

MARKUS DRESSLER



WRITING RELIGION

The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam

Writing Religion



REFLECTION AND THEORY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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Note on Usage

I have attempted to simplify orthography to a reasonable extent. This means that I as a rule preferred English spelling convention for those terms that have made it into English language. For names and concepts that are within this book situated in primarily Turkish contexts I have used modern Turkish orthography. However, for reading conventions I made exceptions, using throughout *Bektashi* instead of *Bektaşî* and writing the plural of *Kızılbaş* as *Kızılbashes*.

As for the pronunciation of Turkish letters the following rules might be helpful:

- c like English j in James
- ç like English ch in China
- ğ mostly silent, lengthening preceding vowel
- ı like English a in mural
- ö like French eu in monsieur
- ş like English sh in Shakespeare
- ü like French u in tu

I have transliterated only general Islamic technical terms in the specialist fashion following *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Third Edition) standards.

Prologue: Alevism Contested

IN THE LATE 1980s, the Alevis of Turkey (to which 10–15% of the population belong), at that time thought to be widely assimilated, began to assert their difference in European and Turkish public spaces to an unprecedented extent. They embarked on revitalizing and reforming Alevi institutions and built new networks reflective of contemporary political and social circumstances that helped them to demand an end to their social and institutional discrimination, as well as their recognition as a community legitimately different from the Sunni majority population. Both in Turkey and in countries with a significant Turkish migrant population such as Germany, the “Alevi question,” which comprises matters of representation and relation to the state, as well as questions of cultural and religious location, has in the last two decades become a subject of intense public and political contestations.¹ In Turkey, these contestations often end in lawsuits initiated either (1) by Alevis, suing state institutions for practices that they regard as discriminatory, often pursuing all stages of appeal up to the European Court of Human Rights, or, (2) until roughly ten years ago, by state attorneys suing Alevi associations for their alleged engagement in some sort of “religious separatism” since violating the secularist and nationalist principles of the country (see Dressler 2008; 2011a; 2011b).

If we look at general ideas about what *Alevi* as adjective or name and the abstract *Alevilik* (“Alevism”) stand for in contemporary Turkish discourses, we find a wide variety of attributions, mostly of a cultural and

¹ Consequently, the Alevi issue has also provoked scholarly interest, mainly from social scientists and anthropologists. For competent studies documenting and analyzing different aspects of the recent developments related to the Alevi revival see Kehl-Bodrogi (1993), Vorhoff (1995), Dressler (2002), White and Jongerden (2003), Massicard (2005), and Sökefeld (2008).

religious nature. For most insiders and outsiders, it is today taken for granted that Alevism is part of the Islamic tradition, although located on its margins—margins that are marked with indigenous terms such as Sufi and Shia, or with outside qualifiers such as heterodoxy and syncretism. It is further widely taken for granted that Alevism constitutes an intrinsic part of Anatolian and Turkish culture. Indeed, it is widely believed that Alevi traditions carry an ancient Turkish heritage reaching back beyond Anatolia into the depths of Central Asian Turkish pasts.

The “Alevi Opening”

The question of where to locate the ethnic and religious origins of Alevism continues to be highly contested and comes to the forefront whenever the status of the Alevi community in Turkey is discussed. This has to do with the particular regime of secularism, or laicism (*laiklik*), hegemonic in Turkey, which in practice establishes a state-controlled secular Sunni Islam as quasi-official religion of the country.² The following discussion of the “Alevi Opening” aims to clarify this point.

The current Turkish government, formed by the conservative Justice and Development Party (hereafter JDP), which has its roots in the political Islamic movement, has recently made the so far most significant attempts to move toward recognition of the Alevis by the state. In 2007, the JDP announced a new engagement with the “Alevi question,” which was quickly labeled the “Alevi Opening.” At the center of this initiative were a series of workshops conducted in 2009 and 2010, in which state officials and members of various Alevi organizations, as well as selected academics, journalists, and civil society representatives participated. The workshops discussed possibilities of how to accommodate major Alevi demands, such as state support for Alevi institutions comparable to the support Sunni Islamic institutions receive, or alternatively, as demanded by some Alevi organizations, the state’s complete retraction from the organization of religious affairs now vested in the powerful state bureaucracy of the Directorate for Religious Affairs (hereafter DRA); the abolishment of the mandatory school classes on “Religious Culture and Ethics” or, alternatively, adequate and positive representation of Alevism therein; the recognition of the *cemevis* (“Houses of Communion”), where the Alevis

2 I have discussed the work of Turkish secularism as it manifests itself in face of the Alevi question from various angles elsewhere. See Dressler (2008; 2010a; 2011a; 2011b).

celebrate their communal rituals, as “houses of worship,” a status that is granted to mosques, churches, and synagogues (i.e., to the houses of worship of those religions that are recognized in traditional Islamic discourse as *din* and had already been privileged within the Ottoman state tradition); some form of state recognition and material support for the Alevi ritual leaders, the *dedes*; and finally, conversion of the Madımak Hotel in Sivas, where 37 people of mostly Alevi background died after an agitated mob shouting Islamic slogans had set fire to it during an Alevi festival in 1993,³ into a museum commemorating the horrific event.

The sociologist of religion Necdet Subaşı, who had been appointed by the government as organizer of the workshops, wrote a final report on the initiative, in which he outlines the “Alevi question” in its various historical and sociological dimensions and offers suggestions for its solution. The report’s concluding recommendations are noteworthy since they give voice to a series of Alevi demands that had so far not received much attention by the state. Therein Subaşı urges the state to end regulations and laws that might lead to discrimination against Alevis; to terminate homogenization politics that were established as part of the nation-building process; to have Alevis themselves define what Alevism would stand for, especially with regard to the creed; to provide the Alevis with an opportunity to benefit equally from the DRA (while asserting, however, the DRA’s hegemonic position in defining “high Islamic discourse”); to secure a legal status for the *cemevis*, and to confiscate the Madımak Hotel and find a way to remember the Sivas incident in a way that unites rather than divides (Subaşı 2010, 189–194). These are recommendations that many Alevis could be expected to support.

