

Islamic reform and the mystic tradition in eastern Turkey

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NUR YALMAN

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in eastern Turkey*

1. *The struggle for reform.*

THERE is now increasing interest in the study of ideology in anthropology. We are disenchanted with community studies. They are obviously useful; but they provide a flat, two-dimensional picture; they are essentially a relic of the times when anthropologists were exclusively interested in primitives and when it was deemed possible to study an entire 'tribe' single-handedly. Turning to study the Tamils, Sinhalese, Turks, Kurds, or Circassians, if the anthropologist digs himself into a small peasant village, it is likely that most of the important and significant issues facing these cultures at that time will be lost.

What is lacking is the study of ideas. The anthropologist must be ready to move up the social scale to the intermediaries between the village and the towns and on to the local intellectuals. These are the people who try to make sense of the activity which goes on around them and who put it all into some kind of order and, in so doing, create new directions and alter the culture they live in. They are the producers and consumers of ideology, and the subjects of their interests must also be our interest.

I realize that this is a program for which few of us have the time; but in dealing with complex nation cultures, we fool ourselves if we think we have understood them, if we have not concerned ourselves with these larger cultural problems.

In the case of understanding Turkey, the question of new developments in Islamic ideology is of particular interest. One theory which has gained some currency and which may be called the "cast-iron theory of Islam" goes something like this:

The Quran is the Word of God. The Word of God is unchangeable. New societies and political conditions are very different from VIIIth and IXth century Caliphates. Therefore, Islam, which has fallen out of phase with life, cannot be adapted to modern circumstances today. Consequently, modern life cannot be organized around Islamic principles.

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It is a view often heard in western academic circles. It also happens to be the general attitude on which numerous nineteenth century Turkish reformers have based the justification for their radical measures against Islamic institutions. I will argue that there is here a serious misconception about variability and flexibility in Islam and in religion.

In this paper, I shall be concerned with problems in religious ideology, which appear to be of vital importance in Turkey; and I will consider them from two perspectives: (1) the attitude of reformist intellectuals, and (2) the outlook of some Alevi and Bektashi (Kurdish and Turkish speaking) villages in the provinces of Malatya and Elbistan in eastern Turkey. The interplay between these positions is vital in understanding the basic problems in Turkey today. New communication between these strata is beginning to trickle through as a result of the exercise of a free political system. It will have a profound effect on both.

First let me describe the general issue: Islam and reform in Turkey. In the eighteenth century, and more particularly in the early nineteenth century, the Ottomans were deeply committed to a program of social, political, and cultural reform. It was a conscious attempt to catch up with the development of Western Europe. The Ottoman polity rested on three pillars: (1) the Sultan and the civil administration; (2) the Janissary Corps, the military establishment; and, perhaps most importantly, (3) the Sheyh-ul-Islam and the Ulema, the doctors of religion. By the end of the nineteenth century the two pillars—civil administration and the military establishment—were ‘reformed’, or at least outwardly westernized. From 1878 to 1923 the central governmental structure changed from a traditional Sultanate to a Republic with an entrenched one-party system. The military establishment had been unrecognizably reformed early in the nineteenth century with the abolition of the Janissary corps.

It is important to emphasize that what proved to be most resistant to reform was the ‘pillar’ of religion. Although fundamental Islam is often described as a religion which permits no intermediaries between Man and God and ideally leaves Man alone to face his conscience, the religious establishment in the nineteenth century (after almost ten centuries of Selcuk and Ottoman effort at organization) had become almost as traditional and hierarchical as the Catholic Church.

When the attempt at religious reform was made a most fascinating battle was joined. On the one side were the young Turks fresh from London and Paris full of Darwinian zeal; on the other side was the traditional establishment. The reformers believed that religion was

an irrational relic of man's past when he lived guided only by the horde instinct. Evolution had proved religion wrong. When men became better educated and more modern, they would get rid of religion. It was only a matter of time. This idea was obviously dominant in Western Europe (where many left-wing intellectuals agreed with this position), so why wait in the case of the Ottoman Empire. Religion should be simply thrown out.

By 1920 it seems clear that quite large numbers of the younger members of the Ottoman upper class had begun to think in these secularist terms. For instance: "Quand les peuples ont atteint un certain degré de culture ils se débarrassent naturellement de la religion [...]" (1).

The question as to why they thought so is, of course, very interesting. It was not merely a matter of a passing fad. There is admittedly a certain logic in the evolutionary argument even today, witness the Marxists. But in the particular context of Turkey, the belief in the efficacy of Islamic thought and culture had become so eroded among upper class Turks that Darwinism of this variety had become a convenient justification for unshackling themselves of the last ties to Turkish Muslim culture and for embracing western culture without any religious inhibitions or scruples—Islamic or otherwise (2). (As Mustafa Kemal said: "There is only one civilization—western civilization". He was, of course, thinking in *real-politik* terms).

Such reformists were met with powerful opposition. The entire religious organization opposed them. Large sections of the military, as it turned out in a dramatic moment, were opposed to them. Both the public in the cities and those who were aware of the matter in the countryside appeared to be opposed to serious tampering with traditional arrangements. We will not enter into the fascinating history of religious reaction to the reformers: Dervishes in the streets whipping the crowds into great frenzy against Western innovations! They made for a great deal of excitement in Ottoman politics in the final days of the Empire.

