

Secularism in Turkey: Myths and Realities

AHMET T. KURU*

ABSTRACT

The Prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals opened a closure case against the ruling AK Party by presenting it as the center of anti-secular reactionism in Turkey. The indictment largely reflected four myths embraced by the Turkish establishment: 1) Secularism is a way of life and a constitutional principle; 2) Secularism does not allow religion's impact on social life; 3) Islam, unlike Christianity, is incompatible with secularism; therefore, secularism in Turkey should be restrictive; and 4) Turkey cannot be compared with the US, which is not a secular state, but is similar to France, which is secular. The Turkish Constitutional Court has justified restrictive policies on the basis of these myths. The court should no longer be bounded by its misleading past opinions. It can play an historical leading role with its future decisions by providing new, myth-free perspectives on secularism in Turkey.

In March 2008, the Chief Public Prosecutor of Turkey's High Court of Appeals opened a closure case against the ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party, which had received 47% of the votes eight months before in elections competing with 14 other parties. The prosecutor asked the Constitutional Court not only to close the party, but also to enact a five year prohibition from politics for its 71 leading politicians, including Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, in addition to President Abdullah Gül. The indictment depicts the AK Party as the center of anti-secular reactionism in Turkey. Elsewhere, I already rejected this claim by revealing that the AK Party defends secularism while opposing its particular Kemalist version, which aims to remove religion from the public sphere.¹ In this essay, I will focus on four misperceptions about secularism which have been largely embraced by the Turkish establishment, which are reflected in several of

* *Postdoctoral Research Scholar and Assistant Director of the Center for the Study of Democracy, Toleration, and Religion, SIPA, Columbia University, ahmettkuru@gmail.com*

the Constitutional Court's decisions, and which have most recently been repeated, explicitly or implicitly, by the prosecutor in his indictment against the AK Party. Only after deconstructing these four myths can one evaluate the AK Party's position towards secularism.

Myth 1: Secularism is a worldview and a constitutional principle

On September 20, 2004, Necdet Sezer, then President of Turkey, stood before the Diyanet's Third Symposium on religious affairs and proclaimed, "Secularism is a way of life, which should be adopted by an individual. A 'secular individual' should confine religion to the sacred place of his conscience and disallow his belief to affect this world."² Conversely, rightist politicians, from Turgut Özal to Erdoğan, have depicted secularism as a characteristic of the state, not of individuals, and have recognized that religion has implications beyond an individual's conscience.³

The mistake of rightist politicians is their denial of the possible existence of a secular individual who embraces secularism as a worldview. There are secular individuals in Turkey and elsewhere who choose a secular lifestyle by rejecting religion or confining it to their consciences. On the other hand, the mistake of Sezer and his followers is to confuse secularism as a worldview and secularism as a constitutional principle. Secularism in the Turkish Constitution, as in the constitutions of other secular states, implies a political principle that delineates the relationship between the state and religions, especially regarding two criteria: 1) Parliament and courts in secular states are not subject to institutional religious control, and 2) secular states constitutionally declare neutrality toward religions. Secularism as a worldview is not a constitutional principle of the Turkish Republic. It is only one of several alternative lifestyles. A neutral secular state cannot impose a secular worldview on its citizens.

In this regard, some individuals may define themselves as "secular" in terms of rejecting or ignoring religion in their lives. The state should be neutral toward these citizens as it should be toward citizens who take religion seriously in their

The AK Party defends secularism while opposing its particular Kemalist version, which aims to remove religion from the public sphere

lives. In some countries, such as Belgium, secularism is considered "not as the basis of the state, but as one of the ideological components of society."⁴ The Belgium state, therefore, funds the secularists among other religious groups.⁵

Secularism in Belgium is one of several officially recognized, comprehensive doctrines, none of which are imposed by the state on the people.

A secular state can only ask individuals to be “secular” in the sense that they defend secularism against anti-secular regimes. Recently, Prime Minister Erdoğan acknowledged this point. He declared that he could define himself as “a secular individual” in terms of “supporting the secular characteristic of the state,” though not in terms of believing secularism as an alternative to religion.⁶ In addition to the misunderstandings on secularism as a way of life, secularism as a constitutional principle is also misperceived in Turkey, especially with regard to religion’s relations to social life.

Secularism as a worldview is not a constitutional principle of the Turkish Republic. It is only one of several alternative lifestyles. A neutral secular state cannot impose a secular worldview on its citizens

Myth 2: Secularism rejects religion’s impact on social life

In a 1997 decision, the Turkish Constitutional Court argued that secularism did not denote the separation of religion and the state, but that it implied the “separation of religion and worldly affairs.” Having cited Niyazi Berkes, the court defined secularism as the separation of “social life, education, family, economy, law, manners, dress codes, etc. from religion.”⁷ This is an exceptionally radical definition of secularism that imprisons religion to individuals’ conscience.