It can be said that the Alevi Opening has contributed to a few concessions made by state institutions on different administrative levels in response to Alevi demands: the Ministry of National Education prepared new textbooks for the mandatory school courses in Religious Culture and Ethics, amended to include more detailed information on the Alevi faith; some municipalities recognized *cemevis* as “houses of worship;” and finally, the state nationalized the Madımak Hotel in Sivas, even if its final destiny is still unclear (European Commission 2011, 29).

³ This terrible incident, in its details still not entirely elucidated, contributed in major ways to the reinvigoration of an Alevi identity in the 1990s, paralleling the formation of the Islamic political movement, which the Alevis see as a threat.

While these concessions to Alevi demands are important, from the Alevi perspective they appear as less than satisfactory, falling far short of the general recognition to which Alevis aspire and showing no intention to restructure the current system of state organization and control of religion embodied in the DRA. This system, they argue, amounts in practice to the establishment of Sunni Islam as the state religion and to that extent disadvantages and discriminates against the Alevis in comparison to the Sunni majority population.

It is certainly true that no other government has ever given as much overt attention to the problem of Alevi difference as the JDP. In fact, as has been remarked by the journalist Oral Çalışlar, himself a participant in the workshops, the very fact of these workshops being organized by the government constituted the foremost act of recognition Alevism has ever received by Turkish state institutions. However, he also noted that the dialogue between the state and the Alevis had been severely hampered by the fact that the government and state representatives were not willing to bracket out their Sunni norms of Islam when approaching the Alevi question.⁴

Çalışlar's observation is right on target. The JDP's general approach to the Alevi question clearly displays a Sunni Islamic bias and is thus in continuation with an approach to the Alevi question typical for the Turkish state since the beginning of the republic. In addition, the JDP government has, despite a more liberal rhetoric when it comes to religious rights, displayed the same patronizing approach to Alevism—in fact to religion in general—as earlier governments and does not question the DRA's prerogative to legitimately define and represent Islam in public. The very top-down character of the Alevi workshops, the fact that the Alevis themselves had no participation in the final report, and the report itself testify to an attitude that one could, in positive terms, describe as one of patriarchal benevolence. It has to be acknowledged that the report reflects a will to understand and represent Alevi sensibilities, and aspires to present the Alevi movement itself, as well as the "Alevi question," in an impartial manner. However, the text ultimately remains within the patronizing tradition of Turkish discourses on secularism and nationalism. For example, the report refers approvingly to hegemonic academic wisdom according to which Alevism is best to be understood as "a heterodox current" within Islam, distinguished by its "syncretistic" character (Subaşı 2010, 43).

4 Oral Çalışlar, "Alevi Önraporu'ndaki Sorunlar," *Radikal*, February 12, 2010.

Emblematic of the public debate of the “Alevi question” in Turkey at large, the report thus continues a line of argument that takes for granted that the particularity of Alevism, namely its “heterodoxy”, needs to be understood and explained in relation to the Sunni Islamic mainstream—the later thus being normalized as “orthodox.”

Political analysts have variously pointed out that the Alevi workshops should be seen as a reflection and symbol of a growing democratic maturity of Turkey embodied in JDP governance, which appeared to be dedicated to achieving a breakthrough in the relations between the Alevis and the state (Köse 2010; Soner/Toktaş 2011). Most importantly, the Alevis would for the first time have themselves been directly involved in the discussion of Alevi difference and recognition. In fact, the Alevi Opening had already been preceded by a more tolerant attitude of the state to Alevi claims of difference, reflected for example in the 2003 lifting of a ban that forbade the foundation of associations based on ethnic, racial, and religious differences. This ban had previously often been used to shut down Alevi associations (Soner/Toktaş 2011, 422). The Alevi Opening itself had been initiated in a liberal phase of JDP rule following its reelection triumph of 2007, when Turkey–European Union membership negotiations were still progressing. The democratization process in this period also comprised an even more ambitious “Kurdish opening,” which implied an extension of cultural rights, as well as the promise for a political solution to the violent conflict, which has continued to plague the country since 1984, between the Turkish state and the Kurdish nationalist PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party) guerilla organization. Until recently, many liberal observers argued rightly that, with regard to questions of communal difference, the Turkish public sphere had following the JDP’s advance to power in 2002 displayed a more tolerant attitude toward claims of communal identities (ethnic and religious), such as those articulated by Kurds and Alevis, respectively. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and his JDP have received much praise internationally for their dismantling of the Kemalist establishment, in particular their success in reducing the influence of the previously all-powerful military, which has an infamous history of intervening in politics. Most lately, the Arab Spring has provided Erdoğan with a stage to internationally promote Turkey as model for a new democratic-liberal Middle East—in sync with Muslim values and traditions, but still avowedly secular.⁵

⁵ Political pundits sympathetic to the JDP have been doing their best to popularize this interpretation among Western audiences. For example, see Akyol (2011).

Domestically, however, the political atmosphere in Turkey has changed drastically in most recent years. Advocates of a liberalization of the public sphere feel disillusioned and betrayed by the rather authoritarian politics that the JDP has of late embraced. Critics maintain that the dismantling of the old patriarchal, corrupt political elite, which was ideologically committed to the nationalist and secularist politics of Kemalism⁶ and institutionally engrained in the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy, has been replaced by a new system of overt and hidden networks of power, organized mainly along religious and economic interests, that is equally if not more oppressive and increasingly less willing to tolerate opposition and dissent. The war between the state and the PKK has picked up once more and a real peace seems far away; the Alevis' Opening has—so far at least (December 2012) barely gone beyond the publication of the mentioned report, and accommodation of Alevi demands for equal treatment and recognition as different according to their own terms is not in sight. In 2012, more than thousand oppositional Kurds; over a hundred journalists, publicists and academics; as well as uncounted numbers of members of various leftist groups, rural activists against large state projects (such as hydro-electronic dams), and student activists find themselves arrested on often dubious grounds and not seldom need to wait for more than a year before they get to face their indictments.⁷ In short, the last years have seemingly led to a reversal of the democratization process with prospects unclear.⁸