Why did Mustafa Kemal and his new party, the Republican People's Party (C.H.P.), feel the need to destroy the religious organization? The reason was partly political, of course, but the leaders of the C.H.P. probably began to feel that no reform at all was possible

(1) A. RECHID SAFVET BEY (Paris 1906), from a Preface to *L'effort ottoman*, by L. ROUSSEAU (Paris 1907).

(2) For remarkably similar attitudes in China at this time, see C. K. YANG, *Reli-*

gion in Chinese Society (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1967). There is the same despair about tradition, the same attitude to religion, e.g. religion is "a relic man's primitive ignorance" (*ibid.* p. 365).

without breaking the hold of fundamental Islam on the masses. This proposition needs to be closely examined, but the kind of westernized and modernized country they had in mind could not be established, so they argued, in cooperation with Islamic authorities.

Whether true or false, Ottoman history has been recounted to show the vehement objections of the religious establishment against any import of western culture. Examples were easy to find: the establishment of the printing press was opposed; the abolition of the Janissary Corps and the establishment of the new army (*nizam-i cedid*) was opposed; Sultan Mahmud II's reforms were opposed; the fez as against the traditional turban, and the new code of law as against the Quranic Seriat, were all opposed. Indeed, the entire political history of the last two hundred years of the Ottoman Empire could be recounted in terms of the see-sawing of reform and reaction between various elements in the country.

This picture of late Ottoman history may not turn out to be accurate. But it is important that it was interpreted—and still is interpreted—in these terms. Some historians suggest that the opposition to the reforms may be analyzed in terms other than blind conservatism and unwillingness to change: it seems quite clear that great excesses of absolutism and remarkably short-sighted policies were justified in the name of reform in the nineteenth century (3).

In the final hectic years of the Ottoman Empire it was clear that the interests of the religious hierarchy had become identified with that of the Sultan-Khalif. As long as the first principle of the organization of the State remained Islam, they would obviously remain at the center of its political life. And certainly the entire Ottoman State only made sense in Islamic terms. All its institutions bore the stamp of Islam. It was not for nothing, after all, that from 1530 to 1922, for almost 400 years, the Quran was recited non-stop in a sacred chamber in Topkapi Palace by relays of readers. The religious officials knew that the Republic would curtail their importance. But their reaction was not merely a matter of self-defense. They undoubtedly felt that Islam was the only acceptable organizing principle of the Ottoman State.

The attempt to change this principle was interpreted as a slavish copying of the Franks, and not a matter of modernization but mere westernization. As far as they were concerned Mustafa Kemal had been wrong when he had said there is only one civilization. Their

(3) See B. LEWIS, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London 1961); also, on the land reforms of the nineteenth century, N. YALMAN, *Land Disputes in Eastern Turkey*, ap. *von Grunebaum Festschrift* (ed. Tikko, [n.d.] forthcoming).

indignation is expressed eloquently by Mehmed Akif: "People of a nation whose religion is imitation, whose world is imitation, whose customs are imitation, whose dress is imitation, whose greetings and language are imitation, in short, whose everything is imitation, are clearly themselves mere imitation human beings, and can on no account make up a community and, hence, can not survive" (4). This then was the issue: western rationalism against tradition and Islam.

The idealized representation of western rationalism in Turkey had more in common with the extreme secularism of the European Left, as we may imagine, than western Christian culture. Hence, in certain writings, there was great similarity between the views of Communists in Russia and the Reformers in Turkey. Even though there was an intellectual similarity (which, for example, is evident in 'Populism', one of the six revolutionary principles of the reformist C.H.P.), there was evidently no political similarity; and relations with revolutionary Russia quickly acquired considerable coolness and distance. Turkish students in Russia, who later became spearheads of left-wing ideas, such as Nazim Hikmet, Va-Nu, and Sevket Sureyya, had been received with considerable suspicion when they returned.

Still, the issue—Rationalism versus Tradition—cleared of its local cultural encumbrances, is one which is central in many traditional countries; the dispute happens to be especially bitter in Turkey. It is rare to see such virulent opposition to a country's own traditions and history. It is perhaps in the nature of revolutions to create and exacerbate such divisions in a country. The case of modern China may provide another example.

After the establishment of the Republic, when the time was ripe and Mustafa Kemal had the chance, he dealt the mortal blow against the religious establishment by the removal of the Sultan and the abolition of the Caliphate; the abolition of the office of Sheyh-ul-Islam; and the taking over by the Treasury of the vast religious endowments accumulated over centuries, which formed (as the *Vakif*) the economic base of the religious organization. Then a series of edicts were issued to conclude the demolition. The Islamic calendar was changed. The sacred script was altered for the Latin alphabet. New civil, penal, and commercial codes imported from Switzerland, Italy, and Germany went into effect replacing Islamic codes. The fez, the veil (decreed in the Quran), and religious garb of all Divines were abolished. But most important of all—an act

(4) *Sebilürreşat* (1328), n° 27.

which cut off the life-line of the religious institutions—the *medrese* (sacred colleges), *zaviye*, *tekke* (convents), and *tarikats* (mystic brotherhoods) were abolished. Instead the General Directorate of Religious Affairs was instated which was to be run by civil servants who took their orders from the Prime Minister.

