This article analyzes how the socio-religious minority of Turkish Alevis, in the course of the Alevi revival in the last two decades, adopted the language of religion as a means of empowerment in Turkey and Germany. In both cases, formations of Alevi identity in religious terms are encouraged by the specific discourses regarding legitimate formulations of identity. In Turkey, the question of Alevi recognition as a group legitimately different from Sunni Islam is entangled in ideological and material conflicts evolving around competing interpretations of Turkish nationalism, Islam, and laicism. Alevis are compelled to articulate their demands within this ideological framework if they want to advance their cause. In Germany, enunciations of Alevi identity likewise adjust to the local religion discourse, and here often transgress the languages of Islam and Turkish nationalism. Though configured differently, both secular and national contexts encourage Alevis to standardize and objectify Alevism using the language and grammar of religion. This reformulation of Alevism is accompanied by a restructuring of traditional knowledge and practice in secularist terms, distinguishing between religious and secular spaces, languages, and practices.
INTRODUCTION

IN RECENT DECADES, critical reflection on the history and politics of the category “religion” has entered the research agendas and classroom discussions within the broader field of religious studies. Most students of religion today will be familiar with a skepticism regarding the concept of religion espoused paradigmatically in J. Z. Smith’s famous dictum, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (1982: xi). More recent scholarship on the genealogy of the religion/secular and “world-religion” discourses has increased our understanding of the evolution of the modern concept of religion as well as its genealogical twin, the secular (Asad 1993, 2003; Masuzawa 2005). The differentiation between religious and secular spheres, languages, and practices characteristic of the discourse of religion emerged in conjunction with the rise of the modern nation-state, which established its authority to govern the newly imagined sphere of the secular qua definition and containment of the religious. Therefore, one can argue that within the semantics of the modern religio-secular paradigm, processes of “religionization”—i.e., the signification of certain spaces, practices, narratives, and languages as religious (as opposed to things marked as secular)—and “secularization” are constitutive of each other. While postcolonial studies has discussed the role of religion as a tool to legitimize and administer the hegemony of the nation-state, less attention has been directed to cases in which marginalized sociocultural communities have adopted the language of religion as a means of empowerment vis-à-vis assimilationist politics directed against them. Modern Alevism offers a compelling example of just such a case. Adjusting to the reigning religion discourses in Turkey and Germany, dominant Alevi currents display strong tendencies to “religionize” Alevism within the respective national frameworks.

The Alevis of Turkey make for roughly 15% of Turkey’s population [and are not to be confused with the Arab Alawīs (Nusayris)]. Roughly two-thirds of them speak Turkish, and the rest either the Kurdish Kurmanci dialect or Zazaki (as Kurdish, a northwestern Iranian language). Alevis insist on their difference from Sunni-Islam, manifested historically in their social and political marginalization within Ottoman and Turkish societies, their ritual and social practices, and a worldview strongly shaped by Twelver Shiite mythology, Islamic mysticism, as well as various non-Islamic traditions. Since the late 1980s, partially in response to a political climate which fostered the role of (Sunni) Islam as a constitutive part of national Turkish identity, Alevi began to claim their difference from the Sunni Islamic mainstream
more openly. They established new organizations and networks and formulated new meanings of Alevism. By now the process of institution building is consolidated and the legitimacy of a distinct Alevi identity is widely acknowledged. The debate on Alevism has entered a second phase in which questions concerning representation and internal organization have come to the forefront. The major challenge concerns the representation of Alevism vis-à-vis the Turkish public and state. While Alevis have recently been intensifying their endeavors to receive official recognition by the state, the debate on the terms and scope of incorporation into the state structure accentuates and deepens Alevi-internal divisions. The fierce dispute circles around a number of highly contested issues: Is Alevism a religious formation and if so, is it part of the Islamic tradition, or rather a religion in its own right? Which organizations and spokespersons can legitimately represent Alevism?