As the cases of the Alevi and Kurdish “openings” demonstrate, the JDP government is eager to retain the power to dictate the speed, content, and limits of any extension of the public sphere. It has continued the top-down, control-obsessive politics of Kemalist nationalism and secularism. The suzerainty over the definition of communal identities, be they of the ethnic/

6 Kemalism is the name of the Turkish state ideology, characterized by its state-centric corporatism, a homogenizing nationalism, and an authoritarian secularism. As a political program it was established under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, since 1934 known by the honorary name Atatürk (“Father of the Turks”), who is recognized as the founding father of Republican Turkey. For a discussion of Kemalism as corporatist ideology see Parla and Davison (2004).

7 See *Amnesty International*, “Amnesty International Report 2012: Turkey.” <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/turkey/report-2012>.

8 Analysis of the complex national and international factors and motivations which contributed to this development would go beyond the scope of this book. General overviews on political developments in Turkey are provided by the annual reports of the European Commission on Turkey’s progress to fulfill EU-membership criteria (for the last report see http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/tr_rapport_2012_En.pdf).

national or the religious kind, remains in the hands of state institutions. This situation is reflected emblematically in a popular theory of layered identities that defines Turkish and Islamic identities as superior/high identities (*üst-kimlik*) of which Kurdishness and Aleviness, respectively, constituted mere subordinate identities (*altkimlik*). The distinction between superior and subordinate identities is embodied in a language that others the Kurds and the Alevis as “our Kurdish” and “our Alevi brothers and sisters,” respectively. It is part of a discourse that is interested in keeping Alevis and Kurds within the discursive reach of the nation, explicitly defined as Turkish and implicitly as Muslim, while excluding them at the same time from its normative center.

It would be wrong, however, to understand such hierarchical discourses on communal identities as static. There are indications that the nationalist conviction that Kurds and Alevis could be assimilated in similar ways into the Sunni Muslim and Turkish mainstream is fading. The continuing political resistance of the Kurds, or the Turkish state’s failure to assimilate the Kurds, has in recent years led to a new Turkish nationalist discourse that regards the Kurds as outside of the nation, comparable to the non-Muslim minorities (see Yeğen 2007).

When it comes to the Alevis, however, the nationalist discourse has as of yet not shown any comparable inclination to conceive of Alevism as outside the fold of Islam and the Turkish nation—although there certainly are Alevis who clearly prefer non-Islamic systems of reference for their religious traditions, as well as mostly Kurdish Alevis who see the origins of Alevism in Kurdish/Iranian rather than in Turkish traditions. In Turkey, public discussions about Alevism remain for the most part confined to the parameters of a discourse that has historically emerged in conjunction with Turkish nationalism and its secularist, but Muslim, presuppositions. Just why is this the case? Why is there to date hardly any scholarship that takes the claim of Alevism being a “syncretism” seriously in a way that goes beyond branding “non-Islamic” features found in the Alevi traditions as “remnants”? Why is there hardly any serious engagement with Alevi traditions from, for example, the viewpoint of Christianity, or Zoroastrianism, or Manichaeism? Why is it that only Kurdish scholars take seriously an investigation of Alevism from the perspective of Kurdish and Iranian culture? And most importantly, why does it appear to be so difficult for scholars of Alevism and related traditions to move beyond modernist parameters of national and religious origins and essences? The answers to these questions are, I argue, linked to the way nationalist and religious semantics are interwoven in the fundamentals of the modern

knowledge about Alevism. This book aspires to elucidate why it remains so difficult for not only Turkish popular but also international academic discourses to conceive of Alevi difference outside of the discursive frameworks of Turkish nationalism and Islam.

Writing Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Genealogies and Significations

Kızılbaş and Alevi as Historical Terms

The aim of this book is to historicize contemporary hegemonic sets of knowledge about “the Alevis” and “Alevism.” As I will show, the modern knowledge about the Alevis, their demarcation as “heterodox” but Muslim and as an intrinsic part of Turkish culture, is of rather recent origins. This knowledge formed in the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of the Turkish Republic, when new discourses of religious and ethnic difference emerged and the foundations of a Turkish nation-state were created.

Modern Genealogies

Reports by Western observers begin to note since the 1880s the vernacular use of the term “Alevi” (or variations thereof), a term that in the language of Islam indicates a close relationship (by descent or chosen affiliation) with Ali Ibn Abu Talib,¹ as a self-designation among Kızılbaş.² The designation seems to become more widespread during the Young Turk period.³ Earlier texts of Western observers in contact with Kızılbaş groups do not mention the term Alevi. But very occasionally the term Alevi as a self-designation, apparently indicating loyalty and/or descent from Ali, also appears in Kızılbaş and Bektashi poems that can be attributed to earlier centuries.⁴

1. The cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, who was the fourth caliph in the Sunni narrative and the first Imam in the Shiite tradition; according to the latter he was the only legitimate leader of the Islamic community following Muhammad's death.

2. Luschan (1886, 171; 1889, 212); Bent (1891, 269); Kannenberg (*Die Paphlagonischen Felsengräber*, 1895) as referenced in Grothe (1912, 156); Crowfoot (1900, 305); Grenard (1904, 511).