It is difficult to convey the precipitate nature of these official acts except to say that they are akin to an attempt in Italy to cut off all the legal, constitutional, financial, and material base of the Catholic Church. Overnight, if a religious person appeared in the street in his usual garb or even merely appeared in public wearing a beard (which, of course, could be interpreted as a reactionary 'Islamic' beard), he found himself liable to arrest.

These reforms are undoubtedly one of the most remarkable self-inflicted, radical social-surgery attempts in history. It should be added that they were only possible after a holocaust like the first World War and only to be attempted by so daring and audacious a man as Mustafa Kemal, who had the power, the prestige, and the vision to attempt to remold an entire nation.

Again the intentions of the reformers are interesting. It was felt that Islam was like Christianity before the Reformation, that is to say, primitive and ritualistic. A word much used was *Bab-i Ictihad* ("the door of interpretation" which was to be opened). This referred to the decision in the early Caliphate to end all personal interpretations of the Quran and to accept only the four schools of Sunni orthodoxy.

Even the more religiously inclined among the reformers felt that orthodox Islam was to confining to the spirit. First, it had developed intermediaries between Man and God, whereas Man alone should be responsible for his own conscience. Five times of prayer a day was unnecessary—it was impractical to think about God most of the day; ablutions and fasting were mere ritual; the pilgrimage, useless custom; sacrifice, an outward form; the sacred language, Arabic, mere hocus pocus, and since no layman, it was argued, could understand it, it had to be changed into Turkish (5).

The Quran had to be translated. They had forgotten that well-educated laymen in the past had learned Arabic and Persian and that there had been many translations of the Quran before.

There were, indeed, experiments with 'Modern Islam'. The call to prayer was rendered into Turkish, and it was even suggested

(5) The 'pure' Turkish word chosen to replace 'Allah' was 'Tanrı' which appears to be Chinese in origin, from Tiengri 'Lord of Heaven'.

in all seriousness to place pews in mosques, introduce music as in western churches, and to give officially approved sermons to the congregations.

The result of these attempts was that in cities mosque attendance dropped off sharply. Many mosques were deserted and not maintained. An entire generation was educated thinking religion to be some evil and irrational force of mere orthodoxy and blind tradition.

The extremist members of the revolutionary party (C.H.P.) were, it seems now, tilting their lances against windmills. Religious enthusiasm disappeared on the surface but merely went underground. It was probably strengthened in some respects. I think it true to say that the intellectuals from Istanbul and Ankara had for political reasons completely misunderstood what Islam or religion was all about. The nature of reforms undertaken also showed up only more significantly how cut off these theoreticians were from the common people.

2. *The mystic traditions.*

One of the perennial problems of Islam, as of any well organized Church, has been how to handle antinomian tendencies. In Islam there was from the beginning a great contest between the orthodox Sunni community or the traditional hierarchy and the mystics or saints, who claimed access to true religious grace.

In Ottoman terms this was described as the distinction between the *Ulema*, the doctors of religious orthodoxy, and the *tarikats* or mystic brotherhoods led by saints. In other words, this was a dispute between the hierarchical organization of Sunni Islam allied to secular rulers with divine claims (the *Caliph*) and those other religious men (*Sheyhs*), who disputed the authority or the 'organization' and claimed special personal insight into divine mysteries. To this day the question turns around the legitimacy of succession to the Prophet and in this one respect appears identical to the disputes of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and other Christian Churches.

These long-standing religious disputes render the position of Ottoman reformists, and the C.H.P. intellectuals who have followed them, even more remarkable. These men wanted a 'reformation' in Islam, but since in many cases their faith in Islam was shaken, they failed to see that the 'reformation' they so fervently hoped to bring about was already in the traditions of Islam. In the mystic brotherhoods all that the reformers had hoped for had already been fulfilled.

There is more learned writing on Islamic mysticism than we can cope with here. Since the source flowed fully, with literally hundreds of mystic brotherhoods distinguished in Turkey alone, the learned treatises are also numerous and complex. Add to this the division between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, then add further the important distinctions of *Hanafi*, *Shafi'i*, *Maliki*, and *Hanbali* (the schools of the four Imam's), and the intellectual complexity of the matter becomes obvious.

But were these, in fact, purely intellectual concerns? In eastern Anatolia these divisions are still used as indices to distinguish communities and/or tribes. They are one of the principles on which the social organization of eastern Turkey is based. Their social role has never been properly understood. The eastern part of Turkey is distant, grandiose, and full of mountains and deep valleys with very difficult communications. It is also in a historically disputed area between the Persian and Ottoman Empires and has never been very closely administered. Since the area was on the borders of the Persian and Ottoman Empires (therefore on a Sunni/Shi'a division), it also fell into a religious, as well as linguistic, shatterzone.