The debate on Alevism is embedded in the ideological and material conflicts evolving around competing interpretations of Turkish nationalism, Islam, and laicism, which frame public negotiation of sensitive identity issues to a great extent.1 The mainstream interpretations of Turkish nationalism and laicism, as endorsed by powerful state institutions such as the military, the judiciary, the educational system, and the state bureaucracy, are rather authoritarian2 and espouse a notion of legitimate religion derived from Turkish-Ottoman political traditions. As I will show, these institutions are, though ostensibly secular, strongly influenced by Sunni Islam—particularly when it comes to the definition of legitimate religion. Alevis are compelled to articulate their difference within the parameters of this ideological framework if they want to advance their cause. The degree of the Alevis’ adjustment to this discourse becomes apparent when compared to debates on Alevism in Germany, where roughly half a million Alevis form the strongest Alevi community outside of Turkey. Here, Alevis can take advantage of a more liberal religion discourse, and enunciations of Alevi identity are not confined to the semantics of Islam and Turkish nationalism. At the same time, Alevism is becoming increasingly transnational as reflected in the networking of Alevi organizations, as well as in the growing importance of the Internet as a means of communication, information,

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1 The tensions between secular and Islamic sensibilities, ideologies, and cultural practices—be it against or within (as mostly) particular nationalist framings—have a history that goes back to the beginning of the republic, and even beyond into Ottoman times. See, for example, Hanioğlu (1995), Bozdoğan and Kasaba (1997), Yavuz (2003), Cagaptay (2006), and Mardin (1989); for a classical modernist reading of the Turkish secularization project, see Berkes (1998).

2 For a critical historical account of the authoritarian state tradition in Turkey, see Heper (1985).
and political agitation. Thus, Alevi have to manage the tensions emerging from the locally specific opportunity spaces in Turkey and Germany on the one hand and increasingly universalized conceptualizations of Alevism on the other.

This article discusses how contemporary formulations of Alevism in Turkey and Germany interact with the respective national discourses on religion. It starts off with an overview of modern transformations of Alevism in the context of the Turkish nation-state, followed by an analysis of contemporary conflicts between Alevi and state institutions, as well as Alevi-internal debates regarding its proper representation vis-à-vis the state, and the necessities of modern Alevi practice. The comparison with Germany shows that in either national context, Alevi try to empower themselves qua objectification of Alevism as a religious tradition. The respective tracks of religionization, however, reveal significant differences. Unlike in Germany, within the laicist definition of state–religion relations in Turkey Alevis seem to be able to obtain official recognition only if they identify their place in relation to the symbolic universe of the Islamic tradition. Thus, the challenges that Alevi face in the transnational perspective teach us something not only about the changing and contested nature of specific understandings of religion and secularity, but also about the local embeddedness of these understandings and their pertinacity against rivaling interpretations. Ultimately, universalist rhetoric notwithstanding, religio-secular discourses are always embodied in locally specific practices and in dialogue with the particular contexts in which they are embedded.

ALEVI TRANSFORMATIONS

Alevism (Alevilik) is a distinctively modern term and concept. The conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte) of the term “Alevism” reveals how it gradually evolved since the second half of the nineteenth century, when different regional proto-Alevi groups seem to have begun to acquire a stronger we-group identity. Historically,

3 For a concise overview of the historical evolution of Alevism, its textual traditions, religious practices, beliefs, as well as modern developments, see Dressler (2008).
4 With the term “proto-Alevi,” I pay tribute to the fact that Alevism, as it is used today to identify a particular socio-religious group and identity, is a twentieth-century concept.
5 Main external factors for this development were the Tanzimat reforms in the nineteenth century (which introduced the idea of freedom of religion in the Ottoman Empire), and correspondingly, a growing demand for religious and national self-determination articulated first by non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities. For a contextualization of the Alevi case within this context, see Kieser (2000).
proto-Alevis were often pejoratively called Kızılbaş (“Redhead”) and denounced as heretics. Many Alevis as well as historians trace the roots of Alevism to the Babai dervishes who played an important role in the Turkish conquest of Anatolia and the Balkans in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries (Ocak 1989). In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, parts of this tradition became submerged in the Kızılbaş movement. The Kızılbaş were followers of the Safavi Sufi order, whose charismatic leader İsmail established the Safavid Empire in 1501, and thus founded the Safavid dynasty (Sohrweide 1965). After their bonds with the Safavids started to loosen in the late sixteenth century, some of the Anatolian proto-Alevis began to recognize dervishes of the Bektashi order as their religious mentors.6 With regard to the religious practices and beliefs of the overlapping Kızılbaş-Bektashi-Alevi milieus, we find an array of practices and conceptions rooted in pre/non-Islamic traditions, which amalgamated over time with popular Islamic, and particularly Sufi, concepts, and are embedded in Shiite mythology. This symbiosis has, as in the case of other Middle Eastern communities at the margins of Islam such as the Yezidi, the Nusayri, and the Druze, defied assimilation into the mainstreams of Sunni and Shiite Islam (Kehl-Bodrogi, Kellner-Heinkele, and Otter-Beaujean 1997).