3. White (1908, 228; 1913); Pears (1911, 265); Luschan (1911, 230); Grothe (1912, 156).

4. For examples see Öztelli (1996, 189–190); Gölpınarlı (1953, 12; 1963, 32).

In Ottoman documents, the term Aleviyye (*'alevîye*) was mostly used as part of the expression *Sadat-ı Aleviyye* (also *Sadat-ı Beni Aleviyye*, “the Alevi Seyyids”), that is, as a referential title for people with an Alid pedigree. We further find the term Alevi used in the sense of Shiite, for example in a text by the bureaucrat and historian Mustafa Ali (1541–1600) from 1589 (Fleischer 1986, 104). An early 19th-century Ottoman example is a text by the chronicler Mehmed Esad Efendi dedicated to the forceful abolition of the Janissary Corps in 1826 and its aftermath, in which he refers to the Bektashis, who were closely linked to the Janissaries, as “this gang of Alevis and [Shiite] heretics” (*bu gürûh-ı 'alevî ve revâfız*) (Es'ad Efendi 1848, 216).

Granted that there are probably more historical examples of that kind to be found in pre-19th-century Ottoman texts, the use of the term Alevi as attribute for Kızılbaş and Bektashi groups remains exceptional. Important is what the term signifies. When, in Ottoman times, the term Alevi was attributed from outside to Kızılbaş and Bektashi groups, it usually was used in a manner that was meant to identify them as Shiites—and for many Sunni Muslims that meant heresy. The term Kızılbaş itself connoted in Ottoman times heresy, political disloyalty, and immorality. This pejorative connotation remained by and large in place when the term Alevi began to appear more frequently in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. In a document from 1896, in which the killing of a group of Kurds in a fight with army and gendarmerie members is reported, the victims are referred to as belonging to the “mischievous Alevi community” (*alevi cemiyet-i fesadiyesi*).⁵ An attachment to the first military report by Zeki Paşa and Şakir Paşa from 1896 on how to bring reform to the eastern Anatolian district of Dersim described the local Kurdish Kızılbaş population as originally of the Shiite faith before having turned to the path of the Ali-Ilahis⁶; it further described them as having entered a “superstitious sect” (*batıl mezhep*) that is caught in innocence (*cehalet*) and would regard it as a religious duty to bring harm to the Muslims (possibly

5. BOA, A.MKT.MHM. 658/3, 18/B/1313 (BOA = Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi/ Office of The Prime Minister Ottoman Archives). Accessed through <http://www.devletarsivleri.gov.tr/katalog/>. The same document further characterizes said Kurds as “a gullible people inclined to Kızılbashism” (as quoted in Akpınar 2012)—an expression that is also used to point to their political unreliability. I am grateful to Alişan Akpınar for sharing his unpublished paper with me.

6. Ali-Ilahi is a nickname given by others in their environment to groups believing in Ali's divine nature, such as the Nusayris, Kızılbaş-Alevis, and Ahl-i Haqq (Bruinessen 2000, 20).

suggesting that the members of this sect are not Muslims themselves) (Akpınar et al. 2010, 329). In fact Ottoman documents from this period frequently question whether the Kızılbaş-Alevi are Muslims at all. In a document from 1891 it is stated that even Kızılbaş-Alevi who claimed to be Muslims would despise the people of the Sunna.⁷ Another document from the same period explains that “with their superstitious dogmas they have totally separated themselves from the Islamic religion and with the exception of their names there has been nothing left that could prove that they belong to Islam.”⁸

In the later period of the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II, when the Ottoman state began to turn more explicitly toward a rhetoric of Islamic unity and endeavored to assimilate groups at the margins of Islamic discourse, we also encounter the first instances of more neutral references to the “Alevi.” An example is an Ottoman document from 1893, wherein officials are ordered to prevent Muslim children of the Alevi branch of faith (*Alevi mezhebi*) to visit local Catholic schools in Malatya.⁹ Probably in response to the Dersim report referred to above, which also mentioned the negative impact of Protestant missionaries on the local population, in a telegraph from 1899 the government ordered the governor of the province of Mamüretülaziz (Elazığ), to which Dersim belonged, to do research and assess responses with regard to the reported inclination of some local Alevi (*Aleviler*)—here not further qualified—to Protestantism (Açıkses 2003, 136–137). Also from this period we have first examples of the abstract term *Alevilik* (Alevism) being applied to Kızılbaş groups (see Karaca 1993, 128).

It is important to emphasize that in the late Ottoman period there was as of yet no necessary connection between the terms Alevi and Kızılbaş established. In the first Turkish-Turkish dictionary, the *Kāmūs-i Türkî* (1901) there is no cross-referencing between the terms Alevi and Kızılbaş. The term Alevi (*‘alewî*) is here attributed the meanings (1) descendent of Ali and Fatima and (2) followers of Ali; the term Kızılbaş (*qizilbaş*) is given the meanings (a) “a class of soldiers of Shah

7. BOA, Y.MTV. 53/108, 27/M/1309 as paraphrased by Akpınar (2012).

8. BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 29/77, 16/L/1311 as quoted by Akpınar (2012).

9. BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 28/70, 29/R/1311. Accessed through <http://www.devletarsivleri.gov.tr/katalog/>.

Ismail" and (b) "a group of the Shiite gulat"¹⁰ (Şemseddin Sâmi 1901, 949 and 1127).¹¹ In the 1920s Turkish nationalist authors began to use the term Alevi for the Bektashis as well as groups that used to be labeled Kızılbaş (an early example is Atalay 1924). Very gradually in the first decades of the 20th century, the term also became more prominent in Western Orientalist discourse and began to be mentioned in encyclopedic entries as the self-designation of the Kızılbaş (Cumont 1915, 744; Huart 1927, 1053). Hasluck juxtaposes the term Kızılbaş as a "contemptuous term used to denote the adherents of all sects of the *Shia* religion, including, e.g., the Nosairi and Yezidi, irrespective of race or language" with "the corresponding inoffensive term, by which the Anatolian Kyzylbash designate themselves, [that] is 'Allevi' ('worshippers of Ali')" (Hasluck 1921, 328).

In the following decades the terms Alevi and Kızılbaş would be used interchangeably, with sensitivity about the pejorative character of the latter term gradually increasing both in the general Turkish public and in international scholarship. It took, however, until the second half of the 20th century that in both discourses the term Alevi replaced the term Kızılbaş.