There is no need here to provide an overall picture of the diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and confessional groupings in the region. It is complex on all counts, but in order of importance, the religious one takes precedence over all the others. There are small Christian communities, such as the Armenians and Assyrians, but the vast majority of the population is Muslim. Among the Muslims the fundamental division is that between the Sunni (orthodox) and the others, such as the *Alevi*, *Bektashi*, and the *Nuseyri*. These three groups, with much in common, are not referred to simply as Shi'a here; and although they are much concerned with Ali (as the name *Alevi* implies), their practices and beliefs are rejected by the Shi'a Muslims of Iran as heresy. In very general terms the *Nuseyri* speak Arabic, the *Bektashi* speak Turkish, and the *Alevi* are found to speak both Turkish and Kurdish.

The orthodox Sunni group, too, is divided into the followers of the four schools: the *Hanafi*, *Shafi'i*, *Maliki*, and *Hanbali*. They tend to form separate communal groups, though their boundaries appear much more indistinct than the Sunni-'other' distinction. These divisions are further cross cut by affiliations to brotherhoods (*tarikats*) of which the most important represented in this area are the *Nakshibendi*, *Kadiri*, and *Rufai*. The new order of the *Nurcu* is active in towns and is of considerable and increasing significance. Finally, a small and interesting community of *Yezidi* (known in the west as

'devil worshippers') may be mentioned to complete the list of confessional groups.

In terms of languages, the major ones are Kurdish and Turkish—Kurdish being further subdivided into numerous dialects of which the most important are *Kormanchi* and *Zaza*. Arabic, some Circassian, and Armenian are spoken by smaller groups.

In ecological and social terms, too, the picture is not a simple one. There are large towns with a highly literate and cultured upper class, such as Diyarbakir, as well as small villages in the plains and nomadic tribes on their traditional routes between their winter quarters on the plains and their summer pastures on top of high mountains. One could also distinguish the professional, merchant, and lower classes in the towns; the landlords and peasants in the countryside; or the noble families and the herdsmen of the tribal areas. It is a complex picture.

I am here only concerned with a small peasant village of Kurdish-speaking *Alevi* in the province of Elbistan.

3. *The Alevi community.*

The village of Ciplaklar is in the midst of some bleak mountains east of Elbistan, itself, a rather uninspiring town dominated by the dung color of all the houses and public buildings. The village is Kurdish-speaking though the men also speak Turkish.

The name of the village is Turkish and is highly suggestive; it means the 'Naked Ones', almost 'Sans-culotte' in French. The reason is barely known to the inhabitants. The townsmen and local civil servants think the name is appropriate since the people are poor indeed. To the outsider the villagers may express the same sentiment. The name may bear a different interpretation. *Ciplak* (naked), *abdal* (fool), or *mecnun* (mad) are names given to mystic wanderers who were important in the spread of Islam and who were men consumed with the love of God. Ciplaklar may indicate the descendants of such a holy man.

The village has 67 dwellings with flat roofs built practically into the mountain. In certain parts (around Mus) the houses are built completely underground with only the chimney-hole visible above the ground. These are considered traditional but rather primitive and unsophisticated by Ciplaklar. It is admitted, however, that these underground shelters were ideal both for the severe winters and searing summers of this region. The villagers of Ciplaklar consider

their houses to be half-under and half-above the ground, therefore half-way along the path of civilization.

The village regards itself to be a branch of a tribe which was nomadic in this region until the turn of the century. They have always had rights on these lands but were more dependent on sheep and goat pastoralism. A mixed economy of pastoral movement in the summer months and wheat and oats agriculture in the autumn, winter, and spring, continues to be practiced.

More important to the economy and social life of the village is migrant labor which annually takes 90 % of all able-bodied men to all parts of Turkey. This remarkable phenomenon, which has far reaching implications for social change and for economic policy, has hardly been touched on in Turkey.

The rest of the social arrangements—the patriarchal family, the arranged matches, parallel-cousin marriage, the customs of weddings, the institution of circumcision kinship (*kirve*)—are so similar to other villages in the entire region that I need not comment on them. However, the similarity of such cultural features between Turkish and Kurdish speakers in this region is of considerable political importance. It gives a vivid impression that there are no boundaries between linguistic groups of the same religious community.

In kinship terms, while the general features of the intensely patriarchal, short lineage are similar to other Muslim groups in this region, the community in question did have special customs regarding divorce and inheritance. Divorce was not permitted under any circumstances (questions of honour being dispatched according to its own special rules), and unlike orthodox Islam, no inheritance rights were recognized for women.

In these general features then, the village was similar to thousands of other villages in the Eastern provinces. What were the distinctions?

An observant visitor would have noted immediately that there was no building with even the semblance of a *minaret* on it. There was no call to prayer and no mosque. Further the visitor would have noted that the men had rather bushy, over-flowing moustaches as opposed to the more closely tended, clipped, short and shaped moustaches of others. (If there is no moustache at all then there is danger that some question may be raised regarding a man's super-virility, which is central to male culture here). Also the more discriminating eye would have detected the regional style of the headdresses of the local women and would have been able to place them with precision into their regional groups.

The first two of these indices are directly associated with the creed of the *Alevi*. The long over-hanging moustache, which is a fairly universal index at the peasant and tribal level, symbolizes secrecy. In other words, the *Alevi* creed is not to be divulged to non-members.