Following the secularization of Turkish society in the first decades of the Turkish Republic (founded in 1923), the evidence of kinship-based proto-Alevi identities slowly decreased and they gradually faded while the new term “Alevism,” Alevilik, became more prominent. The transformations of Alevism in the twentieth century can be typified and summarized in terms of: first, secularization understood as decline of religious beliefs and practice; second, a turn to leftist ideologies; and third, a cultural and religious reorientation.7 Each of these ideotypical stages, which are historically and semantically interrelated, deserves attention.

As part of the secularization of the Turkish Republic, Sufi lodges were closed and all tarikat (Sufi order) activities banned in 1925. The ban included the practice of dedelik, the office of the dede (“elder”), the

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6 As a clearly distinguishable tarikat (Sufi order), Bektashism only emerged in the early sixteenth century. Its genealogy overlaps with that of the Babai and the Anatolian Kızılbaş (Dressler 2002: 26–102; cf. idem 2008). The best English description of Bektashi belief and ritual is still Birge (1994); see also Mélikoff (1998).

7 For overviews over these transformations with different foci, see Ellington (2004), Kehl-Bodrogi (1993), Vorhoff (1998a), and Massicard (2005a).
central social and religious institution in traditional Alevism.\(^8\) There are accounts of how dedes were discriminated against by local state representatives in the early years of the Republic, although this discrimination should not be seen as the main reason for the subsequent decline of the dedelik. Much more significant was the economically motivated exodus to the urban centers since the 1950s, which often cut the regular personal interaction between dedes and their followers, called talibs, “students,” and thus undermined the social fabric of traditional Alevism (Shankland 2003: 135–136; Yaman 2006: 38). After a temporary period of Alevi political activism in the 1960s, driven by pretty much the same reasons as the recent Alevi revival—but with much less success—the younger Alevi generations began to turn to leftist ideologies in the 1960s and 1970s (Bumke 1979; Massicard 2005b; cf. Ata 2007). The dedes’ authority was further damaged, and quite often they were now portrayed as charlatans exploiting ordinary people.

The erosion of traditional Alevism was a gradual process, which took place with different speed and intensity depending on social and geographic location. Until the 1960s, Alevis were almost unnoticeable in Turkey’s public. This changed with the increasing polarization between ultra-nationalists and leftists in the 1960s and the 1970s. The militant right, on the one side of the political spectrum, denounced Alevis as Kızılbaş (i.e., heretics), Kurds, and communists, thus portraying them as at once threatening the religious, ethnic, and political identity of the nation. Indeed, Alevis overwhelmingly tended to the left, for the most part identifying with the universalistic worldviews offered by socialism and Marxism. If they did use Alevism as a point of reference, then they did so by reinterpreting Alevi symbols in line with their politics, which put them into conflict with those loyal to traditional Alevism (Bumke 1979: 543f.; Dressler 2003: 125f.). But the breakdown of the traditional hierarchies eventually facilitated the emergence of a new urban Alevi elite (Yaman 2003: 333). Unlike most dedes, this new secular Alevi elite, which is the brain and motor of the recent Alevi revival, has the social and communicative skills necessary to capitalize on the opportunities that emerged with the privatization of the Turkish media, and the concomitant gradual expansion of the public sphere since the late 1980s (Yavuz 1999).