In this definition, the court understands secularism as a social engineering project whose role is to secularize society. By doing that it confuses *secularism* with *secularization*. Secularization refers to particular social processes, including the erosion of religion’s public role.⁸ These are gradual and bottom-up social processes based on people’s demands and choices. Secularism, on the other hand, is a constitutional regime that determines the political boundaries between the state and religion as explained above. A neutral secular state should not take a position for or against the secularization of society. The absence or existence of religious symbols and discourses in social life, therefore, should have no place in the policy agenda of a secular state. If a secular state pursues policies to secularize the society, it will lose its neutrality.

In this regard, an institution’s position toward secularism can only be evaluated through an examination of its attitudes toward a) the secular character of Parliament and the courts, and b) the state’s neutrality towards religions. In Turkey,

The absence or existence of religious symbols and discourses in social life should have no place in the policy agenda of a secular state. If a secular state pursues policies to secularize the society, it will lose its neutrality

of religion from social life altogether does not signify an approval of secularism. Instead, such a support contradicts liberal democracy.

The Turkish Constitutional Court admits that secular state policies toward religion in Turkey are more restrictive than those in liberal democracies. Yet it tries to justify these illiberal policies with the alleged difference between Islam and Christianity.

Myth 3: Islam, unlike Christianity, is incompatible with secularism; therefore, secularism in Turkey should be restrictive

In 1989, the Turkish Constitutional Court claimed that Islam, unlike Christianity, had public aims. For controlling such a religion, a strict secularism, which confines religion to individual spirituality, was deemed necessary, although it was not needed in Christian societies.¹⁰ The court, in fact, is not the inventor of the argument on the so-called exceptionalism of Islam, but adopted it from essentialists such as Berkes.¹¹ According to the essentialists, “Islam... holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society.”¹² A leading essentialist, Bernard Lewis, argues: “The distinction between church and state, so deeply rooted in Christendom, did not exist in Islam.”¹³ Lewis and other essentialists often refer to a well-known verse of the Bible to prove the compatibility of Christianity and secularism: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s, and unto God the things

Islam is not an inherently political religion. Like Christianity, it has both political and apolitical interpretations

there is almost a consensus on secular legislation and jurisprudence. According to recent survey data, supporters of an Islamic state based on Sharia constitute only 9 percent.⁹ The debates on secularism, therefore, focus on state neutrality towards Sunnis, Alevis, and non-Muslims. Those who support equal rights for these groups are truly for secularism in Turkey. Conversely, to support the exclu-

sion of religion from social life altogether does not signify an approval of secularism. Instead, such a support contradicts liberal democracy.

which be God’s.”¹⁴ Samuel Huntington expands Lewis’ thesis to other religions and cultures: “In Islam, God is Caesar; in China and Japan, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar’s junior partner. The separation and recurring clashes between church and state that typify West-

ern civilization have existed in no other civilization.”¹⁵

The US respect toward religious freedom is not against secularism, but is rather because of it

The essentialists, therefore, present Turkey as an exception in the Muslim world with its secular state. A general survey of the Muslim world, however, refutes this claim. Ira Lapidus stresses that there have existed separate religious and political authorities in the Muslim world since the 8th century. At that time, independent Sunni schools of law, Shia sects, and Sufi tariqas, in addition to secular military and administrative rulers, challenged and replaced the institution of the Caliphate, which claimed to represent both political and religious authorities.¹⁶ Recently, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom issued a report on the constitutions of Muslim-majority countries. The report concludes that, “More than half of the world’s Muslim population (estimated at over 1.3 billion) lives in countries... that either proclaim the state to be secular, or that make no pronouncements concerning Islam to be the official state religion.”¹⁷ The state-religion regimes index summarized below confirms the report’s textual analysis, disproving the alleged homogeneity of state-Islam relations in the Muslim world. It also shows that Turkey is not the only secular state in the Muslim world.

State-Religion Regimes in 45 Muslim Countries¹⁸

Islamic States	States with Islam as Established Religion	Secular States
11	15	19

Essentialism has difficulty explaining not only the Muslim world, but also Christian societies. Its argument about the inherent church-state separation in Christianity overly romanticizes Christian societies by ignoring their a) historical religious wars and church-state struggles, b) substantially diverse state-religion regimes at present, and c) current experience of religiously-driven debates on political and legal issues such as divorce, abortion, gay rights, and evolutionism, which cannot be explained simply by rendering them unto Caesar. Anthony Gill, for example, points out the strategic flexibility of the Catholic Church. It seeks for state intervention in order to restrict Protestant proselytism in Latin America where Catholicism is a dominant religion, asks for more church-state separation and religious freedom in post-Soviet Russia where Catholicism remains in the

The French state has been more sensitive to the religious demands and freedoms of its citizens than Turkey

minority.¹⁹ The essentialist approach, in short, ignores the contextual conditions that shape politics in Christian societies.

