

Alevi Identity in Turkish Historiography

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“If Alevism consists of a love of Ali then I, too, am an Alevi” - Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, mayor of Istanbul (1994-1998), Refah Partisi (the Islamist welfare party).¹

In this paper I will critique the historiography of the Turkish Alevis, which positions them as a religion and society in Anatolia existing prior to the foundation of the Turkish republic. My objective is to show that the study of Alevilik² has not relied on critically identified and well-analyzed historical sources. Scholars have based their research on concepts developed by early 20th century Turkish nationalists, who by “discovering” Turkish heterodox Islam attempted to distinguish politically the Turks of Anatolia from the Ottomans. I will argue that the sources scholars have used indicate that Alevi identity is a by-product of the emerging Turkish national identity; therefore, scholars have not properly historicized Alevis because they project nationalist ideologies on the sources they examine.

Scholars usually view the Alevis as an Anatolian rural society of Turks (and Kurds), whose religion combines Shi’i mysticism, paganism and Christianity. Supposedly, the Alevis embody the heritage of the ancient Turks, who emigrated from Central Asia to Anatolia. Like the Bektaşî Sufi order, Alevis worship the 13th century figure Hacı Bektaş Veli, whom they consider a descendent of Khalif Ali. Thus it became common to identify them as a branch of the Bektaşî Sufi order; nowadays both scholars and popular writers tend to use “Bektaşî” and “Alevi” almost interchangeably.³ In the 15th century, under the influence of the shi’i propaganda of the Safavi ruler Shah Ismail, the Alevis participated in a peasant rebellion against the Ottoman government. Since then Alevis have been also called Kızılbaş (“red heads”), the nickname of the Safavids. During the independence war Alevis supported Atatürk enthusiastically, and nowadays they follow his secularist ideology. Politically, they are identified as leftists. Alevis have always voted for the CHP (the Kemalist People’s Republican Party); during the political polarization of the

¹ The citation appears in Çakır Ruşen, “Political Alevism versus Political Sunnism: Convergences and Divergences” in *Alevi Identity*, edited by Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere, (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1998), 64.

² This term means Alevi religion, culture, and society.

³ For historical introduction see Irène Mélikoff, “Bektaşî/Kızılbaş: Historical Bipartition and its Consequences” in *Alevi Identity*, 1-8; Kristina Kehl-Bodrogi, “Introduction” in *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East*, edited by Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-inekele and Anke Otter-Beaujean, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), XI-XVII; Suraya Faroqi, “The Bektashis a Report on Current Research” in *Bektachhiyya*, Alexandre, edited by Alexandre Popovic & Gilles Veinstein, (İstanbul: İsis, 1995), 9-30.

1960's and 1970's many of them supported Marxist and Communist parties, and in the last two decades they have opposed the Sunni Islamists.

To explain the methodological problems in this approach to Alevis, I will briefly present Ahmet Yaşar Ocak's historiographical study, which is thus far most influential. Ocak asserts that scholars, intellectuals, and journalists have appropriated the Alevis, especially in the political struggle between Secularists and Islamists. As a result, most Turks perceive Alevis either as heretics, communists or primitive pagans. Ocak suggests that scholars disconnect the study of Alevis from its political context and investigate Alevi identity as a syncretistic religion. I will argue that this suggestion does not solve the methodological problems plaguing the Alevi topic, because his identification of Alevis relies precisely on the same ideas of early 20th century Turkish nationalists. I propose instead that since Alevi identity has developed alongside Turkish national identity research on Alevis should be situated in the socio-political context of Turkey as a nation-state. Such an approach will serve as a conceptual framework that will allow scholars to evaluate correctly their historical sources.

The Turkish Alevis have received a lot of attention in the last twenty years. An Alevi research institute in Germany, which published a comprehensive bibliography of works on Alevis and Bektaşîs, found approximately 3000 items published until 1998.⁴ Nevertheless, anyone who follows the academic and popular literature on the topic would probably get the same impression as David Shakland, an anthropologist from Wales, who wrote some years ago, "Periodically, even since the founding years of the Turkish Republic, there have been attempts to 'discover' the Alevi."⁵ Indeed, especially in the last 20 years, once in a while, scholars publish new studies, in which they intend to fix the wrong image the Alevis have acquired in the eyes of the Turkish public. Usually scholars claim that for many years the authorities and the media have ignored the Alevis, even though they constitute a substantial portion of the Turkish population. They also complain that most Turks have negative stereotypes about the Alevis; the Turkish academia neglects their contribution to Turkish history, and various political groups have used the name Alevi to promote their own political ideologies. Therefore, scholars conclude, Alevis deserve to be studied in an unprejudiced fashion, which will illuminate their true identity.

⁴ Ali Yaman, *Alevilik-Bektaşîlik Bibliyografyası*, (Manheim: Alevi-Bektaşî Kültür Enstitüsü, 1998).

⁵ David Shakland, "Anthropology and Ethnicity: The Place of Ethnography in the New Alevi Movement" in *Alevi Identity* (1998), 15.

