Religion is back in Turkey! This is the prevalent secular fear, anxiety and apprehension that finds various expressions in the social, cultural and political context of today’s Turkey. But where has religion been all this time, to warrant the allegation that it is ‘coming back’? Why is the return of the religious deemed so dangerous? To make sense of this situation requires a brief overview of the nationalist project that established a modern, secular and Westernized identity for Turkey at the turn of the twentieth century.

The nationalist project in Turkey instituted by Mustafa Kemal developed through successive waves of modernization, which took secularization and Westernization as their predominant ideology. The principles of the Enlightenment (science, rationality, secularism and progress) shaped the discourse of Westernized indigenous elites. This desire to modernize the country went hand in hand with the denunciation and condemnation of traditional Islamic values. The official ideology of secular modernization measured civilization according to the degree of Westernization achieved in different areas of social life. Concomitantly, progress was defined by a breaking with Ottoman backwardness, symbolized in the distance achieved from Islam. In the attempt to establish a new identity for the nation and to reach the desired level of ‘progress’, the abolition of the Caliphate was a necessary but insufficient step. In Bernard Lewis’s words, ‘a further shock was necessary – a traumatic impact that would shake every man in the country into the realization that the old order had gone, and a new one come into its place.’ What Lewis called Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s ‘great symbolic revolutions’ marked the transformation of the nation from a ‘backward/Islamic’ to a ‘civilized/secular’ identity.1

Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Turkish political elites have attempted the most radical secularization ever seen in a Muslim country. This project stretched far beyond the state apparatus. It idealized Western cultural codes, modes of life and identities; it penetrated into the lifestyles, manners and daily customs of the people. Most importantly, it entailed a change in the self-identification of the Turkish people. In so far as modern Turkey constituted its identity by progressively distancing itself from Islam, Islam functioned as its constitutive outside. As Islam was increasingly marginalized as the negative of the civilized national self, it came to represent a threat to the emerging secular, modern and enlightened Turkish nation. However, since such processes of exclusion can never be achieved tout court, the result always carries the traces of what is excluded in its constitution. The civilizational shift in Turkey from an Islamic to a Western identity created a cultural split. Modern Turkish identity has come to be inhabited by what it has tried to push outside of itself; its constitution is inevitably an unstable, contingent arrangement. It is this inability to completely erase Islam that best explains its recent ‘comeback’. The main social, political and cultural
conflict between the secularists and the Islamists is rooted in the exclusion of Islamic culture, ways of life and codes from the public domain as legitimate markers of Turkish identity. Current demands for more public visibility of Islamic identity, aesthetics and ways of life should be seen in the light of this historically rooted split.

**Redrawing the lines of membership**

However, despite the historically deep-seated fissure between Islamists and secularists, and contrary to the clichés of modernization theory, the current political and cultural split over Turkey’s desire to be part of the European Union is not between ‘Islamists’ and ‘secularists’. Rather, it is between anti-EU ‘authoritarian nationalists’ (including Kemalist nationalists, far-right nationalists and a small minority Islamic view) and pro-EU ‘liberal globalists’ (who include liberals, the Islamic majority and a very small minority of Kemalists).\(^2\) Indeed, this opposition cuts across left- and right-wing politics in Turkey. (It has had repercussions within the socialist Left as well.) Contrary to commonsensical expectations, the predominant Islamist discourse, represented by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is liberal globalist and pro-EU. Indeed, it is the only major political force in Turkey that deploys elements of liberal multiculturalism in its discourse and programme.

After the military intervention in 1980, most of the Islamic parties in Turkey were closed down. However, the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of an interesting political phenomenon: the splitting of Turkish political Islam into two. The predominant tendency adapted itself to the modern liberal-democratic parliamentarian framework, describing itself as a Turkish version of the European Christian Democrats and naming its politics as ‘conservative-democratic’. Although it emerged from the tradition of an Islamic party, it questioned the place of Islamic politics in Turkey. In contrast, a minority tendency insisted on old-style Islamic fundamentalist politics. The former is pro-EU, while the latter is militantly against Turkish membership. The current party of government, the AKP, emphasizes human rights from a pluralist perspective. Differences in religion, culture and opinions are highly valued and secularism is seen as the principle that guarantees the freedom of expression of these differences. Turkey’s ties to the West and the vision of Turkey as a secular democracy have been embraced without qualification. One reason that it is strongly in favour of Turkey’s EU membership is that it sees the Union as a guarantor of religious freedom against the state and the army.