The new signification that accompanied the gradual name change was substantial. While the connotations of the term *Kızılbaş* had been entirely negative, the new term *Alevilik* carried new, more positive meanings. Although the Kızılbaş were in 19th-century Ottoman censuses counted as Muslims,¹² their relation to Islam was seen as rather equivocal. Renamed Alevi, the nationalist discourse integrated the groups under question not only into Turkish nationhood, but decisively affirmed their Islamic character, even if this Islam was declared to be "heterodox." In this way it provided a rhetoric that allowed for the integration of the former Kızılbaş and now Alevi groups into a nation that was conceived of as explicitly Turkish and implicitly (Sunni-)Muslim. Thus I argue that the primary motivation for the reconceptualization of the Kızılbaş as Alevis was political. While it

10. Gulat ("exaggerators"; Arab. *ghulāt*) is an apologetic term that had been established within early Shiism to delegitimize certain practices, such as the exaltation of Ali as divine, the belief in *ḥulūl* (incarnation of God in human form), and the doctrine of *tanāsukh* (metempsychosis) (see Halm 1982; Hodgson 1955). All of these doctrines we find among Bektashi and Kızılbaş-Alevi groups.

11. The editor of this work, Şemseddin Sâmi, who wrote and compiled various important dictionaries and encyclopedias, was himself an Albanian Bektashi (thanks to Cemal Kafadar for pointing this out to me).

12. See the census records put together by Karpāt (1985); cf. Shaw (1978).

can certainly be argued that the renaming of Kızılbaş groups and Bektashis as Alevis already began in the second half of the 19th century and that this renaming was facilitated by the fact that various Kızılbaş groups themselves had begun to use the term in the late Ottoman period, their re-signification as Turkish and Muslim “heterodox” only began in the context of Turkish nationalism since the last decade of the Ottoman Empire. The new thesis, as I will argue, worked well for the nationalists. It (1) provided evidence for the continuity of Turkish national culture by arguing that Alevism would contain remnants of ancient Turkish culture and (2) strengthened the national body by integrating the Kızılbaş as Alevis into the new nationalist construct of Turkish-Muslim unity. The new term gained currency in the critical phase of Kemalist nation-building in the 1920s and 1930s and legitimized the social integration of the “Kızılbaş-Alevis”—a term that I use for those contexts in which both attributes were used parallel to each other and the distinction between meanings associated with the respective designations was not yet clearly established. In short, the reconceptualization of the Kızılbaş as Alevis aimed at reducing—though, crucially, not totally eliminating—their socioreligious and political otherness in order to assimilate them into the nation-in-formation.

Premodern Significations

While the focus of this study is on developments in the late Ottoman and early Turkish Republican periods, it will at the outset be helpful to outline the premodern history of the terms Alevi and Kızılbaş. Within the Muslim world, the name Alevi (Ar. *‘alawī*) carries several, sometimes-overlapping meanings. First, it can signify descent from Imam Ali; second, it is a general epithet for “followers” of Ali¹³—this meaning can be restricted to formal Shiites only, or be broadened to include all those Muslims who pay special reference to Ali and the “people of the house” (*ahl al-bayt*);¹⁴ third, the term is used pejoratively to denounce heresy/heretics with Shiite tendencies. In the late Ottoman context, it also appears as name

13. For both meanings the anglicized term “Alid” is variously used in the scholarly literature.

14. *Ahl al-bayt* (Turk. *ehl-i beyt*), refers to the family of the Prophet, that is Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband Ali, and the latter two’s sons Hasan and Husayn. In a wider sense the term also includes the descendents of Husayn, believed by Shiites to be the legitimate leaders of the Islamic community and bestowed with special qualities.

for specific socioreligious groups, such as the Bektashi Sufi order, as well as endogamous communities, such as the Arab Nusayri, and the Turkish and Kurdish Kızılbaş.

The term Kızılbaş (lit., “Redhead”)¹⁵ historically referred to the mostly Turkmen adherents of the Safavi Sufi order, whose charismatic leader Ismail established the Safavid Empire in 1501 and is regarded as the founder of the Safavid dynasty of Iran (1501–1722).¹⁶ The communities in Turkey that are today called Alevi, roughly two-thirds of which are Turkish and the rest are Kurds (Kurmanci and Zazaki speakers), are for the most part descendents of Kızılbaş communities. The latter, associated with the Safavi Sufi order, had rebelled against Ottoman rule in the early 16th century and were ever since regarded by the Ottomans as politically unreliable. The mistrust was furthered by the Kızılbaşes’ religious deviance from what the Ottomans, who turned more deliberately to Sunni Islam in the course of their competition with the Safavids in the 16th century, understood to be correct religion (Dressler 2005). A major reason why the Ottoman reaction to religious deviance from the mainstream legalist understanding was in this period much more rigid in rhetoric and political practice than what it used to be in the previous two centuries (as well as what it would look like in the following two centuries) is the fact that the Kızılbaş challenge coincided with growing Ottoman centralization efforts since the late 15th century. The political uprising of the Kızılbaş also needs to be seen as a reaction to this centralization politics, which it challenged directly. In this context, religion became a tool for both explaining the Kızılbaşes’ political deviance as well as justifying their punishment (Winter 2010, 12–17).

After gradual disconnection from the Safavids since the late 16th century, some Kızılbaş tribes over time associated rather closely with the Bektashi tradition. This rapprochement was facilitated by the fact that the sociohistorical genealogies of the two milieus were characterized by certain similarities and overlap. This does not mean, however, that the Bektashi tradition in its various forms and the Kızılbaş groups totally amalgamated. Rather, the Kızılbaş began to associate with the one Bektashi branch that based its authority on lineage (namely descent from the patron saint of the Bektashi order, Hacı Bektaş Veli, d.1270/71). Doing so they integrated

15. Reference to the red headgear that the supporters of the Safavi order are said to have worn since the late 15th century.