Following this conclusion, 10 years ago Ahmet Yaşar Ocak presented a historiographical study,⁶ in which he criticized Turkish scholars for dealing with Alevis only in the context of Islam and Turkey, specifically, the struggle between Sunni and secular ideologies. During the republican era, he writes, the authorities suppressed any deviation from the Kemaist dogma under the pretext of “the interests of the state” and “the unity of the nation”⁷; as a result, questions about the religious identity of Turkey remained more or less invisible until the end of the 1970’s. After 1980 this situation changed; in the new political climate Sunni intellectuals began to advocate re-Islamization of Turkish society, and secular intellectuals, in response, presented Alevilik as the genuine Turkish reconciliation of Islam with secularity. Ocak claims that the latter approach emerged in nationalist ideas of Zia Gökalp (1876-1924), Fuat Köprülü (1890-1966), and “Türk yurdu” (a group of nationalist intellectuals, 1911-1931), who declared Alevilik-Bektaşılık as the national religion of the Turks.⁸

To show in what ways this ideology affected the thought of Turkish scholars, Ocak analyzes some recent studies he deems most important to this topic. First, he claims that Alevi authors tend to emphasize the uniqueness of Alevilik-Bektaşılık, whereas Sunni authors portray it as a popular version of Sunni Islam. Second, he defines four political trends of writing: Nationalist-Alevi scholars, who identify Alevilik-Bektaşılık with Kemalist secularity, Nationalist-Sunni scholars, who regard it as Turkish Sunna, Humanist scholars, who define Alevilik-Bektaşılık as a non-religious ideology of universal love (aşk felsefesi), and Communist scholars, who reduce it to Marxist materialism. Third, Ocak asserts that most scholars study Alevilik-Bektaşılık in the historical context either of Islam or of Central Asian Shamanism.

Ocak shows how the above-mentioned studies explain the origin and principles of Alevi faith; his goal is to refute attempts to reduce Alevilik to other religions, especially Shi’a and Shamanism. First, with respect to Shi’a, he agrees that Alevis worship Ali and the Imams. He explains that Shi’i motives penetrated Alevilik in the 13th century when Shi’i Ismaili Turks emigrated from Khorassan to Anatolia and again in the 16th century, when Shah Ismail, the Safavi ruler, spread in Anatolia anti-Ottoman propaganda based on the doctrine of the twelve-Imams. Nevertheless, Ocak rejects the reduction of Alevilik to Shi’a, because it embodies Turkmen, Zoroastrian, Manichaeen, and other non-Muslim motives as well. He also criticizes Fuat Köprülü

⁶ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, “Alevilik ve Bektaşılık Son Yayınlar zerinde (1990) Genel bir Bakış ve Biraz Gerçekler” in *Tarih ve Toplum*, Temüz (1991): 20-25, Ağustos (1991): 51-56.

⁷ see also Erik Siesby, “Turkey in a State of Fear” in *Contrasts and Solutions in the Middle East*, edited by Ole Hoiris and Sefa Martin Yürükel, (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1997), 417-423.

⁸ For the influence of 19th sociological theories on the construction of Turkish national identity see Paul J. Magnarella & Orhan Türkdoğan, “The Development of Turkish Social Anthropology”, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 17, Issue 2 (Jan., 1976), 363-274.

and “Türk Yurdu”’s argument that Central Asian Shamanism was the pre-Muslim Alevi faith. Ocak claims that this argument relies on 19th century theories of Christian missionaries, who attempted to “disclose” the Shaman origins of the Turks. However, recent studies indicate that Shamanism arrived to Central Asia only after the 6th century. In short, Ocak suggests that Alevilik should be regarded as a syncretism of Shi’i Islam together with Shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions.

In addition, Ocak outlines and criticizes the four ways, in which those studies define the essence of Alevilik. First, in regard to approaches to Alevilik as a secular, national and democratic faith, Ocak maintains that since religion contradicts secularity, one cannot define the former by the latter. Judaism, according to him, is the only phenomenon of nation-religion; all other religions have developed in relation to different nations, though none achieved the fusion of nation and religion. Second, he contradicts the identification of Alevis as a permanently oppressed class. Ocak explains that it was common among Alevi peasants to compare the Ottoman oppression with the Ummayyad oppression of the first Shi’ites. He argues that even though the Ummayyads and the Ottomans were Sunni authorities, Sunni Muslims were oppressed not less than Alevis. Thirdly, Ocak dismisses as fundamentalist propaganda approaches to Alevilik that depict it either as genuine Shi’a or fidelity to Muslim Ahl al-beyt. Finally, Ocak criticizes scholars, who by referring to Alevi riots conclude that Alevilik is a revolutionary ideology of social reform. He argues that Alevis rebelled only in times when rulers pursued policies of centralization and Sunni peasants and Turkish nomads participated in such riots as well.