The institutionalized dissociation of religion from politics, the eradication of religion’s public and political presence, and the desire to contain it within the private sphere of faith (the Enlightenment consensus on religion) was the backbone of secularization in Asia and Africa, as well as in Western Europe and North America. However, unlike those countries in Western Europe whose secularization resulted from an internal transformation of religion itself,\(^3\) secularization in Turkey was accomplished by the use of coercive power. The use of legal institutions of the state in directing and tailoring the nature and course of the process of secularization has been central both historically and to the present political conjuncture in Turkey.

The increasing presence of politicized religion, not only in Turkey but all over the world in a variety of modern and modernizing societies, indicates that the conventional peripheral modernizing effort to differentiate structurally the spheres of politics, economy, science and individual faith (and hence relegate religion to a non-political space) have proven problematic. In common with the worldwide religious response to modern global realities, Islamism as a political movement in Turkey has developed responses to issues of democracy, family life, the ways in which national education is to be structured, the sort of scientific projects that can and should be funded, how the economy should be structured, human rights, and so on. Islam has become an integral
part of these public debates and has developed quite singular responses to such contentious issues. As Talal Asad notes, objects, sites, practices, words and representations (even the minds and bodies of worshippers) cannot be confined within the space of what secularists name ‘religion’. Yet the entry of Islam into such debates has created strong reactions on the part of defenders of secularism.

**Paranoid nationalism**

The public sphere is not a blank space; nor can it be constituted from scratch each time anew. The public sphere is constituted by the sensibilities, memories and aspirations, fears and hopes of its participants. It is a space that is historically inscribed. It is this inscription that helps explain why the ‘return of religion’ is deemed so distasteful and dangerous in Turkey. I do not mean to psychologize the reasons for the attribution of an abominable character to the presence of religion in the public sphere. However, secularist alarm at the idea of a religious invasion of the domain of the political can be understood as an instance of what Ghassan Hage calls ‘paranoid nationalism’. Hage notes that there are different modes of belonging to the nation. The paranoid mode of belonging entails ‘worrying’ as a result of feeling threatened. Such a defensive attitude flourishes because of an insecure attachment to a nation that is incapable of properly nourishing its citizens. Worrying thus results in the exertion of ‘a form of symbolic violence over the field of national belonging’, obliterating other possibilities and modes of belonging. The paranoid nationalist imaginary forecloses the possibility of a relation with the other.

One finds in Turkey a systematic and persistent questioning of the ‘motives’ of Islamists. The Islamic movement is attributed ‘hidden motives’ behind its apparent political behaviour, in particular via the use of the Islamic notion of *takiyye*. According to this concept, which can be translated as ‘dissimulation’, a Muslim is justified in hiding his or her real motives if the circumstances are unfavourable to the exercise of his or her faith. The concept of *takiyye* is often used indiscriminately as an umbrella term for Islamic politics in general. The whole of Islamic political behaviour is thus reduced to so many ways of covering up a larger secret plan to establish an Islamic hegemony and finally an Islamic regime of *sharia*. This attitude of wholesale accusation creates a paranoid political atmosphere that is increasingly inimical to democratic debate, which requires a minimal understanding of the political motive or rationale of others, and does not presuppose that everything is known in advance. Such an image of the ‘dissimulating other’ is familiar from Orientalist discourse. It demonstrates an unpleasant complicity between Orientalism and the authoritarian-nationalist version of secularism.

Secularism’s standard argument is that religion must remain within the terrain of individual faith and devotion. Any public appearance of religion, and any political claim that the religious make in matters pertaining to the domain of the nation-state, are regarded as a threat to individual freedom. Yet it is inevitable, given the historical exclusion of religion in Turkey, that the religious can only claim a social space by disrupting the sanctioned and authorized patterns of political debates and practices.

In defending the secular heritage and principles of Turkey, new patterns of expression are emerging. Secular sentiments, ceremonial and ritualistic practices and symbols are being deployed, such as attending to Atatürk’s mausoleum, excessive use of the Turkish flag, and the use of the slogan ‘Turkey will remain secular’ on almost every occasion, from protests about the AKP to football matches. Such expressions can be understand as a process of sacralization and transcendentalization of the principles of secularism. What needs to be asked is whether such ceremonialized and ritualized responses can also be considered symptoms of a new form of religion. The sacralized defence of the principles of secularism feeds the paranoid nationalist response. The insistence on the
categorical separation of the religious and the political leaves no room for a different and more responsible articulation of religion with the secular.

