Secularization of Alevis

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Summary
Secularization of Alevis is a concept used to define the weakening of the influence of religious beliefs and institutions in Alevi communities in Turkey under the effect of modernization. This transformation can be explained, in the form predicted by classical secularization theory, as a decline in beliefs and practices. Since the 1950s, the daily life of Alevis has been affected by modernization, and after the 1980s, the visibility of Alevi identity in the public sphere has increased. However, this visibility should be evaluated not as a religious revival but rather as a construction of a cultural identity. Because, qualitative research conducted in regions densely populated by Alevis shows that traditional structures such as marriage, musahiplik (sacred brotherhood), dedelik (religious leadership), and cem rituals have lost their function among younger generations. The authority of the dedes has decreased, and cem ceremonies have turned into cultural rituals. This situation can be explained by the replacement of religious institutions with secular structures. Musahiplik has been replaced by NGOs, dedelik by the law, and the education in cem ceremonies by public schools. Thus, Alevism has evolved into a cultural form based more on belonging than belief and has become folklorized. This transformation reveals the explanatory power of secularization theory even in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Cem Rituals, Modernization, Religious Leadership, Sacred Brotherhood, Secularization

From Faith to Identity: The Cultural Transformation of Alevism

Alevi secularization is a concept used to define the transformation that has occurred in the traditional belief structures and religious institutions of Alevi communities in Turkey under the influence of the modernization process. Alevi secularization will be presented in this encyclopedia entry within the framework of classical secularization theory. Classical secularization theory argues that modernization directly results in a decline in religious beliefs and practices

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(Bruce 2002; Wilson 1976). Criticisms against this theory gained momentum especially from the 1990s onwards; phenomena such as examples of global religious revival and the influence of religion in the political field have questioned the universal validity of secularization theory (Berger 2008; Stark 1999). This encyclopedia entry discusses the validity of secularization theory on religious groups outside of Western Christianity, through the example of Alevi communities in Turkey.

Alevism is a heterodox belief system that has historically been shaped by exclusion, and is defined both by rural isolation and sensitivities related to identity (Erdemir 2004; Lord 2017; Zeidan 1999). The modernization process, which gained momentum in Turkey from the 1950s onwards, has deeply affected the daily life practices of Alevis. With the "Alevi revival" observed after the 1980s, Alevism became more visible and Alevis were able to express themselves more openly in the public sphere. However, the question of whether this revival increased Alevism's influence in daily life is of critical importance in terms of secularization. From the 1960s onwards, Alevis, who aligned closely with leftist ideologies, came to the forefront more with their class and political identities than with their religious identity. In this process, cem rituals weakened, and the authority of the dedes (religious leaders) was shaken. However, from the 1980s onwards, Alevi associations were established, dedes took part in these structures, and Alevism began to be represented in a more systematic way (Dressler 2012; Soner & Toktaş 2011). This transformation laid the groundwork for the reconstruction of Alevism as a folkloric and cultural identity (Sökefeld 2004).

However, in the qualitative field research conducted in Çorum and Tunceli provinces, in-depth interviews were carried out with 40 individuals from different generations (20 parents and their married children). The intergenerational transformation was analyzed based on marriage, spiritual brotherhood (musahiplik), religious leadership (dedelik), and cem rituals. This research revealed

certain dissolutions or flexibilities in traditional Alevi institutions. For instance, in traditional Alevism, marriage was a prerequisite for community acceptance. However, today divorce has become more acceptable, and interfaith marriages have become more common. This situation indicates a relaxation of religious boundaries and a weakening of social control mechanisms. Moreover, the institution of spiritual brotherhood (musahiplik), traditionally regarded as sacred kinship, appears to have lost its function among younger generations. Particularly, urbanization, individualization, and decreased participation in cem ceremonies have rendered this institution largely symbolic. Along with musahiplik, the power and prestige of religious leaders (dedes) has notably diminished. Dedes were traditionally both religious and social authority figures. However, today younger generations rarely consult dedes, and many dedes work in different professions in urban areas. Cem rituals have transformed into cultural events, and social sanctions like being declared 'düşkün' (ostracized) have lost their former significance.

Such societal transformation aligns with the core propositions of classical secularization theory. With modernization, the social functions of religious institutions have been transferred to secular institutions (Stolz 2010; Hirschle 2014). For instance: Spiritual kinship (musahiplik) has been replaced by NGOs The religious authority of dedes has been supplanted by state legal systems The educational role of cem ceremonies has been taken over by public schools This situation demonstrates that the Alevi revival represents more of a cultural identity-based resurgence rather than a religious revival. Sökefeld's (2004) concept of "folklorization" proves particularly useful in explaining this new manifestation of Alevism. Ritual practices such as cem ceremonies, semah dancing, and bağlama music now serve primarily as markers of cultural identity rather than expressions of faith.

Conclusion

This entry on the secularization of Alevis clearly demonstrates how modernization processes have reshaped the religious institutions, rituals, and social structures of Alevi communities in Turkey. Drawing on classical secularization theory, it argues that Alevilik has undergone a shift from a lived religious system to a cultural identity framework. Institutions such as *musahiplik*, *dedelik*, and *cem* rituals have lost their binding religious functions, especially among younger generations, and have been increasingly replaced by secular equivalents-NGOs, civil law, and public education.

The fieldwork conducted in Çorum and Tunceli reveals a marked generational transformation: divorce and interfaith marriage are now more socially acceptable; dedes have lost their former authority; and formerly sacred practices are largely symbolic. This case supports the secularization thesis, showing that the Alevi revival is not a return to religious orthopraxy but a cultural resurgence. Ultimately, the entry positions Alevism today not as a domain of spiritual guidance, but as a marker of collective identity shaped by historical exclusion and adapted to the conditions of modernity.

In conclusion, Alevi secularization reflects the diminishing role of religion in guiding individual lives. In this context, Alevism in modern Turkish society is evolving into a cultural form based on identity rather than religious belief. Secularization theory provides an explanatory framework for understanding this transformation, even in non-Western and non-Christian contexts.

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