Thereafter, Ocak discusses Hacı Bektaş Veli, the Alevi and Bektaşî saint. Ocak claims that we have very little historical knowledge about his life and his spiritual thought. In the literature he is first mentioned in the *Vilayetname* (the book of his miracles) and the chronicles of the Ottoman historian Aşıkpaşazade, which were both written in the 15th century, 200 years after his lifetime. As a result, people could freely appropriate his name in many different ways. In Turkey, for instance, people believe that Hacı Bektaş was a revolutionary leader, who defended the Turks from Arabization or Iranization; others, on the other hand, regard him as a prophet of humanist secularity. In conclusion Ocak suggests that since Alevilik was developed throughout so many centuries, in an area that extends from the Balkans to Central Asia, one should investigate it as a syncretistic phenomenon.⁹ Ocak censures all attempts to reduce Alevilik to either Islam or Turkish nationalism, Marxism or any other ideology. Thus, he believes, Turkish scholars would

⁹ see also Carsten Colpe, “The Phenomenon of Syncretism and the Impact of Islam” in *Syncretistic Religious Communities* (1997), 35-48. He bases his criteria on Max Weber’s methodology of history.

be able to disconnect their observations from political persuasions and base their study on critical methodologies.

Following in Ahmet Yaşar Ocak's footsteps most scholars in Turkey and abroad have investigated Alevilik as a syncretistic phenomenon by employing interdisciplinary methodologies. The syncretistic framework has given them an opportunity to compare Alevilik to other syncretistic religions, like the Sikh of India, the Nusayriyya of south-east Turkey and north Syria, Ahl al-Hakk of Iran etc.,¹⁰ and thus to identify Alevilik as an independent religion.¹¹ But, even though this framework has helped scholars avoid reducing Alevilik to other ideologies, it has failed to de-politicize their study. When I attempted to find out what sources scholars use to identify Alevilik as a syncretistic religion and culture, I realized that they either cited each other or relied on the same writings of early 20th century nationalist ideologues. The syncretistic framework failed to show that before the emergence of Turkish nationalist thought, there was an Alevi religion and society. Studies on this topic showed very well that in Anatolia rural communities developed local rituals and beliefs by mixing elements taken from many religions. This phenomenon can be understood easily, since Anatolia has always been a crossroad of many religions and cultures. Moreover, throughout the Seljuk and Ottoman eras, alongside the official Islam, worship of saints, pilgrimage to holy places, and secret rituals crossed religious and ethnic boundaries. However, no one could demonstrate in what ways Alevilik is different from other folk traditions in the area.

In the studies I read I found that scholars identified Alevi either as Bektaşî Sufis, Anatolian Kızılbaş, or rural non-Sunni Turkish groups (like Tahtacılar and Yürükler). In so doing, they attempted to provide Alevi identity with a history, which precedes Turkish national identity. But, what is the historical basis for this identification? In asking this question, I do not argue that heterodox groups of Turks have not lived for centuries in Anatolia, nor do I reject the assumption that such groups were influenced by the Bektaşî order or by neighbor communities; also, I agree that there is an Alevi society and religion in **modern Turkey**. My argument is that Ocak's thesis of is an example of "catch-22"; he identified Alevilik as a syncretistic religion so as to disconnect it from Turkish national ideology, but, since Alevilik itself was invented as the primordial Turkish identity, his study remained conditioned by the same political propositions. I see the syncretistic framework of research as not less political than the other frameworks Ahmet Yaşar

¹⁰ See for example Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites – The Ghulat Sects*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988)

¹¹ In 1995 an international symposium about Alevilik was held at the Freie Universität of Berlin, under the title: "Alevism in Turkey and Comparable Syncretistic Religions Communities in the Near East in the Past

Ocak criticizes; Alevilik is a syncretistic religion in the same way it is Humanism or Shi'a, because all these theses are grounded in Turkish nationalist discourses.

I would like to discuss two difficulties in disconnecting Alevilik from Turkish nationalism. The first difficulty is that there are no commonly accepted criteria to identify who is an Alevi and who is not; in Turkey scholars even disagree whether Alevi identity exists or does not. The statement of the former mayor of Istanbul, I quoted at the beginning of my paper, indicates that people from different backgrounds have appropriated Alevilik for their political purposes. I will explain this issue by presenting how dictionaries and encyclopedias define the Alevis in very different ways. The second difficulty concerns the history of the terms "Alevi" and "Alevilik." I pose three questions: when did people begin to identify Anatolian heterodox groups as Alevis; In which historical context did the terms "Alevi" and "Alevilik" appear; and, what are the historical sources used to identify the term Alevi with Kızılbaş, Bektaşî, Tahtacı or any other term? In so doing, I will show how concepts of Turkish nationalism always precede scholarly investigation.