By criticizing essentialism, I do not deny the political impact of religion. This impact, however, depends on diverse human interpretations of religion. Some Christians may defend church-state separation referring to the above-mentioned verse of the Bible. Others may interpret Christianity as a total blueprint for life by referring to another verse: “No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and mammon (i.e., money).”²⁰ Likewise, Muslims interpret Islamic principles in terms of their political context. Mumtaz Ahmad stresses the diverse strategies of an Islamic movement, Jamaat-i Islami, on secularism. It defends an Islamic state in Pakistan where Muslims are a majority, while supporting the secular state in India where they are a minority.²¹ Some Muslims embrace the idea of an Islamic state, while others defend the necessity of a secular state in order to fully live Islam as a free individual.

In sum, Islam is not an inherently political religion. Like Christianity, it has both political and apolitical interpretations. Therefore, the rigid policies of the Turkish state toward religion cannot be justified by the so-called exceptionality of Islam. The refusal of the myth on Islam’s exceptionalism empowers the demand for more religious freedom in Turkey following the model of democratic secular states in the West regardless of the fact that Turkey and Western countries have different dominant religions. Yet, those who defend rigidly secularist policies still argue that Western states that deeply respect religious freedoms, such as the US, are not comparable with Turkey since they are not secular enough, while Turkey can only be compared with similarly secular states that may also restrict religious freedoms, such as France. The next section will address this fourth and last myth.

Myth 4: Turkey cannot be compared with the US, which is not a secular state. Turkey is similar to France, which is secular

According to the American legal system, neither the federal government nor states can prohibit religious symbols in general, or symbols of a particular religion by singling them out. In France and Turkey, however, the state has singled out students’ religious attire as a means of excluding them from public schools without having a general regulation due to a practical (e.g., health or security) purpose. If the headscarf had been a secular fashion, it would not have been banned in France

and Turkey. The US respect toward religious freedom is not against secularism, but is rather because of it.

The First Amendment established secularism in the US in 1791, more than a century before the 1905 French Law of Separation, with following statement: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Since then the US Supreme Court has consolidated the secular nature of the state with famous decisions such as *Everson* and *Lemon*, which intended to put a “wall of separation” between the state and religion. On some crucial issues, such as the financial separation of the state and religious institutions, the US is more clearly secular than France and Turkey. Taxpayer money cannot be used to fund religious schools or temples in the US. The French state, however, funds 80 percent of the budgets of Catholic schools, which train about one fourth of all students.²² The French state also finances the maintenance of all churches built before 1905. Similarly, in Turkey, the state pays the salaries of imams through the Diyanet and runs Islamic Imam-Hatip schools. In this regard, the US is clearly a secular state and its policies should be taken seriously by those who defend secularism as a universal principle.

On the other hand, the similarity of Turkey and France is also problematic. The French state does not intervene in rituals in publicly funded church buildings or in Catholic schools’ religious characteristics. The Turkish state, however, has used the Diyanet and Imam-Hatip schools as means to keep Islam under control. In general, the French state has been more sensitive to the religious demands and freedoms of its citizens than Turkey. In France, students have the opportunity to attend churches or other institutions for religious education on school-free Wednesdays; in Turkey, the state has barely allowed any religious education, except the limited religious instruction in schools, which teaches a state-drafted version of Islam. Since the 1905 Law, French public schools have had Catholic chaplains on hand to respond to students’ demand for religious counseling.²³ There have also been chaplains in French prisons, hospitals, and barracks. In 2005, Muslim chaplains similarly started to take a place in the French military. In Turkey, however, there are no Muslim or non-Muslim chaplains in schools, the military, or several oth-

In terms of the right to association and to private religious education, France provides more freedom to religious groups than Turkey, where teaching the Qur’an to children under 15 is forbidden except in the summer, and for those under 12 it is totally banned

The headscarves ban in France is confined only to public schools, whereas the ban in Turkey encompasses universities, private schools, and all other educational institutions

er public institutions. Furthermore, in terms of the right to association and to private religious education, France provides more freedom to religious groups than Turkey, where teaching the Qur'an to children under 15 is forbidden except in the summer, and for those under 12 it is totally banned.