This is certainly not a good way to engage with the return of the religious in the public sphere. Given the urgent political task of creating a democratic and civil polity and society, it is important to develop a more positive and responsible ethical and political attitude to political Islam. Such a response would refuse to suffocate it with a self-righteous secularism. Instead, it would try to understand the social, economic, political and cultural conditions that have prompted Islam to emerge as a political movement.

Beyond the simple humanist benevolence of allowing the Muslim to speak (which we often find in reaction to Orientalism), such understanding is the only genuinely ethical response to Islamic difference. Conventional, mainstream secularism offers no analysis of Islam and remains blind to the reasons behind its politicization and ‘de-privatization’, to use José Casanova’s term. In so doing, it inhibits the possibility of the secularization of religious concepts, beliefs and practices.

As I finish this piece (23 July), the result of the general election in Turkey has been announced. To the dismay of the so-called social-democratic constituency, represented by the People’s Republic Party (CHP), established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Turkish electorate did not base its decision on fear of Islam. Ironically, manipulation of the fear of anti-secularism, articulated with nationalist sentiments and an anti-EU stance did not bring success to the CHP, but rather paved the way for the presence of the national-socialist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in parliament.

There are important lessons to be learned from the choice made by almost 50 per cent of the electorate that the current government should remain in power. One is that fear of anti-secularism is increasingly losing its currency. Another is the Turkish people’s disapproval of the military’s intrusion into politics. Presenting itself as the guardian of secularism, the military had intervened into politics (by a so-called ‘cyber coup’) during the nomination of the AKP’s candidate for presidency. The public’s disapproval of this intervention can be considered an important step towards the achievement of civil liberties and democratic principles.

Presenting themselves as heirs to Atatürk’s legacy, CHP supporters organized a series of large demonstrations during the election campaign. These demonstrations used secularism and anti-terror as their main discursive weapons against the current government. Some public intellectuals regard these demonstrations as indicators of a significant transformation of the modernist and Westernist tradition. It was suggested
that, unlike the secularism of the 1920s, which was imposed top-down, these demonstrations signified the reclaiming of the principles and ideology of secularism by the people themselves. This diagnosis is mistaken. First, it is dubious to regard these demonstrations as popular. Second, if Turkey’s political and social conjuncture reveals a significant transformation of the modernizing efforts of the early republican period, it is nonetheless misleading to search for the indicators of transformation in these demonstrations. Rather, the true indicator is the entrance of religion into the public sphere, via a unique articulation of the religious with other social, political and cultural issues.

Notes

Secularism and politics in Iran

Morad Farhadpour

The establishment of an Islamic state in Iran and the imposition of a system of ideological discrimination have turned secularism into a magical concept. For its defenders, it signifies a sacred cure for all the ills of Iranian society; for the Islamic state, it is a kind of sacrilege. In Iran, the concept of secularism is wholly determined by these two great forces; its political function is thus problematic. It is as if religion and the state have filled the space of history, leaving no room for politics.

Secularism is no less ambiguous in Western societies. It comprises many different, even divergent, moments, from the expropriation of the Church to Republican anti-clericalism and a Weberian disenchantment of the world. This ambiguity, intensified through decontextualization, means that any analysis of secularism in Iran has to be selective. What follows is an attempt to analyse the relationship of secularism to the possibility of democratic politics – or politics as democracy – in Iran. This analysis is based on belief in the political potential of the 1979 revolution, which to this day has remained inexhaustible. Unable to tolerate the void of this potentiality, the official jargon of the state tries to fill it in with the word ‘Islamic’, understood in an adjetival sense, rather than as part of the proper name ‘the Islamic Revolution’, given to the event by the event itself. The question is: can the word ‘secular’ act as a gatekeeper that keeps open the strait-gates of politics, or is it just another adjective that fills the gap between the state and the community, but cannot be internalized by them?

We can begin with a simple argument: every democracy or democratic state entails the formal equality of citizens before the law; a religious state, by definition, negates this condition; therefore, only a completely secular state can be considered democratic.