The *Redhouse Ottoman-English dictionary*, which was first published in 1890 only explains the literal meaning of "Alevi;" it neither defines any sort of society or faith, nor relates Alevilik to other definitions. There "A'levi" (the dictionary's transcription) means simply: "Pertaining to a man of the name Ali; especially, pertaining to or descendent from the caliph Ali."¹² The *Turkish-English dictionary* of Vahid Moram, which was first published during the Kemalist era (1945), defines the word Alevi as a rare synonym of Shi'ite; the author also identified Alevilik with Shi'ism.¹³ There "Alevi" is "partisan of the Caliph Ali; Shiite". This identification is the most common and it appears in most of the dictionaries that were published thereafter, like the *Langensceidt Turkish-English dictionary*¹⁴ and the *Concise Oxford Turkish dictionary*.¹⁵

In the "*Encyclopedia of Islam*"¹⁶ the terms "Alevi" and "Alevilik" do not appear as separate entries; instead, "Alevi" is included under "Kizilbash," whose meaning is: "a wide variety of extremist Shii sects, which flourished in Anatolia and Kurdistan from the late 7th/13th century onwards, including such groups as the Alevis (Alawis)." According to the author, the Alawis are the Nusayris, and differ from the Tahtacılar, whom he relates to the Bektaşî order.

and Present". One year later, an international symposium about Alevilik that was held in Istanbul by a Swedish research center got the title: "Alevi Identity".

¹² James W. Redhouse, *A Turkish and English Lexicon*, (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1996).

¹³ Ahmet Vahid Moram, *Büyük Türkçe-İngilizçe Sözlük*, (İstanbul: Adam, 1945).

¹⁴ Resuhi Akdikmen, *Langsceidt's Standard Turkish Dictionary*, (New York: Langsceidt, 1986).

¹⁵ A.D Alderson & Fahir Iz, *The Concise Oxford Turkish Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

¹⁶ R.M. Savory, "Kizilbash", in: *Encyclopedia of Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, CD-ROM edition, 1999).

“Strictly speaking,” he writes, “the term Kızılbaş should be applied only to those Turcoman tribes inhabiting eastern Anatolia, northern Syria and the Armenian highlands which were converted by the Safawid da’wa and became the disciples of the Safawid shaykhs at Ardabil.” In *“İslam Ansiklopedisi,”*¹⁷ the Turkish version of “Encyclopedia of Islam,” “Alevi” or “Alevilik” also do not appear separately, but under the entry “Kızılbaş.” The author of the entry, Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, defines Alevilik as the worship of Imam Ali, which was developed by Shii ghulat sects that lived between Rumeli and Iran. These sects are called Kızılbaş, and their members are Turks, Persians, or Kurds. According to Gölpınarlı, the Anatolian Kızılbaş resemble the other groups in every respect, except one; unlike the other Kızılbaş, they regard Hacı Bektaş veli as their saint. In another Turkish encyclopedia for Turkish culture, *“İnönü Ansiklopedisi,”*¹⁸ the term “Alevi” appears as an independent entry, and it means a general name for all the groups between the Mediterranean and China, which worship the Imam Ali. In Turkey the Alevis are identified with the Kızılbaş, which is general name for separate rural communities that have different leaders, practices and faiths. One of the reasons for the differences between the groups is the fact that every community mixed in its own tradition elements taken from neighboring religions; thus, in different regions of Anatolia, one can recognize in the local Kızılbaş communities rituals of Orthodox Christianity, Zoroastrian, Armenian Christianity, Sunna, Shi’a etc.

In addition to the identification with the Kızılbaş, in Turkey it is common to identify Alevilik as a synonym of Bektaşilik, and hence the term “Alevi-Bektaşî.” Early 20th century historians like Gölpınarlı, Köprülü, Hasluck and Birge, as well as recent scholars, tend to differentiate between the two and to argue that while Alevis are the rural Anatolian non-Sunni Turks, who during the Ottoman era were powerless and disrespected, the Bektaşîs were the heterodox Muslim Sufis, who were in charge of converting conquered populations to Islam, and until the abolition of the Janissaries were responsible for the education the young soldiers. Although this distinction between Alevilik and Bektaşilik is prominent in the historiography of the field, many Turkish scholars tend to conflate the two groups. They do it by emphasizing that some Alevi communities developed close relationships with Bektaşî tekkes in Anatolia and formed their traditions under the influence of the heterodox Islam of the Bektaşilik. For example, Besim Atalay, a nationalist scholar, whose book *Bektaşilik ve Edebiyatı* was published in 1924,¹⁹ argues that the Bektaşilik was more than a Sufi order, it was a unique Turkish medheb of Islam. According to his argument, two branches emerged from the Bektaşî medheb: the Babai branch,

¹⁷ Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, “Kızılbaş” in *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol.6 no.61, (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1968), 789-795.

¹⁸ İnönü Ansiklopedisi, vol.2, (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1948) , 46-48.

¹⁹ Besim Atalay, *Bektaşilik ve Edebiyatı*, (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Amre), 1924.

which was active in the Balkans, and the Çelebi branch, which was active in Anatolia. The Çelebis were called also Alevi and they lived all over Anatolia, called by different names (Tahtacılar, Çepeniler, Abdallar etc.), but similar in values and practice (relationship of equality between men and women, non-observance of the Muslim prayers or the Ramadan etc.).

