The Importance of Being Secular: Islam in the Service of the National and Pre-National State

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Both in political debates on the current state of affairs in Turkey and in the historiography of the country, the dichotomy of religion and secularism is without doubt the dominant paradigm within which analysis takes place. Observers and commentators (both from within Turkey and from abroad) are so preoccupied with the problem of secularism, or to be more exact: with that of laicism, the separation of religion and state, that one’s position on the issue has come to be seen as the yardstick with which any prominent Turkish public figure or intellectual should be judged. Author Orhan Pamuk published his novel *Benim Adim Kirmizi* (*My Name is Red*) to such a degree of worldwide critical acclaim that he is now a Nobel laureate, but the debate on this and subsequent novels by the author in Turkey itself was more about his stance on Islam and westernisation than on the literary merits of his work. The candidature of former Islamist Abdullah Gül for the presidency of the republic, and particularly the fact that, if he were to become president, the first lady would be a woman wearing an Islamic headscarf (türkban) in public, caused an uproar. Militant Kemalists in Turkey, led by the army top brass, hinted darkly that Turkey’s secular order was in mortal danger. The campaign for the parliamentary elections that were called to clarify the situation caused by the presidential crisis, had as its main issue the threat or otherwise to the secular order and the army’s right to interfere in politics to defend that order.

Historical figures are judged on their stance in the secularism debate as much as contemporary ones. Indeed, the contemporary debate on secularism is often structured around historical events and figures from the past: for a long time Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, executed by the military in 1961, was hated by Kemalists as the man who allowed Islam ‘back in’, but in the 1980s, Izmir International Airport was officially named Adnan Menderes Airport, by people who regarded him as the second great architect of modern Turkey (after Atatürk) and who wanted to make a point about their own political stance. This use of historical figures is thus highly divisive and it is the issue of secularism that divides more than any other. The reappraisal of
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the once despised ‘tyrant’ Sultan Abdülhamid II by Islamists (who, in this, tend to follow the lead established by right wing Nakşibendi poet/publicist Necip Fazıl Kısakürek in the 1940s and 50s) is as much an illustration of this phenomenon as is the constant reference to figures like Derviş Vahdeti and Kubilay by hardcore Kemalists. The former was an Islamist firebrand, who as one of the leaders of the ‘Muhammedan Union’ (İttihadi Muhammadi) and editor of the paper Volkan in 1908–9 constantly called for the restoration of religious law. He was accused of instigating the 1909 counterrevolution against the ‘secular’ Young Turks in Istanbul and convicted and hanged once the Young Turks had regained control of the capital. The latter was the young teacher and reserve officer who confronted a group of radical young mystics that came to the Aegean town of Menemen in 1930 and announced that they were the advance guard of an army of Islam that would bring down the ‘infidel’ republic. Kubilay paid for his courage with his life when his head was sawn off while the populace of Menemen watched in silence. Both figures, like Menderes and Abdülhamid, thus serve as markers of the boundary between secularism and (political) Islam in contemporary Kemalist discourse.

The other issue, which has dominated the public debate in – and on – Turkey in recent years, is that of Turkey’s possible accession to the European Union. In this debate, too, the question whether Turkey is ‘truly secular’ is constantly raised and the credentials in this field of leading politicians and other public figures are scrutinised. There is nothing on religion or secularism in the official criteria (the so-called Copenhagen criteria) that have to be met by candidate countries and, indeed, the issue of religion was never raised in the negotiations with the ten countries that acceded in 2004. In the Turkish case it is raised in the shape of concern about the depth and irreversibility of Turkey’s secular (laik) order. Ironically it is Europe, which regards itself as secular (although in fact that secularism is never absolute and in every single European country formal links between state and religion can be demonstrated) that introduces the religious factor into the membership negotiations. This of course feeds into the already existing debate on the issue in Turkey, especially because there are inconsistencies in the European position on the issue that are caused by fundamentally different views on the nature of secularism.

After the 1978–9 revolution in Iran, governments in the West became gravely concerned that Turkey would go the same way. They tended to side with the classic Kemalist interpretation of secularism as a protective shield, guaranteeing (by less than democratic means if need be) the survival of freedom of conscience in the face of the threat of ‘Islamic reaction’ (irtica). This tendency was strengthened when political Islam was identified as the main threat to the West after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s and, of course, became even more prominent after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001. Fear of a reversal of the Kemalist