16. On the Safavi-Kızılbaş connection, see Sohrweide (1965) and Babayan (2002).

the Bektashi lineage into the Kızılbaş network of *ocak* (lit., “hearth”) lineages, which are sacred lineages of actual descent (as a rule traced back to Muhammad and mostly also to Anatolian dervish saints in the Babai¹⁷ tradition), on which the authority of the *ocak* members and their representatives, the *dedes* (lit. “elder”) depends.¹⁸

In Ottoman language conventions, the term Kızılbaş became a stigmatizing name for all those groups that were believed to be descendents of the Kızılbaş by blood or in spirit. Associated with the term was religious deviance/heresy and political subversiveness. The *mühimme defterleri* (records of the Ottoman Imperial Assembly) offer numerous accounts of complaints against Kızılbaşes such as rejection of sharia law, cursing of the first three caliphs, and immoral behavior (see Ahmet Refik 1932; Imber 1979; also Ocak 1998). Originally a historical term, Kızılbaş became a term by which to denounce as deviant those groups that differed from what was constituted as properly Islamic. The term was therefore not, usually, a self-designation, but a pejorative signification from outside. The ambivalence regarding the relationship of the Kızılbaş to Islam reflected in Ottoman documents is nowhere so evident as in the blame of heresy. The charges brought forward against the Kızılbaş—which until today constitute an important part of the body of knowledge many Sunni Muslims share about them—mark them at the same time as insiders and outsiders: outsiders as transgressors of Islamic law, and insiders due to the fact that they are still charged with committing offenses against Islamic law and conventions.

The Ottomans had no other term available to designate the range of groups comprising those post-Kızılbaş communities organized around *ocak* lineages that were more or less identical with those groups who would later be labeled Alevi. The term Kızılbaş was, however, not exclusively applied to individuals and groups associated with *ocak* networks, but also at times used to defame groups and individuals who belonged, in a broader or narrower sense, to the Shiite tradition. In the early 20th century, when Turkish nationalists developed an interest in assimilating and integrating the *ocak*-centered groups into the new national body, the traditional term Kızılbaş proved, given its negative connotations, counterproductive.

17. Name for a group of Turkmen dervishes and their supporters who had launched an uprising against the Rum-Seljuk Empire in 1240; see Ocak (1989).

18. For a competent overview of the intricate historical relationship between the Bektashis and the Kızılbaşes see Yıldırım (2010); see also Karakaya-Stump (2008).

In this context, the term Alevi, as shown above, already since at least the mid-19th century used by various Kızılbaş groups as self-designation, appeared a viable alternative. With its various meanings all establishing links to the Imam Ali and his legacy, it did not carry the same negative ballast, but to the contrary firmly located those referred to in this way within an Islamic context.¹⁹

Objectives

The major aim of this book is to analyze, contextualize, and explain the history of the modern knowledge about the Alevis. When, why, and how did the terms *Alevi* and *Alevilik* acquire the particular sets of meaning that they carry today? Which politics were involved in the renaming and re-signification of the Kızılbaş as Alevi? Starting from these questions, themselves the result of about fifteen years of research on different aspects of Turkish history, culture, religion, and politics, as well as more particularly on academic and popular discourses on Alevism, this book attempts a critical analysis of the making of the modern concept of Alevism.

A major thrust of this book is therefore genealogical, geared toward a contextualized historical analysis of the politics of nation-building in which the writing of modern Alevism was situated. Although a contextualization of Alevism exclusively within Turkish-Islamic culture lacks evidence on historical, cultural, and even linguistic grounds, such contextualization has been paradigmatically established in Turkish discourses (Alevi discourses included). Even most of contemporary scholarship on Alevism still follows a historically rather naïve *longue durée* outline of the Alevi tradition remaining largely within Turkish-Islamic parameters. It assumes a continuity that genealogically and teleologically connects the medieval Babai, Bedreddin, and early modern Kızılbaş and Bektashi movements with the modern Alevis. While I do not deny the existence of historical and sociological connections between these groups, I would caution against making this continuity assumption the dominant or even exclusive framework for the historicization and characterization of Alevism.

The sense of homogeneity that is suggested when the term Alevi is being projected backward in history to a wide variety of different

19. A similar case of renaming was experienced by the Nusayris. As with the Anatolian Kızılbaş communities, we find that they began to refer to themselves and began to be referred to by the Ottomans as '*Alawī*' since the end of the 19th century (Alkan 2012, 49). For a discussion of what the new name signified see Firro (2005).

contexts and groups needs to be countered with historical contextualizations that provide sufficient space for the specificities of these movements/groups in their various environments. Even today, when the term Alevi is widely accepted by those groups that were referred to by the Ottomans as *Kızılbaş* and that were historically organized around the networks of sacred *ocak* lineages, the extent to which it is meaningful to subsume, for example, the Turkmen Tahtacı of the western and southern Mediterranean regions, the Aliani of Bulgaria, the Shabak of Northern Iraq, and the Kurdish- and Zazaki-speaking Alevis of eastern Anatolia under one unifying concept could be questioned. To be clear, my aim is not to interrogate vernacular “Alevi” identities and sensitivities with regard to the evidence of the term Alevi as an emblem of historical continuity and communal identity. However, I would hold that homogenizing perspectives obstruct our understanding of how the concept of Alevism has been formulated in the early 20th century within the Turkish nationalist project. The latter played a major role in the normalization of the new name and its significations. In this context, I will also argue for epistemological sensitivity with regard to the work of our concepts and the implicit and explicit knowledges that they are based on.