The way Besim Atalay distinguished between the Balkan and the Anatolian Bektâşîs and then conflated the Anatolian Bektâşîs and the Alevi exemplifies how scholars have rooted nationalist ideologies in “history.” Besim Atalay, like many others, defined Bektâşîlik as a non-Sunni semi-secular religion and Alevilik as the origin of pre-Islamic culture of the Turks. In so doing he differentiated the Turks from the Ottomans thereby providing a “genuine Turkish national identity” with a culture rooted in pre-Ottoman history. In the introduction to *Bektâşîlik ve Edebiyatı* Besim Atalay explained that his motive for investigating the Bektâşîlik, was to define and characterize the national identity of the Turks (in his words, Türklük). Atalay did not aim to identify the Alevi in particular; rather he studied the heterodox Anatolian communities in order to identify the unique culture, history, and religion of the Turks, apart from the culture, history and religion of Persians, Arabs, Greeks, Albanians, or Ottomans. In this context scholars used the term “Alevi” in order to identify Turkish heterodox Muslims differently from non-Turkish heterodox Muslims. Besim Atalay strove to distinguish Turkish from Balkan groups by emphasizing the differences between the Anatolian and the Balkan Bektâşîs, and in so doing he identified the Anatolian Bektâşîs by the term “Turkish Alevi.” Scholars, who attempted to differentiate Turkish from other eastern Anatolian heterodox groups (such as Iranians, Syrians, Azeris etc.) identified Turks as “Alevi” and others as “Kızılbaş.” In short, by employing particular terminologies, scholars could situate the study of the Anatolian Alevi in the context of Turkish history. The ideological role of Turkish scholars was to disconnect the Alevi both from the Balkan Bektâşîs, which have been studied in the context of the Ottoman Empire, and from the eastern Anatolian Kızılbaş, which have been studied in the context of the Safavid state. In Turkey, the terminology in use has always reflected a particular political situation, because scholars adjusted their identifications to the official policy; the Bektâşîs of the Balkans stopped being Alevi around the time the Empire lost the Balkans; on the other hand, the Kurdish Kızılbaş remained Alevi, together with the Kurdish provinces of eastern Anatolia, which were included in the territory of the Republic of Turkey.

In short, the identifications of the Alevi have depended on the political persuasions of researchers. This becomes clear when one traces the history of the term “Alevi.” Most scholars of the topic employ the term “Alevi” as a more precise identification of Turkish rural Bektâşi or Kızılbaş. In so doing they assume that these groups developed more or less in a similar way. But I

found that “Alevi” began to be in use in positive sense just close to the end of the 19th century, and it was the way Western scholars, especially missionaries, identified Turkish communities in Anatolia, which they described as Christians under the cover of Islam. For instance, Stephen Van Rensselaer Trowbridge,²⁰ an American missionary, published an article in 1909, in which he reported about an interview he conducted with “a well known Alevi teacher,” who revealed to him the secrets of Alevilik. According to this teacher, Alevilik is a non-Muslim religion that recognizes Muhammad, its faith is based on mysticism and pantheism, and it resembles Christianity more than Islam. The most important early 20th century scholar, who used the term “Alevi” to identify the Anatolian heterodox Turks, was F.W. Hasluck. He studied religious traditions of Anatolia and the Balkans during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, and asserted that the Alevis, like other heterodox groups in Anatolia, were Christians, who converted to Islam.²¹ This early usage of the term “Alevi” as the name of Turkish Christians appeared also in an article in 1918 by George E. White,²² another American missionary. White argued that the Alevis were the original Christian inhabitants of Asia Minor, who had had to convert outwardly to Islam in order to survive. These people were ethnic Turks, and they made up 20% of the population in Anatolia. Much earlier reference appears in the study of the Turkish scholar Bakı Öz,²³ who collected Ottoman documents pertaining to the Alevis beginning with the 16th century. As I will demonstrate in greater detail Bakı Öz’s book is not a reliable source, since the author translated the original texts to modern Turkish, and thus we cannot know what the original terminology in the Ottoman documents was. The earliest text I read was *Üss-i Zafer* (first published, 1826) of the Ottoman historian Es’ad Efendi (1789-1848), who wrote about the abolishment of the Yeniçeri and for whom Alevis were heretic shi’i (rafızı) supporters of the Bektaşî order.²⁴

Although western scholars and missionaries were the first to identify Anatolian Alevis as Turks in order to reveal the Christian heritage of Anatolia, Turkish scholars were the ones who linked Alevilik and Türkçülük. For example, in his introduction to Hasluck’s *Bektaşîlik*

²⁰ Stephen Van Rensselaer Trowbridge, “The Alevis, or deifiers of Ali” in *Harvard Theological Review* (1909), 340-353.

²¹ Frederick William Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans* (London: Clarendon press, 1929), 157; 568-570; 585-586.

²² George E. White, “Some Non-Conforming Turks” in: *Muslim world*, no.3 July (1918), 242-248.

²³ Bakı Öz, *Alevilik ile İlgili Osmanlı Belgeleri*, (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 1995). The author translated the original text from Ottoman to modern Turkish.