This relates to the long history of persecution by the largely Sunni organization of the Ottomans. But furthermore, the vow of secrecy is also, I think, intended to underline that what is important in religion is not the outward compliance of the believer with certain prescribed ritual acts but that for true religion, the believer must turn inward and look into his heart.

This point may, indeed, be regarded as the critical point of division of the *Alevi* from the Sunni traditionalists. (Islamic authors have been much concerned with *Riya* (dissimulation), since the elaborate Islamic ritual, which ideally should have a strong mystic flavor, can be imitated without real 'surrender' (*teslim-Islam*) to God).

Let me now turn to the lack of the mosque. I will have to approach it in a round-about manner. The central features of Sunni Islam in terms of ritual are as follows :

- (a) The pronouncement of the oneness of God (*Sahada*) ;
- (b) Prayer, five times a day and more;
- (c) Fasting, through the month of Ramadan;
- (d) The pilgrimage to Mecca;
- (e) Alms to the poor.

The *Alevi*, to be concise, reject these features for the following reasons :

(a) The standard pronouncement is altered, and Ali, the nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet, is given recognition.

(b) The prayer, five times a day, is mere ritual. What is needed for the believer is two *rekat* (bowings) per year. (Five times a day adds up to about 40 *rekat* per day on standard *Hanafi* reckoning). And these 2 *rekats* a year should be performed on the annual ritual of (*Ayin-i Cem*) in the presence of the prayer leader.

(c) The standard fast is mere hocus-pocus. To show that one is thinking of God, and ready to sacrifice one-self, one does not need 30 days of fasting. In fact only 12 days are necessary, in memory of the Twelve *Imams* (teachers) which may be performed any time during the year but preferably during the month of *Muharram*.

(d) The pilgrimage to Mecca, again, is mere external pretense. What is intended is that Man should seek God. This is an eternal search. And where will God be found? Not under the stone in Mecca. But in Men's hearts. Therefore, the best pilgrimage is into one's own heart. That was what the Prophet had really

meant. (In these passages I am not glossing the statements of informants. The reasoning follows that of a particular informant almost verbatim).

(e) As regards alms, the sentiments are the same as the orthodox.

It will immediately be realized that these interpretations are indeed very close to the *Sufi* and the Shi'a positions. They are in fact validated by reference to the Myth of Ali and the murder of Ali's sons, Hasan and Huseyn.

The central reason for the rejection of the traditional Sunni system is based not merely on the mystic inadequacy of the strictly ritualistic, formal prayers of Sunni Islam, as the *Sufi*'s would argue, but on the avowed devotion for the household (*Ehli-beyt*) of the Prophet Muhammad, which includes his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali and their sons, Hasan and Huseyn. For this reason, one of the traditional texts held in esteem by the *Alevi* and frequently read in the evenings is that of Husniye, a servant girl in the court of Harun-Resid, who in the story cogently argues the case for the legitimate succession of Ali's children to the Caliphate which has been usurped.

Though expressed in these *Sufi* terms, I did find myself involved in a deep discussion as to whether Ali is God or not. (*Ali'm Allah!* "My Ali is God", a common expression, puts the claim concisely and was mentioned by the *Alevi*. The Sunni interpret the expression as "God knows!", *Alim Allah!*).

There is disagreement here and the point need not be laboured. However, starting with the adoration towards the family line of the Prophet Muhammed and the claim that Ali should have succeeded him as Caliph at his death, we have an entire theology which attributed divinity to Ali and makes his son, Huseyn, son-of-God and intermediary between Man and God. There is food for thought here, and the Christian theme of the Trinity needs no emphasis.

Ali is respected in the Sunni orthodox community as well, but no special attention is given to his sons, Hasan and Huseyn. To drive the distinctions home further, the *Alevi* single out the Twelve Imams who follow Ali. The recitation of their names is required of all *Alevi*. The list appeared almost as a secret and complicated password which permitted entrance into the community. The formula also includes the 4, the 7, the 12, and the 40 and is recited at annual rituals. There are myths attached to each of these numbers, as well as to each of the Twelve Imams, which I will not examine here.

Two other distinctions of the *Alevi* are well known: first, the rabbit. The rabbit is what we would call a *totem*. Some say the rabbit is Ali's 'cat' and, therefore, respected. Others say he is the 'cat' of Hasan

and Huseyn—their pet—and is, therefore, to be respected. Still others maintain that the rabbit startled Ali on his horse and caused him to fall inauspiciously before a battle and is, therefore, taboo as food. The more modern apologists maintain that there is really not much meat on the rabbit anyway, and what there is has an unpleasant odour and is not worth eating.

But more striking, and more important, is the serious matter of purity. Here we hit a rock upon which the relations of the Sunni and *Alevi* have foundered.

In the town of Elazig I was often told that I should not live with the *Alevi* since they are dirty. I asked the Sunni coffeeman: "Why?". He leaned over with a serious expression and said: "They are filthy; they do not wash themselves after sexual intercourse". A very serious matter indeed, especially for the Sunni, since the daily prayers can only be undertaken in a state of physical purity; and sexual pollution is specifically mentioned in the Quran as negating prayer. In the Sunni case a complete bath from head to foot (*qusul abdesti*) is needed to purify sexual pollution, quite apart from the ordinary ablutions concerning the hands, feet, and head for the five daily prayers.