\(^8\) With “traditional Alevism,” I mean Alevism as it was practiced before the impact of secularization and urbanization hit the Anatolian and Thracian countryside and impacted on the boundaries and social practices of Alevism.
From the late 1980s onward, Alevis put more emphasis on the religious dimension of Alevism. This development has to be situated in the context of the political and economic makeover of Turkey following the coup d’état in 1980. Aiming for the establishment of a neo-liberal order, the elites surrounding the Turkish military now systematically increased Islamic institutions as a bulwark against the left. Facilitated by a booming media sector, religion went public to an un-precedent extent. While in the 1960s and 1970s the political debate was shaped by Cold War polemics, which had put the extreme right, a growing bourgeois establishment, and a revolutionary left against each other leading to a political padlock and sporadic accesses of violence, the top-down orchestrated turn to religion after 1980 facilitated the rise of political Islam and would lead successively, with gradual political liberalization, to a reorientation of the political discourse along a reinvigorated secularist-Islamist fault line. Prime Minister Turgut Özal (1983–89), one of the prime architects of Turkey’s new economic liberalism, was a moderate figure in that regard. He supported the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, an ideological project, which aimed at reconciling a universalistic Islamic with a particularistic Turkish identity and redirected the Turkish state ideology of Kemalism toward a conservative modernism, Islamic but secular, and committed to a nationalism directed against perceived separatist threats, be they ethnic or religious (Yavuz 2003: 69–75; cf. Seufert 1997). Though one of its obvious targets, the Alevis did not subscribe to this new ideology, which presented Turkish Islam as Sunni Islam and which paved the way for intensified efforts in assimilating them, as manifested, for example, in the establishment of mandatory religious education (based on the Sunni faith) in school (since 1982) and in the increase in mosque construction in Alevi villages—mostly against the will of their inhabitants (Dressler 2002: 203–209).

The Alevis had to adjust to the new parameters of Turkey’s post-1980 political discourse. With religion having become a major point of reference for political identity formations, many Alevis, formerly aligned with the now largely dysfunctional left, began to assert Alevi identity within a universalistic human rights discourse and secularist rhetoric of religious freedom and self-determination. Alevis now turned to their half-forgotten traditions, which they increasingly formulated in explicitly religious terms, thus to a certain extent appropriating the language of post-1980 Turkish identity politics. They began to forcefully confront Turkish society with their demands for recognition of Alevism as an identity significantly different from mainstream Sunni Islam. As a consequence, since the late 1980s, not only Turkey but also countries with significant numbers of Turkish immigrants such as Germany
witnessed reformulations of Alevism as a distinct worldview, way of life, cultural practice, and religion.

With the Alevi revival, public discussions on the nature of Alevism emerged. What is Alevism? and What do the Alevis want? became widely debated questions in the Turkish public. Alevi activists responded by stressing their difference from Sunni Islam, and demanding recognition by state and society as a legitimate community. They initiated an Alevi historiography from below and began to discuss Alevi beliefs and practices publicly; they founded Alevi organizations and created new Alevi spaces, networks, and media. This process was accelerated by a horrific incident in 1993, which had a profound impact on the Alevi revival. On June 2, thirty-five people—most of them Alevi—died after an incited mob chanting “God is Great” set fire to a hotel in Sivas, which hosted guests of the annual festival in honor of the Alevi poet Pir Sultan Abdal. Local security forces watched the horrific massacre without intervening.9 Another important incident was the military’s interference in Turkish politics in 1997.10 In the context of heightened anti-Islamist awareness, leading state officials turned toward the Alevis as allies in their fight against political Islam. Some went even so far as to promote Alevism as an example of a purportedly secular Turkish Muslim tradition, an interpretation popularized in 1998 with the notion of the Turkish Muslimdom, which was juxtaposed to (of course less secular and modern) stereotypes of Arab and Iranian Muslimdoms (Dressler 2002: 193–213).

Throughout the twentieth century, identity politics in Turkey remained strongly contested. The Kemalist modernization program entailed the control of public religion and the privatization of individual religiosity (referred to as laicism since the 1930s), and Turkish Nationalism was promoted as the new nation’s main source of identity (cf. Dressler 1999). Nevertheless, Sunni Islam maintained a strong influence on public discourse and on the worldview of a large part of the population (Seufert 1997). Compared to Sunnism, Turkish Alevism was relatively more affected by the social transformations of the last century. Drastic economic and social changes between the 1950s and 1970s led to a rural exodus, which destroyed traditional Alevism’s bonds of

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9 For this and other instances of anti-Alevi violence in the republic, see Jongerden (2003).
10 On 28 February 1997, the military-dominated National Security Council issued a manifesto discrediting the politics of the government coalition led by the Islamist Welfare Party. The manifesto addressed practices supposedly undermining the laicist foundation of the state. The increased pressure forced the government to subscribe to the manifesto and eventually step back; the Welfare Party was prohibited in the following year.
affiliation based on kinship and lineage. In the urban context, Alevism had to be recreated. Broader concepts of Alevism gained leverage which could provide a common identity beyond regional particularisms. Until the 1970s, they were often politically coined, but since the late 1980s, they began to recenter around notions of culture and religion. Identity claims in the name of culture and religion hit sensitive spots in the post-1980 public sphere and allowed the Alevis to enter the debate demanding their recognition as legitimately different but equal.