²⁴ Mehmet Esad Efendi, *Üss-i Zafer* (Istanbul : Dârüttibâât il-Ma’ mûre, 1243 [1827]), 219. I thank Dr. Hulya Küçük from the Seljuk University of Konya for referring me to this book.

*Tedkikleri*²⁵ Fuat Köprülü explains that the study of Bektaşilik is essentially a study of the Turks because the Turks brought Sufism to Anatolia. Therefore scholars, who studied the history of the Bektaşî order (which according to Köprülü is the most Turkish Sufi order), helped Turks understand their national identity. Besim Atalay expresses the same idea in the introduction to his book. He writes that the goal of his research was to provide knowledge about the uniqueness of Turkish Islam. By examining Alevilik he intended to define Turkish national identity.²⁶ It is this linkage between academic research and nationalist ideologies that creates the “catch-22” in Ahmet Yaşar Ocak’s argument. Scholars, who distinguish the ideological from the historical identification of the Alevis, need to explain what they consider as primary and secondary sources. Any explanation of historical sources is essentially identification of the Alevis. But, since the identification of the Alevis emerged in Turkish nationalist ideologies, scholars have not been able to define their historical sources, unless they identify the Alevis according to nationalist ideologies. Thus, most scholars have based their arguments on historiographical rather than historical research. They have not been able to develop non-ideological methods, which would permit one to judge which textual or oral materials could be used as historical sources, and as a consequence the identification of the Alevis was never historical, but political.

The a-historical and political identification of the Alevis is evident in two recent studies by the Turkish scholars Bakı Öz and İlyas Üzüm. These two studies merit more in depth discussion, because Bakı Öz and İlyas Üzüm attempted to prove their arguments by using historical evidence. Bakı Öz collected Ottoman documents about Alevis between 16th and 19th centuries and tried to show that the Ottoman authorities perceived the Alevis in a negative and stereotypical way. As I mentioned earlier, the main problem of the book is that Bakı Öz translated the documents to modern Turkish without indicating whether he kept the original terminology or changed it. Because of this problem one should be cautious about relying on Bakı Öz. Yet, it is worth noting that, to the best of my knowledge, Bakı Öz is the only scholar, who has used Ottoman documents in his study of the Alevis, and thus his book is an important departure from nationalist studies. However, although he did not use historiographical literature as an historical source, Bakı Öz could not identify the Alevis from the texts. Except in two documents, the word “Alevi” or “Alevilik” is not mentioned, and instead names like Kızılbaş, Fesatçı (conspirator), Rafızî (schismatic, heretic) and others appeared and usually carried a derogatory meaning. Indeed, a researcher reading these documents could become convinced that there were people in the Balkans, Anatolia, and Arab lands whose loyalty to the Ottoman state and Islam was doubtful,

²⁵ Frederick W. Hasluck, *Bektaşilik Tedkikleri*, translated by Rağıp Hulus, (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1928).

and whom the Ottoman authorities considered as Ghulat (extremist Shi'ites) and melamatiyyun (radical Sufis). According to the documents Bakı Öz presents, these people observed folk saints like Hacı Bektaş, their folk traditions incorporated rituals from foreign religions, and in eastern Anatolia many of them collaborated with the Safavids. But still, there is no evidence in the documents that these groups identified themselves or were identified as a general society of Alevi, whose religion was Alevilik. One cannot therefore conclude which of these groups are either the ancestors of the Alevi of modern Turkey or that they preserved ancient Turkmen culture. In short, Bakı Öz did not solve the “catch-22,” because he still needed Turkish nationalism to define the historical sources that contain information about the Alevi.

İlyas Üzüm's study²⁷ exemplifies in a different way why writers, who have attempted to identify the Alevi by employing historical sources could not break the “catch-22.” To portray a picture of the Alevi and Alevilik in Turkey, İlyas Üzüm first tried to discover their number and their geographical distribution. To do so he used population censuses and election results. However, it is impossible to address this issue by examining population census or registrations of inhabitants, because the Turkish authorities have never recognized Alevilik as a religion; officially the Alevi are identified as Muslims and thus censuses or registrations of inhabitants do not have the category Alevi. There are many speculations about their percentage of the population; some people say that they are 20%, others reduce their percentage to less than 10%; in absolute numbers they are estimated to be between 5 and 20 million. But since there are no commonly accepted criteria to identify who is Alevi, nobody can confirm or refute these speculations. İlyas Üzüm attempted to develop a method by which he could identify Alevi; he looked for a point of time at which Alevi identified themselves as a collective and assumed that this self-identification could help him analyze the official data. According to his argument, there were two such points in time: in 1950, when an unofficial population census was held among the Alevi, and in 1969, when a political party, Birlik Partisi, participated in the general elections under the banner of Alevi party.