When I met my *Alevi* friends, I mentioned the subject: "Do you not take a complete bath from head to foot after visiting your wives?". One of them said: "Have you ever bought cucumbers?" I said: "Yes". "If you have a paper bag full of cucumbers and you drop one cucumber on the ground, do you need to wash all the cucumbers or only the one that fell on the ground?"

This question of *qusul* and the Sunni accusation greatly annoy the *Alevi*. In a cold climate, and in the absence of facilities for taking purificatory showers, there are short-cuts for the Sunni as well, but these are not recalled in connection with the *Alevi*. In popular terms the Sunni after intercourse has to get up from his bed and must solemnly swear his intention (*niyet*) to bathe when convenient; then he can return for an undisturbed sleep beside his wife.

4. *Religious organization.*

The most interesting and far reaching distinction of the *Alevi* from the other Muslim groups around them is their independent religious organization. The *Alevi* in eastern Turkey are led—in religious matters—by certain holy persons who come from holy lineages. Their lowest orders are called *Rehber* (guide). They are under the jurisdiction of a *Pir* (elder), who in turn comes under the control

of a *Mursid* (literally, "one who professes", or "professor").

The *Mursid* of this regions lives in Malatya. He is a well known and very highly respected man of about 60. He has served in Parliament and is at the moment M.P. from Malatya. He has perhaps 500 villages under his patronage. He is well educated. His various sons are in modern, high-prestige occupations. There is a lawyer, a doctor, and a civil servant among them.

Not all the *Alevi* of eastern Turkey are under one *Mursid*. There are some other *Mursid* in the Sivas-Erzincan region, as well as to the west of Malatya. The seat of a *Mursid* is known as an *ocak* (hearth). This word is common to all the *Sufi tarikat* (brotherhoods) in Turkey. It derives from the popular attitude to the hearth and the fire in the ordinary household, which are given special respect.

The flock of the *Mursid* is known as his *Murid* or *Talib* (seekers): the words carry the implication of followers or seekers after divine knowledge. The structure appears to be open to outsiders as in the more usual *tarikats* but is in fact a community and not merely a religious association as *tarikats* can be.

The respect for the *Mursid* is due to him for two related reasons: he comes from a sacred lineage, and he has demonstrated his ability and interest in leading his community. The lineage has a special legend explaining its role (e. g. the name, *Ahu icen*, drinkers of poison).

Though the villagers hold the *Mursid* in very high reverence, they rarely see him. Their main contact is with the *Pir* and the *Rehber*, who are in charge of their village and who have special connections as 'pastors' with particular households.

The *Pirs* are villagers themselves, but they also have their special hearths (*ocak*). They, too, come from sacred lineages and are related to each other. An important element in the maintenance of this structure is the marriage-ban between the lineages of the *Pir* and the villagers. This is expressed in the idiom of incest. The villagers say: "We are his [the *Pir*'s] sons and daughters. Their women are like mothers and sisters to us. It would be shameful to have connections with the *Pir* families".

The *Rehber* (guides) are the assistants of the *Pir*. The *Pir* should visit every village in his vicarage. Sometimes the *Rehber* is sent in his place. They rank lower and do not have the right to perform the annual sacrifice.

In Ciplaklar the *Pir* was called Dogan Dede ('Grandfather Falcon') and lived in a small town, Pazarcik, about two hours away by bus. He came around once or twice a year. The villagers collected funds for him from every household every year, and this sum was given to

him. He in turn forwarded a portion of these sums to the *Mursid*. This at least was the theory. There is a great deal of secrecy about the precise workings of this organization, and I am hazy about the actual sums. I know that they are very considerable in the case of some *Mursids* and *Sheyhs*.

The visit of the Dede (as the *Pir* is usually called) is essentially for the performance of the central annual ritual of the *Alevi*. The ritual is called *Ayin-i Cem*. It exists under this name in certain other *Sufi* orders.

The rite is known as *Mum sondu* (candle blown out) outside the community. This term causes intense annoyance for it is associated with the myth of communal sexual intercourse and incest. There are similar myths prevalent in northern India concerning the behaviour of outside castes. The *Alevi* tell the story of the Sunni who came into their midst during an *Ayin-i Cem* with sexual intentions and was struck dead by the fear of God (6).

The rite of integration presupposes peace in the community. Therefore the first essential before the rite can take place is to establish such peace. For this reason the Dede arrives in the village and first tries to settle outstanding disputes between members of the community. Most non-criminal offenses can be handled by him in this fashion. The villagers claim that they try to keep their disputes away from the Courts and prefer the mediation of their Dede; some, on the other hand, appear to think that the Dede's influence is waning nowadays.

