many young Alevi from their culture and most importantly from their community and the support system that comes along with it. This dichotomy, the de-regulation of religion at the same time with the regulation of Sunni Islam, not only led to a significant identity crisis among many minorities in Turkey but also caused the two most prominent political identities, Islamists, and seculars, to further radicalize each other.

French and Turkish secularism focus on limiting religion to private life and eliminating its symbols from the public sphere. This was done in order to separate religious affairs from the state’s and to refrain the state from taking a position on the religious lives of the public. However, this top-down approach was not only internalized by the public in Turkey, but led to the exclusion of any religion outside of Sunni Islam. This led to laws that do not grant the same religious freedom to other religious or ethnic minorities. A modern society needs inclusive orders, laws, and social rules to be democratically organized and globally recognized. Today’s most civilized and modern societies are the ones with more cosmopolitan structures that allow their inhabitants to practice their culture and religion freely.

¹¹ “Temel İlke Ve Hedefler,” T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, December 25, 2012, <https://www.diyamet.gov.tr/en-US/Institutional/Detail/3>.

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