İlyas Üzüm claims that in 1950 a group of Alevi, about which he mentions nothing, held an unofficial population census in areas that were known as centers of Alevi. He insists that it was possible to identify Alevi then, because Turkey had not yet experienced huge demographical transformations and urbanization, and consequently different groups hardly intermingled. In their research this group of Alevi discovered that in this year the number of Alevi was 2.5 million, or 11.3% from the entire Turkish population. Assuming that the percentage of Alevi relative to the

²⁶ Besim Atalay (1928), p.3-5.

remaining Turkish population has not changed in the last forty years, he found that in 1990 their number had reached 6.5 million, or 11.3% from the population of Turkey, which according to official censuses was 56.5 million. The second time Alevis identified themselves, according to Üzüm, was in 1969, when a radical leftist group, whose members were mostly Alevis, split from the Communist party and participated in the general elections independently. This party, Birlik Partisi, identified itself as an Alevi party and claimed to represent the Alevi minority in Turkey. Considering that the Turkish system is regional, and parties can choose in which provinces to participate, Birlik partisi put candidates just in areas, where it had enough electorate, in other words, just in areas with concentration of Alevis. İlyas Üzüm examined the results of the 1969 general elections and claimed that he could use the data to determine the geographical distribution of the Alevis.

Üzüm's approach is problematic. It is obvious that the percentage of Alevis in 1950 could not have remained the same in 1990 because during these forty years urbanization and emigration from Turkey changed the demographics of the country dramatically. Furthermore, the results of the 'population census' he presented cannot be trusted completely. The Birlik Partisi got just 2.8% of the vote, much less than Üzüm's results, and in 1971, two years after the elections, the party was closed down, and its leaders joined the marginal Turkish Labor Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi). What I would like to examine is whether İlyas Üzüm identified the Alevis through historical sources, or he relied on his own ideological assumptions. In order to do that, I will focus on the second part of his argument: his identification of Alevis as the people who voted for Birlik Partisi. First, Üzüm's argument is logically invalid because "Alevi party" is identification of party and not of voters. Second, it identifies Alevilik with Marxism because BP was first of all a Marxist party. This identification was popular during the 1960's and 1970's, when the Turkish left had to deal with two kinds of rivals: the right-wing nationalists and the still weak but already threatening Islamists. In this struggle, leftist intellectuals and politicians, along with the public media, portrayed the Alevis as a secular rural society; for leftist ideologists the Alevis symbolized the Turkish revolutionary proletarians. But, as Ahmet Yaşar Ocak argued convincingly, this identification is not implicit in the history of the Alevis, rather it is based on political needs, not on critical study. In short, İlyas Üzüm could not link Alevilik to Marxism unless he identified Alevilik with Marxism beforehand.

So far I have tried to present the difficulties in identifying the Alevis as a social group and as a religion. I outlined Ahmet Yaşar Ocak's argument, which states that scholars and

²⁷ İlyas Üzüm, *Günümüz Aleviliği*, (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı – İslam Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, 1997), p.19-28.

intellectuals have identified the Alevis by relying on their political persuasions rather than on rigorous methodological approaches. My objective was to show that even when scholars tried to avoid basing their study on ideology, they were closed in a “catch-22,” since they could not locate the Alevis in historical sources, unless they projected on the sources ideological identifications (nationalist, Marxist, Humanist, Shi’i etc.). To disconnect the identification of Alevilik from ideologies, Ahmet Yaşar Ocak proposed the study of Alevilik as a syncretistic phenomenon, that is, a culture or a religion, which is heterogeneous and its principles are taken from different cultures and religions. I argued that Ocak did not solve the problem, because to identify the Alevis he also employs his political assumptions rather than an historical approach detached from ideology. Thereafter, I showed that there are two obstacles, which prevented scholars from disconnecting the identification of the Alevis from Turkish nationalist ideologies. First, there are no commonly accepted criteria for identifying who is Alevi and who is not; second, the term Alevi emerged in Western Christian and afterwards in Turkish nationalist-secular thought, which aimed to define the Turkish nation. As a result, scholars had to project an Alevi identification on the materials they investigated in order to employ them as historical sources.

In the last part of this paper I would like to discuss briefly two studies, which investigate Alevilik in specific socio-political contexts. The first study analyzes the way Alevi identity is formed and asserts that Alevis have re-identified themselves according to changing historical circumstances in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. The second study focuses on the role ideology and identity play in the Alevi struggle for political power in Istanbul. Following these two studies I will suggest that since Alevilik has developed alongside Turkish nationalism, scholars study it as a political concept, which relates to Turkey as a nation-state.

The first study is of the social anthropologist George Elwert.²⁸ Elwert criticizes as essentialist scholars who believe that to investigate the creation and maintenance of group identities one should disclose their primordial emotions and traditions. He claims that identity is a pragmatical concept; it reflects specific conditions of specific groups in specific time and area. According to Elwert, groups change their identity from political to ethnic or from religious to cultural, if they have to survive, to gain privileges, to ally with more powerful groups etc. In this process groups also identify enemies and threats, stress differences, and put strict boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Thus, instead of finding the ‘real Alevis’ George Elwert attempts to reveal the historical reasons, which influenced Alevis to change their identity. For example, he argues, endogamous groups adopted outwardly Shi’i Islam to distance themselves from the Sunni

²⁸ George Elwert, “Switching of We-Group Identities: The Alevis as a Case Among Many Others” in *Syncretistic Religious Communities* (1997), 65-85.