Once peace is established, 12 special servants are selected for the performance of duties in connection with the ritual. The 12 represent the Twelve Imams of the *Alevi* creed who followed Ali. One of the larger houses in the village is singled out as a 'prayer house', and the Dede takes his place in the large room on a divan prepared near the wall opposite the door. Then the *talib* (seekers) go into the room in pairs, hand in hand. When they get near the Dede they kneel down and walk along on all fours, like lambs, and kiss the hem of his coat. (This part of the ritual is identical to the proceedings which traditionally took place at the Divan sessions of the Ottoman Sultans in Istanbul up to the xviiith century. European ambassadors later apparently complained about having to behave in such a defferential manner). The pairs then perform the only obligatory

(6) There are hints of special sexual customs among the *Alevi*. R. Grønhaug (University of Bergen, Norway) reports that initiated couples may share their spouses

and are then known as *musahip* (co-owner). Hence the growth of the community as four, eight, twelve, etc. The practice, if extant, is still shrouded in secrecy.

formal Islamic prayer in the *Alevi* system. They go through two *rekat* (bowings) of *namaz* and then move aside for the next pair. New members may also be introduced into the community in this manner.

The Dede asks the pairs whether they are at peace with the community, and the final difficulties, if there are any, are ironed out. When all the households connected with the particular Dede, men and women, are assembled, one of the 12 servants brings in a specially decorated and purified ram. The ram is consecrated by the Dede who recites a blessing and is then carried out "like a child" in the arms of the helpers to be sacrificed. After the sacrifice, which is carried out outside the house, the ram is placed in a large cauldron and is cooked whole. The food is brought back into the prayer-chamber and is communally eaten.

After this communal dinner, the Dede (and his assistants) start preaching and singing. They sing with a four-stringed instrument (*baglama*) mainly mystic folk poetry in Turkish. (There is a long tradition of such poetry in Turkey which dates back to the XIIIth century poet, Yunus Emre, and others, and which is still going on). The congregation sits in a reverend attitude without moving at all until given permission by the Dede. Now and again, there are intervals of slow-turning dance, referred to as *sema*, which is the same term used for the whirling of dervishes. There are also communal recitations of the name of God repeated over and over many times (*zikir*). This induces trance states in some members of the congregation—particularly women—but the loss of control by women in public in this manner is generally disapproved of by the community. These sessions last the entire night and come to an end in the morning.

There is much to be written about the symbolism of the entire *Ayin-i Cem*, which appears in various forms to be common to mystic brotherhoods of the Sunni Muslims as well; but in this context all that needs to be underlined is that it consists of the re-enactment of the central myth of Islam, which is the complete surrender (*teslim*) to the will of God. The myth which expresses this theme is the Biblical story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his son. In the Islamic version, the son to be sacrificed is Ishmael. The rituals carried out at the end of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (one of the pillars of Islam) consist, in fact, of the detailed re-enactment of the entire myth of Abraham with Sarah's servant, Hagar, and the sacrifice of Abraham's elder son, born of Hagar, Ishmael. The *Ayin-i Cem* once again repeats the crux of the story by sacrifice of Ishmael in the form of the ram.

We have mentioned the *Bektashi* and the *Nuseyri* as communities

related to the *Alevi*. The organization of the *Alevi* in eastern Turkey differs from the *Bektashi* which in terms of creed and ritual are almost identical. Among the *Alevi* the offices of *Mursid*, *Pir*, and *Rehber* are handed down in the patrilineal line in certain families. The *Bektashi*, on the other hand, do not have hereditary leadership, and succession to office on the decease of a religious leader is by election within the community. The *Bektashi* in this region are all connected with the famous *ocak* of Hacı Bektash, the founding saint of the *Bektashi* path; and the *Alevi* who respect Hacı Bektash explain their distinction by claiming that their own *ocak*, that of Dogan Dede, though less well-known, is nonetheless of equal standing to the one of the *Bektashi*.

Though closely related, the two communities maintain a marriage barrier between themselves; and although the wealthy Bektashi village of Nurihak was a near neighbor of Ciplaklar, there had been no marriages between the two settlements.

The organization of the *Nuseyri* (Arabic speaking) is said to be akin to that of the *Alevi* (that is, associated with special sacred patrilineal 'hearths'); but since the *Nuseyri* inhabit a region much further to the South on the borders of Syria, no relationship between the communities is maintained. All three communities are said to be kinsmen because, it is said, they all accept the command of Imam Cafer (Imam Cafer Buyruğu).

We must conclude that the religious life in Anatolia remains vivid and lively, notwithstanding the intense secularism to which the civil service and upper classes in Turkey have been subjected.

Furthermore, the 'official' religious organization of the hierarchy of *Imam* and *Muftu*, etc., connected to the General Directorate of Religious Affairs, is almost completely disregarded. Religious people feel that these persons are merely an arm of civil authority and not a part of themselves. They prefer the warmer, personal (and communal) relations maintained between themselves and the local *Sheyh* to the impersonal, almost bureaucratic relations with religious officials who, in these parts of the country at least, do not have very clear duties to perform.

This issue, of the function of the General Directorate of Religious Affairs, a legacy from the Ottoman Empire when the religious officials had important educational and judicial duties to perform, remains thorny and is still completely unsettled. At the moment the duties of the organization are restricted to general religious guidance, organization of Friday sermons and mosque prayers, and administration, such as appointments to various minor posts in mosques.