REPRESENTATION CONTESTED

In Turkey, public assertions of identity which challenge the hegemonic concept of Turkish nationalism alert Kemalist hardliners who stick to an exclusivist and narrow interpretation of the state mantra of “unity and togetherness” (birlik ve beraberlik). The guiding principles of Turkish nationalism have, since the early twentieth century, been ambiguous, wavering between racial, cultural, ethnic, and citizenship-based leitmotifs (Cagaptay 2006). To varying degrees, the prescribed Turkishness of the nation has always challenged the legitimacy of ethnically non-Turkish citizens and fueled particularistic and at times even seditionist ambitions, as, for example, in the case of the Kurdish separatist movement. Alevis are naturally afflicted by this dynamic since significant parts of the Alevis embrace Kurdish identities. The situation is complicated by the fact that Turkish nationalism entails a rather

11 Recent polls among Alevis indicate clear preferences for self-identifications in cultural and religious terms. Questioning 208 Alevis from two Ankara neighborhoods about the definition of Alevism, Kâmil Frat received the following distribution on his three pre-prepared responses: “true Islam,” 52.4%; “independent religion outside of Islam,” 1.9%; “way of life,” 45.2% (Frat 2005: 55). In a poll by Nail Yılmaz among 364 Alevis (equally divided among Istanbul and an Alevis village), a vast majority of 89.8% declared that Alevism was carrying “cultural/religious,” as opposed to “ethnic” (4.3%), “religious and ethnic” (4.8%), or “other” (0.5%) meanings (Yılmaz 2005: 210). Another poll by Ahmet Taşğun among Turkmen Alevis in the Southeast of Turkey showed similar results: among 309 surveyed, 35% defined Alevism as “religious subgroup” (mezhep), 29% as “culture,” and 36% as “way of life” (Taşğun 2006: 48). The results of two earlier studies, conducted in the 1990s, are not very different. Ali Aktaş asked a total of 1623 visitors of two Alevi centers (one in Istanbul, one in central Anatolian Hacıbektaş) about their definition of Alevism and received the following responses: “religion (independent of Islam),” 10.4%; “religious subgroup” (mezhep), 43.4%; “Sufi order” (tarikat), 10.4%; “culture,” 16.1%; “way of life,” 16.9%; “other,” 6.8% (Aktaş 1999). Also compare the study by Hüseyin Bal, whose relatively small survey (45 persons) from two Turkish Alevi villages showed results congruent to those above (1997: 173). While none of these results can claim to be statistically representative for Alevi at large, taken together they still provide a reasonably clear picture about Alevi self-images, even if the terms are vague and their meanings would have to be further scrutinized.

12 The identity conflicts within Alevism along competing ethnic and nationalist configurations are comprehensively addressed in White and Jongerden (2003).
authoritarian form of laicism (Turk: laiklik—together with nationalism, one of the sacred principles of the state ideology of Kemalism), while implicitly maintaining a Muslim self-understanding. Indeed, there is a widely shared perception that the Turkish nation is Muslim, and, more specifically, Sunni.13 On this background, it becomes clear that Alevi claims of religious difference challenge both Turkish Nationalism and laicism, which perceive identity conceptions deviating from the Sunni-Turkish norm as threatening the internal peace and unity of the country, in powerful ways.

Alevis and the Directorate for Religious Affairs

For Alevis, the nonrecognition of Alevism is embodied in the Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, hereafter DRA), which they accuse of trying to assimilate them into mainstream Sunni Islam. The DRA is a massive state bureaucracy, the budget of which exceeds that of many government ministries. It defines and organizes legitimate public Islamic practice and is responsible, among other things, for Islamic education, mosque construction and maintenance, issuing of legal opinions (fatwas), and the pilgrimage to Mecca. The organization of religion by the Turkish state perpetuates forms of religious control established in the late Ottoman Empire, where Christian and Jewish denominations had a considerable degree of autonomy while Alevis were not recognized. Unlike Sunni Muslims and those non-Muslim communities14 who were recognized as minorities following the Lausanne Peace Treaty (1923), Alevis never received official status or representation.15 Purportedly, religious Alevi spaces and activities are therefore illegal. While there have been concessions to the Alevis in the last decade, which show increasing de facto toleration of Alevism as a legitimate identity, this has as of yet not led to any serious endeavors to lift their institutional discrimination. The situation leaves the Alevis with two main options: either they oppose the symbols and institutions of the hegemonic discourse or they appropriate them, as well as possible, for their own purposes. Alevis who highly value loyalty toward the state generally support the integration of Alevism into the

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13 The term millet (“nation”), in late Ottoman times a legal term for recognized religious communities, maintained a strong religious connotation since the beginnings of its incorporation into Turkish nationalism (Zürcher 1999).