A comprehensive critical genealogy of Alevism, that is, an analysis of the history of the concept of Alevism within the modernist discourses of religion and Turkish nationalism, remains a desideratum. Such an analysis, as attempted in this book, can be a first step for an emancipation of the scholarly study of Alevism from the shortcomings of nation-centric historiography and the biases of Turkish secularist discourse, both of which crucially influenced Alevi religiography. The term religiography refers—by analogy to the terms historiography and ethnography—to the practice of writing religion, that is, the production of data on religion. The religiography most influential in the formation of the modern concept of Alevism can be characterized as modernist-secular. By that I mean an understanding of religion as a distinct domain of human existence that can be separated from other spheres of life and is universal and ready to be examined in a comparative way by means of analysis of the phenomena and structures of religious practices and beliefs. The application of such a modernist religiographic framework to *Kızılbaş-Alevism* had enormous implications on the academic and popular discourses established on it since the early 20th century, and also impacted on indigenous knowledge formations of Alevism.

The nationalist authors involved in the historiographic, ethnographic, and religiographic practices of re-writing and thus re-signifying Kızılbaş-Alevism were working with the modern concepts of religion and Islam that were available to them in their time. As I will show, their concept of religion was rather essentialist and functionalist, strongly influenced by French positivism and sociology. Parallel to this, they subscribed to an understanding of Islam that accepted legalist Sunnism as its self-evident historical and theological core. Within this framework the place attributed to Alevism was that of the “heterodox” and “syncretistic” other in relation to a proposed Sunni “orthodoxy.” While this conceptualization is not surprising within the context of early 20th-century discourses on religion and Islam, what is surprising is that this kind of reading of Alevism is still hardly questioned. Based on the scholarly discussion of Alevism, I aim to offer a comprehensive critique of conceptualizations of inner-Islamic difference undertaken from the viewpoint of implicit normative assumptions about religious and ethno-national essences. This critique is theoretically anchored in recent scholarship on religion from postcolonial and post-secular studies, especially the work of anthropologist Talal Asad and those continuing his critique of the secularist and liberal paradigms of modernity and their normative impact on modern concepts and subjectivities.

The nationalist renaming and re-signification of the Kızılbaş as Alevi in the 1920s can not be understood without taking into account an earlier phase of writing about the Kızılbaş-Alevi. Since the mid-19th century, mainly American missionaries, but also other foreign travelers in the Anatolian and eastern provinces had come into contact with Kızılbaş groups and were attracted by what appeared to them as strange practices and beliefs. They pursued various interests (missionary, scholarly, political, adventurous) and developed a number of interpretive models for explaining the difference of the Kızılbaş as compared to the Sunni Muslim population. Framed in discourses of origins and boundaries typical for 19th-century Euro-American modernity, they tended to see in the Kızılbaş remnants of older layers of Christianity and pre-Muslim Anatolian cultures, and engaged in racial speculations about possible Kızılbaş descent from Christian and ancient Anatolian people.

I am particularly interested in the relationship between this first occidental “discovery” of the Kızılbaş as crypto-Christians and remnants of ancient Anatolian people, and the later Turkish nationalist conceptualization of the Kızılbaş-Alevi. Turkish nationalist writers who wrote about the Kızılbaş-Alevi in the 1920s and 1930s sometimes made explicit

references to the earlier Orientalist writings about these groups and vehemently rejected the connections these Christian authors drew between Kızılbaş-Alevi and Anatolian Christians (mainly Armenians), and/or to ancient Anatolian populations. I argue that the Turkish nationalist reading and writing about Alevism also has to be understood as an antithesis to these earlier Western interpretations.

Both the initial Western/Orientalist discovery of the Kızılbaş-Alevi and their re-signification by Turkish nationalists are cornerstones of the modern genealogy of the Alevism of Turkey. Clarification of the genealogy of the concept of Alevism will also enable us to situate its more recent transformations since the second half of the 20th century in a broader historical framework. The diverse connotations that have been attributed to Alevi/Alevism during the last century (e.g., Alevi as preservers of pre-Islamic Turkish traditions and culture, Alevism as pre-Marxist class-fight ideology, as Turkish philosophy, as secular Turkish Islam, or as post-Zoroastrian Kurdish religion) are part and parcel of the complicated dynamics of Turkish identity politics in which religious, ethnic, nationalist, and class-based concerns relate and clash. In the context of these politics, Alevi have not only been object of signification but also themselves been engaged in the signification of others. In this context I consider the victimization of the Alevi, to which both Alevi themselves and non-Alevi sympathizers (mostly secularist and leftist Turks and Kurds as well as foreign observers) contribute, as an epistemological hindrance for the clarification of the Alevi genealogy. Such victimization often tends to reduce Alevi history to a history of suffering inflicted upon the righteous by oppressive others, bears the danger of leading to the perception of the Alevi as only passive subjects of history without any real agency, and is ultimately a hindrance to a historicization of the relations between Alevi and their environment. In short, Alevi history needs to be demythologized (cf. Bozarslan 2003).

Conceptual and Theoretical Contestations

To a limited extent the introduction of the terms *Alevi* and *Alevilik* into the public discourse of Turkey helped to suppress the pejorative connotations of the term Kızılbaş. However, as I will argue, the new meanings that would be associated with “Alevi” also carried new ambivalences. When the Kızılbaş of Turkey began to be known as Alevi, the new name signified a very particular, mainly Anatolian-shaped formation, sociologically

much more specific than the general meanings the term *‘Alawī* carries in the Muslim world. This is a point of sometimes more and sometimes less innocent confusion. Such confusion is not surprising when outsiders familiar with the Muslim epithet *‘Alawī* assume that the Alevis from Turkey are merely another branch of Shiite Islam. When, however, somebody aware of the particularities of Alevi difference tries to explain Turkish Alevism from within the traditional, broader meaning of Alevi as “Shiite” alone then this is often done with the intention to draw the Alevis closer to the Islamic mainstream.

A perspective that takes seriously the work of concepts further needs to pay attention to the methodological problem entailed in the back-reading of “Alevi” history into times in which the modern concept of Alevism did not yet exist. It is rather common both in popular and in academic discourses about Alevism to apply the term “Alevi” not only to the late Ottoman context, in which we find both the first examples of its use by various Kızılbaş groups as a self-designation and the beginning of a discourse about Kızılbaş groups as Alevi, but also to earlier Ottoman and even pre-Ottoman contexts. In these later contexts, however, neither did the term have the modern meanings associated with it, nor were the Kızılbaşes—or any other group usually seen as being in genealogical connection with them—called “Alevi”.