Ottoman rule; also, in the republican era some Black Sea Christian groups escaped ethnic expulsions by claiming Alevi identity.

I agree with Elwert that one should not ‘prove’ that Alevilik is a syncretistic religion, Humanism, or Shi’a, but should locate the research in a specific place and time and analyze the reasons for each identification. In this way one can argue that in the 1920’s Alevilik was Turkish Islam, because Turkish nationalists had to distinguish Turks from Ottomans; however in the 1960’s Alevis became proletarians and Alevilik secular materialism, because Turkish leftists had to present an opposing ethos to those of right wing Nationalists and Sunni Islamists.

The main problem of this framework is that Elwert assumes that the definition of Alevis has changed, but the identification of Alevis as what he called ‘we-group,’ subjects who identify themselves, remained. For example, he explains, the Ba’ath party of Iraq changed its identity from secularist-nationalist to Islamic during the Gulf war in 1991. The ideology, the definition, was changed, but the organization, the “Ba’ath party,” the we-group, remained. Elwert argues that a similar process occurred in Alevi history; there has been a permanent Alevi society, which has changed its ideology from Christianity to Islam and from Islam Communism as a result of various historical events. However, in so doing, Elwert proposes that groups are non-historical entities; they do not become and perish in course of place and time. In the same way he could also claim that the American society changed after the Americans immigrated to the United States. Furthermore, Elwert ignores the fact that most Alevi identities were developed by non-Alevis, and consequently, as Ahmet Yaşar Ocak showed, they do not necessarily reflect interests of Alevis themselves. For this reason I think that any critical study should investigate Alevi identity only in the historical context in which it emerged.

The second study is of the historian of religion Catherina Raudvere,²⁹ who links the development of Alevilik to specific socio-political circumstances in Istanbul. Raudvere investigated the activity of Alevi and Islamist non-governmental organizations, which provide financial support and education to the poor immigrants from the provinces. She claims that in addition to such support these NGOs try to fill the ideological vacuum the official administration created by neglecting these millions of Turks. They do so by propagating new models of society and identity. The Sunni Islamists base their propaganda on the model of Medina, the city of ideal Muslim society, whereas the Alevis base their propaganda on the model of the ancient Turkish communities of nomads. Raudvere argues that these models indicate the crisis of the Kemalist framework; instead of addressing to the entire society of the Turks, the Islamists try to arouse

²⁹ Catherina Raudvere, “Urban Visions and Religious Communities: Access and Visibility” in *Alevi Identity* (1998), 185-197.

religious sentiments of Sunnis, and Alevis, on the other hand, try to excite the fears of both non-Sunni and secular Turks from Islamisation of the country. Catherina Raudvere concludes that in the last two decades the rediscovery of Alevilik has been connected to this process; Alevis have emphasized the religious characteristics of their identity in order to oppose effectively the politics of Sunni Islam.

I agree with Catherina Raudvere that Alevi identity should be connected to the immediate conditions and circumstances of the urban Alevis of the present. Raudvere correctly investigates Alevilik as a construct, which is produced in specific historical contexts and has political goals. In this way Raudvere avoids referring Alevilik to places and times, in which it did not exist, but attempts to reveal the political interests, which have influenced Turks to perceive Alevilik as heterodox Islam, heresy, Communism etc.

Nevertheless, I think that to grasp the way Alevi identity has developed, anthropological research, which places the Alevis only in the socio-political context of contemporary Istanbul, is not enough. Such a scope is too narrow; scholars cannot employ it to explain how rural communities became Alevis or what sorts of Alevilik existed in the Ottoman Empire. I believe that the study of Alevilik should be connected to the study of Turkish history, because Alevi identity is a product of the transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish republic. As I showed, Alevilik had developed with the emergence of nationalism in the Ottoman Empire, which began in the second half of the 19th century; intellectuals tried to distinguish the Turks from the Ottomans by disclosing Turkish heterodox Islam. After the foundation of the republic the authorities appropriated Alevilik as a model of national and secularized Islam. During the political polarization of the 1960's and 1970's radical leftists appropriated Alevilik to present their Communist ideals as the "real Turkism." Finally, since the 1980's, secularists appropriated Alevilik to oppose the Sunni Islamists, who became recently a prominent political power.

As a result, I suggest that scholars do not 'de-politicize' Alevilik by looking for its 'true essence.' On the contrary, Alevi identity should be studied in the context of modern Turkish politics. As the historiography of this topic indicates, by defining Alevilik political parties and social movements seek legitimacy and power in Turkey. For Turkish secular nationalists Alevilik has embodied the 'foundation myth' of the country, that is, the Turkish nation is rooted in a pre-Islamic Turkic civilization. Islamists, on the other hand, do not recognize Alevilik either as a distinct religion or identity, and thus delegitimize the 'foundation myth' of the Turkish republic and the political power of secular parties and ideologies.

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