14 The term “non-Muslim” referred to Christians and Jews and not to Alevis, who were, after all, still considered Muslims, even if suspected of heresy.

15 For an excellent and concise treatment of the minority question as interpreted in Turkey following Lausanne, see Oran (2003); for a short discussion of the positioning of the Alevis within Turkey’s minority discourse, see Dressler (2007).
DRA, while more state-critical Alevis argue for the abolishment of the DRA, urging the state to withdraw from the organization of religious affairs, which they regard as contradicting the state’s principle of laicism—in this context interpreted by them along the lines of a more liberal secularism. The following statement, made in 1994 by its then-president Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz, still reflects the DRA’s position on the Alevi question: “Alevism is not a religion. Nor is it a sect of Islam. Alevism is a culture” (quoted in Şahin 2001: 237). While the DRA has as of yet not shown any inclination to acknowledge Alevism as a distinct religious tradition, be it within or outside the abode of Islam, it recently seems to prefer a softer rhetoric, which stresses the place of Alevism within the Islamic tradition at large. As an example serves a press release from March 2004 by the DRA’s current president Ali Bardakoğlu on the occasion of a conference organized by the Alevi Ehl-i Beyt Foundation:

Alevism, too, is part of our Islamic imagination. Like the other sub-groups of Islam, it is an important orientation and thus a contribution which is worth our respect. The way in which Islam has been internalized by the Alevi people created a tradition which is compelling in its spiritual richness and affection…Alevis belong to the most important currents of our culture, and with their particularities there is no doubt that they will add…to the richness of the religious life of our country. (T.C. Başbakanlık Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2004)

At first, this statement might appear to entail a sympathetic recognition of Alevi difference. However, the addressed Ehl-i Beyt Foundation is a rather marginal Alevi organization, which supports an understanding of Alevism as a Turkish version of Twelver Shiism and represents only a tiny portion of the Alevi community. In this light, what appears as recognition of Alevism at first sight should rather be understood as support for a very particular interpretation of Alevism, one which is much closer to mainstream Islamic orthodoxy than the Alevism as understood by the majority of Alevis. In a more recent statement by Saim Yeprem, Deputy Chairman of the Diyanet’s “High Counsel on Religious Affairs,” the possibility of conceive of Alevism as a legitimate subgroup (mezhep) of Islam is once more denied. Instead, Yeprem offers to classify Alevism as a “Sufi formation” (tasavvufi bir oluşum) (Çalışlar 2007).

Alevi-Internal Competition

Alevi-internal disagreement on proper representation vis-à-vis the state and the nature of Alevism is severe and furthers political and
organizational divisions. An example is the debate surrounding the Directorate of Religious Services of Alevi Islam (Alevi İslam Din Hizmetleri Başkanlığı, hereafter DRSA). As it turns out, the resemblance of the name to the DRA is programmatic. The DRSA was founded in November 2003 on the occasion of the “Third Convention of Anatolian Leaders of Faith,” an initiative sponsored by the CEM Foundation. The CEM Foundation (Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi, “Center for Republican Education and Culture,” hereafter CEM) is a Kemalist and state-loyal Alevi association with its headquarters in Istanbul. Both the annually gathering Convention of Anatolian Leaders of Faith and the DRSA are part of CEM’s network, created to broaden its legitimacy and to position it as the most powerful player within the contested field of Alevi politics. In its founding document, the DRSA outlines its goals as follows:

To carry out the duties related to belief, form of worship, historical development, philosophy, social and ethical principles, as well as communication and culture of Alevi Islam; to guarantee, through training in religion, belief, and practice the enlightenment of society and, according to [the Directorate’s] aims, its application and supervision in the places of worship. The faith of Alevi Islam represents the Alevi-Bektaşi-Mevlevi-Nusayri as well as other belief groups which are based on this interpretation of Islam. (CEM Vakfı 2003)