Another major problem is with the Turkist bias in Alevi historiography. Scholarship in the 20th century has tended to present the Bektashis, Alevis, and groups seen as being related to them within a framework of Turkish culture and tribal networks. Recent research, however, has questioned this story. Historical work on the Kızılbaş shows their multilingual and multicultural character, emphasizing especially—in Turkist perspectives usually neglected—their Persianate roots (Babayan 2002). Challenging traditional wisdom, Ayfer Karakaya-Stump has argued that “the building blocks of the Anatolian Kızılbaş milieu were not individual tribes as such, but rather various Sufi circles and itinerant dervish groups who joined together under the spiritual and political leadership of the Safavid shahs” (Karakaya-Stump 2008, 180). As she has shown, many of the Kızılbaş *ocak* lineage holders or *dedes* of Anatolia received their formal religious authorization letters from the Wafā’iyya (Turk. Vefaiye) order (13th–16th century), which blended in the course of the 16th century with the Kızılbaş and submerged between the 16th and 17th centuries into the Bektashi order (Karakaya-Stump 2008, 37). The importance of the Vefaiye order in the early Anatolian history of the *ocak*-based charismatic

communities contradicts the assertion that the latter's history and their religious culture were primarily shaped by Central Asian (Turkish) heritages (Karakaya-Stump 2008, 208–210; see also Ocak 2005). The success of that assertion is very closely connected to the scholarship of Fuad Köprülü, which will play a central role in this book, and to which I will turn below.

Another problem with the *longue durée* perspective on “Alevi” Islam is that it is often not clear what kind of religiosity the attribute Alevi is supposed to refer to. It has to be considered that in the medieval Islam of Anatolia and adjacent areas the boundaries between Shiite and Sunni Islam were not yet that clearly defined and Alid sentiment, or, to use a term coined by Hodgson, “Alid loyalism” was widely spread beyond the boundaries of explicitly Shiite circles, especially in Sufism (Hodgson 1977; see also Cahen 1970; Nasr 1970; Mélikoff 1998, 47–50). The question as to whether the Babai movement, the first Anatolian formation associated with the modern narrative of the *longue durée* of Alevism, can already be called Shiite has been disputed. Kafadar was probably the first to allude to the politics and teleological assumptions behind modern projections of clear Shiite or Sunni faiths to medieval Anatolian contexts (Kafadar 1995, 75–76).

Karakaya-Stump has shown that until the 16th century Vefai *icazet-names*²⁰ pay reverence to both “Sunni” and “Shiite” figures. Only in the course of the 16th century did this change and references to, for example, the Sunni caliphs were replaced by the names of Shiite Imams. This transformation corresponded with the coalescence of the Vefai order and Kızılbaş groups (Karakaya-Stump 2008, 80–82). The same period witnessed more conscious efforts by both Ottomans and Safavids to present their respective faiths as the only valid ones. In the context of the political rivalry between the two empires, the boundaries between Sunni and Shiite Islam were defined much more exclusively than used to be the case in previous centuries. In fact, the Safevi order itself began only in the second half of the 15th century to provide Ali with a central role in its religious culture (Babayan 2002, 139–140); the Bektashis—a Sufi order the historical roots as well as the religious practices and doctrines of which overlap to a certain extent with those of the Kızılbaş groups, with some of which they developed close institutional affiliations between the 16th and 17th centuries—did this only in the course of the 16th century in a

20. Religious letters of authorization in Sufi Islam.

comprehensive manner (Yıldırım 2010, 34). Among the various tribes and dervish groups that eventually merged into the Bektashi order or aligned with the Kızılbaş there were of course groups with deep Alid affinities, ranging from emotional affinity with the closer family of the prophet (the *ahl al-bayt*) to more explicit and central veneration of Ali (see Karamustafa 1994). This does not, however, make self-evident the assumption that Alidism could be regarded as the major principle that connected all of those groups that are today integrated into the *longue durée* of Alevism. While the matter of the extent of the Babais' Shiism is, as mentioned above, contested, it appears even more difficult to qualify the Bedreddin movement—which shows social and structural continuities with both the earlier Babai movement and later Kızılbaş groups—as Alid in any substantial way.²¹

All these messy conceptual issues considered, I caution restraint with regard to the application of the term Alevi as a common denominator for the various historically connected groups from the Babais to the Bektashes, Bedreddin followers, Kızılbaşes, and modern Alevis. To argue that the moments of social and religious continuity that connect these groups are adequately expressed by the label Alevi is problematic since what this common Aleviness is supposed to denote remains highly elusive. And even if this commonality would be clearly defined,²² there still remains the fact that the *longue durée* from the Babais to the modern Alevis contains questionable teleological assumptions. The problem with such teleological operations, embodied in the back-reading of the modern category Alevi into premodern times, is not circumvented when we, as I admittedly have done myself, label said groups at their premodern historical stages “proto-Alevi.” This is roughly the same as if one, while writing a history of Christianity, were to label B.C. Jews “(proto)-Christians”—a description that can hardly be accepted from a historical point of view.

The problem is not one of naming itself, but more precisely one of signification. In the emerging field of Alevi studies the practice of projecting modern notions of Alevism back into the past is still extremely widespread. The field is still caught in implicit presumptions of religious and cultural

21. The revolutionary Bedreddin movement of the early 15th century was named after Sheikh Bedreddin from Simawna (1358/9–1416), who was an Ottoman military judge in the Balkans before he became the leader of a millenarian movement that challenged Ottoman authority. Between the Bedreddin movement and the milieus of the Bektashi order and the Anatolian Kızılbaş exist clear sociohistorical continuities (Balivet 1995).

22. For typical attempts see Mélikoff (1998), Ocak (2000b), Dressler (2002).