The difficulty of the position of religious officials becomes particularly evident in their relations with the *Sheyhs*, *Mursids*, and other traditional charismatic leaders in their locality. There is real conflict of interest here; and the *Sheyhs* and *Mursids*, as indigenous leaders, have a communal following and political influence which the *Muftu* or *Imam* could not hope to equal. The treatment that is meted out to religious officials by the modernist and secularist notables is, however, identical to the indigenous holy men.

I shall mention one case. One of the leading MPs from this region—multi-lingual (Kurdish, Turkish, French, German), Sunni, and *Hanafi*—and a member of one of the most influential families in the area, was invited to join the Cabinet and become responsible for the General Directorate of Religious Affairs under the C.H.P. administration. He had studied Law in Europe and was extremely westernized. One of the first official acts he carried out when he took office was to issue an order that he would not receive any *Muftu* or *Imam* who wore the traditional Islamic beard. “Those horrible beards”, he said to me as he recounted the story with some pride, “are primitive, dirty, and intolerable”. He was even more severe with the indigenous religious leaders in the region from which he had been elected to Parliament. They had wanted to visit him and pay their respects. He told them that according to the law of the Republic there were no traditional religious leaders or privileged and sacred families and men in Turkey anymore. They could not, therefore, visit him and should stay in their places and keep out of trouble.

5. *The communication gaps.*

What are the conclusions to be drawn from this evidence of a community more concerned with the spirit of faith than in the mechanics of rituals?

1. Contrary to popular belief in Turkey and abroad, there are lively and creative movements which continue in Islam and Anatolia. They are associated with communities and/or *tarikats* brotherhoods and flourish entirely outside official recognition. They produce holy men who are interested and capable of spontaneous and creative new interpretations of Islam at all levels.

2. There is an almost complete lack of communication between the people involved in these communities and brotherhoods and the secularized intellectuals in the major cities and in the universities.

3. The attempt to cut the jugular vein of religion by direct educa-

tional policy and by pretending that it is mere superstition with no place in Republican Turkey has signally failed in Anatolia but has, to some extent, succeeded in westernized circles in the cities.

The persecution of religious leaders and brotherhoods, however, has resulted in driving them underground without affecting popular interest in these questions.

Also, an unexpected and unpremeditated effect of the anti-*tarikât* policy has been to give renewed power and opportunity to orthodoxy at the capital. The Sunni practitioners of religion have had to be officially reinstated as a State department; but the opportunity to challenge Sunni views, which had always been one of the theological roles of the *Sufi* orders, has been lost. The result has been an increasing rigidity in the teaching and practice of the Sunni organization—a result which is precisely the opposite of what had been intended.

4. It is a matter of considerable good fortune for Turkey that religious affiliations remain more important than linguistic affiliations. If the religious affiliations were weakened, they would have given way possibly to Turkish-Kurdish opposition of a more divisive kind. As it is, this latent structural cleavage is bridged by numerous institutions, among which religious ties play a cardinal role.

5. The press, the Parliament, the intellectuals, and the universities remain split on the political issue of modern Western Rationalism versus Islamic Traditionalism without seriously investigating the sociological or theological issues involved. The politicians continue along perhaps recreating the orthodox Sunni *Ulema* structure of the Ottoman Empire with all its divisive tendencies (Sunni versus *Sufi* and *Alevi*) while the religious life of the communities in Anatolia goes on largely unmolested. (Six months after these lines were written, these Sunni/non-Sunni problems burst upon the political arena and resulted in the controversial removal of then General Director of Religious Affairs, Mr. Elmali).

I have described a communication break in Turkey between elite groups in the cities interested in softening the puritanism of Islam and traditional communities in Anatolia for whom the struggle against Sunni orthodoxy was their *raison d'être*. The basic similarity of interest between the ideological positions of these groups was not recognized.

In the light of this discussion, it is also noteworthy that one of the extreme left-wing opposition parties (The Marxist Worker's Party, T.I.P.) has now discovered this fertile issue. They have been trying to make political capital out of the Sunni/*Alevi* division by fostering a political connection between the free-thinking urban

supporters of their party and the traditional mystic *Alevi* communities. They naturally hope that this may enlarge their base of support, which has been very narrow (2.8 % of the vote in the 1965 general election). It is no doubt in order to forge more effective links with the *Alevi* community that the annual convention of this party in the winter of 1966 was held in the province of Malatya.

While the political capital to be gained out of this strategy appears meagre, there is no doubt that new thinking in religious lines in Turkey will probably become concerned with the closure of this gap between the western educated, who would like to find some Islamic roots to justify their new mode of life, and the *Alevi* community, which has liberalized its version of Islam long ago. The difficulty, even here, is that while the division between Sunni and *Alevi* is barely understood among the non-practicing urban groups, the marriage barriers and other cleavages continue to remain solid walls dividing the communities in the country*.

* A version of this paper was read at the seminar of Professors E. Gellner and I.M. Lewis in London. I am grateful for their comments. I have also had the benefits of comments and discussions from scholars such as Professor A. Tietze, Professor N. Keddie of U.C.L.A. and some of their suggestions were incorporated. R. Grønhaug (University of Bergen, Norway) and M. Meeker (University of Chicago) have generously discussed their field work with me, some of which relates to the issues raised in the paper. I am grateful to Professor L.A. Fallers (Chicago) for many fruitful discussions on religion in Turkey.