Even the French and Turkish ban on headscarves is not easily comparable. The headscarves ban in France is confined only to public schools, whereas the ban in Turkey encompasses universities, private schools, and all other educational institutions. The ban in France was established by a law that was supported by 72 percent of the population,²⁴ while in Turkey it is imposed by courts against Parliament's attempts to lift it, and despite the fact that only 22 percent of the people supported the ban.²⁵ In France, the headscarf is a symbol of a formerly colonized and immigrant religious minority, while in Turkey Islam is the religion of the overwhelming majority and 61 percent of women wear some kinds of headscarf.²⁶

Consequently, not only does the US constitute an example of a long-standing secular state; but also the supposed French-Turkish sameness on secularism is misleading due to Turkey's much more rigid policies toward religion.

Conclusion

The myths about the secular individual, secular society, Islam's relation to politics, and the exceptionality of Turkish secularism are not simple rhetoric. Instead, they have important policy implications as they have been used to justify highly restrictive state policies toward Islam in Turkey. The Turkish Constitutional Court, for example, has justified policies such as the ban on students' headscarves at universities and the closure of political parties, with regard to a particular understanding of secularism based on at least one or a combination of these myths. In this regard, the deconstruction of these myths through an analysis of the international realities of secularism by means of a comparative perspective is crucial to have a new and constructive discussion on secularism in Turkey. The Turkish Constitutional Court should no longer be bounded by certain misleading past opinions on this issue. The court can play an historical leading role with its future decisions, including the one on the AK Party closure case, if it provides new perspectives for the understanding and practice of secularism in Turkey. For such

new perspectives, the four issues mentioned in this essay should be rethought through data from other secular democratic states. That is the only way to adapt secularism in Turkey to universal standards, in terms not only of religious freedoms and the rights of education and association, but also the abolition of state control over religion.

Endnotes

1. Ahmet T. Kuru, "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies towards Religion," *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (July 2007); Ahmet T. Kuru, "Reinterpretation of Secularism in Turkey: The Case of the Justice and Development Party," M. Hakan Yavuz, ed., *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Islam, Democracy, and the AK Parti*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006.
2. The author's personal observation at "Diyanet's Third Symposium on Religion," 2004, Hotel Dedeman, Ankara; see also "Zirvede Laiklik Atışması," *Radikal*, September 21, 2004.
3. "Cami yerine Hastane Yapın," *Sabah*, June 14, 2004.
4. Jean Michel Ducomte, *La Laïcité* (Milan : Toulouse, 2001), p. 41.
5. Guy Haarscher, *La laïcité* (Paris: PUF, 2004) pp. 51-53.
6. "Erdoğan Soruları Yanıtladı," *Sabah*, May 15, 2007.
7. The Turkish Constitutional Court, January 16, 1997; no. 1998/1. For a critique of this decision, see Mustafa Erdoğan, "Religious Freedom in the Turkish Constitution," *Muslim World*, Vol. 89, No. 3-4 (July 1999), pp. 377-388.
8. Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 19-39.
9. Ali Çarkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak, *Değişen Türkiye'de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset* (Istanbul: TESEV, 2006), p. 19.
10. The Turkish Constitutional Court, (March 7, 1989) no. 1989/12.
11. Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998) pp. 480-481. For a critic of essentialism, see Alfred Stepan, "The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the 'Twin Tolerations,'" in his *Arguing Comparative Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
12. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). p. 1.
13. Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.
14. Luke 20:25.
15. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 70.
16. Ira M. Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (October 1975), pp. 363-385.
17. Tad Stahnke and Robert C. Blitt, "The Religion-State Relationship and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Comparative Textual Analysis of the Constitutions of Predominantly Muslim Countries," (2005), p.2, accessed on June 13, 2008 at <http://www.uscirf.gov/countries/global/>

comparative_constitutions/03082005/Study0305.pdf,

18. Ahmet T. Kuru, (forthcoming). *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press)

19. Anthony Gill, "The Political Origins of Religious Liberty: A Theoretical Outline," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2005), pp. 13-15.

20. Matthew 6:24.

21. Mumtaz Ahmad, "Islamic Fundamentalism: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). p. 505.

22. Denis Lacorne, "La séparation de l'Eglise et de l'Etat aux États-Unis. Les paradoxes d'une laïcité philo-cléricale," *Le Débat*, No. 127 (2003), p. 79.

23. More than 60 percent of French schools have chaplains. Bérengère Massignon, "Laïcité et gestion de la diversité religieuse à l'école publique en France," *Social Compass*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (September 2000), pp. 353-366.

24. Jean-Louis Debré, "La laïcité à l'école: Un principe républicain à réaffirmer. Rapport de la mission d'information de l'Assemblée nationale," Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004, p. 179.

25. Çarkoğlu and Toprak, *Değişen Türkiyede Din, Toplum ve Siyaset*, p. 75. According to the survey of *A&G* and *Milliyet*, 24.5 percent of the interviewees support the ban at universities while 75.5 percent oppose it. *Milliyet*, May 30, 2003.

26. Çarkoğlu and Toprak, *Değişen Türkiye'de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset*, p. 66.