The DRSA challenges the monopoly of the DRA and is a reaction to the state’s refusal to formally acknowledge Alevis and provide them with a share of the DRA’s competence and budget. The rhetoric through which the DRSA legitimates itself is certainly remarkable and reflects a major trend within the Alevi movement. Without using the contested terms din (religion) and mezhep (legitimate religious subgroup), it claims that Alevism is a particular interpretation of the Islamic religion. Distinguishing between belief, worship, philosophy, ethics, and culture, “Alevi Islam” is conceptualized with categories which could be taken from any traditional text book on world religions. Incorporating the Turkish Sufi traditions of the Mevlevi and Bektaşi orders, as well as the Nusayris, the notion of Alevi Islam is broadened to obtain legitimacy as an Islamic “interpretation” which incorporates a

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16 Regarding the competing Alevi discourses and the major organizations associated with them, see Dressler (2002: 176–191), Massicard (2005a: 55–127), and Erman and Göker (2000).
wide array of groups at the periphery of Islamic discourse. The DRSA attracted considerable public attention upon its foundation, but it has not been able to establish itself as an authoritative Alevi voice—neither among Alevis outside the CEM network nor within the broader public. Its rhetoric nevertheless reflects a growing self-assuredness of Alevi communities daring to confront the hegemonic state interpretation of Islam.

In opposition to most other Alevi organizations, CEM distinguished itself since its foundation through a rather conciliatory position toward the state, and embraced nationalist rhetoric and symbols. When its demand for official state recognition did not lead to any significant policy change (although occasionally—especially prior to elections—well received by leading politicians), CEM decided to take a more aggressive stance. Thus, the DRSA has to be seen as an attempt to increase the pressure on the state regarding the Alevi demands. Since the CEM network voices its criticism against the DRA’s Sunni exclusivism from a position which is decisively state-loyal and Turkish-Islamic, it might be in the long run more successful than Alevi voices with a leftist and state-critical approach who oppose the Turkish-Islamic paradigm. On the other hand, its strong Kemalist rhetoric and demeanor seem to have tempered its political success since the Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party became the major political force following the general elections of 2002.

The politics of the CEM network and its charismatic leader İzzettin Doğan (born 1940) are highly disputed within the Alevi community. Reactions from Alevi umbrella organizations competing with CEM are very critical of the DRSA, questioning both its legitimacy and its aims. İbrahim Karakaya, then general secretary of the Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association (Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği, hereafter PSAKD), which inherited much of the political ethos of the Alevi left of the 1970s and is extremely state-critical, believes that “İzzettin Doğan wants to establish his own sharia and Diyanet [DRA]. That might work in Iran, but it is contradicting the belief, culture, and philosophy of the Alevi-Bektashi in Turkey. We don’t have clerics (quoted in Önal 2003).” Karakaya implicitly accuses CEM of giving in to the pressures of Sunni-Muslim discourse. Unlike CEM, Karakaya not only vehemently criticizes the DRA, but demands its abolishment. He voices Alevi fears that incorporation into the state administration would undermine their independence from the state. Already at a very early point in the Alevi revival, this position has been put forward by Şahin Ulusoy, who belongs to one of the Alevi most prominent dede-lineages. As a member of parliament for the Republican People’s Party (CHP),
he gave in 1992 an extremely sharp speech in the parliament, in which he directly attacked the DRA’s assimilatory politics against the Alevis and openly demanded its abolishment.17 Turgut Öker, president of the powerful Germany-based Federation of the Alevi Communities in Germany (Almanya Alevi Birliği Federasyonu, hereafter FACG), also joined in the criticism of both CEM and the existing organization of religious affairs in Turkey. Claiming that “in Europe, there is no institution like the DRA” and demanding that “the state must not interfere in beliefs and should adopt the standards of the European Union,” Öker capitalizes on his position from outside of Turkey and draws on international human rights conventions to challenge the Turkish discourse (Yaşar 2003).

One of the major criticisms put forward against CEM by rival Alevi organizations concerns its understanding of “Alevi Islam,” which Karakaya regards as reactionary—especially if compared to the “modern” approaches of the Alevi Bektashi Federation (Alevi Bektaşî Federasyonu, hereafter ABF):

[The approach] of the ABF is fighting to defend the Alevi tradition, [which is] modern, laicist, democratic, and legal. Another approach is the approach of which İzzettin Doğan has taken the leadership, which defends the Islam thesis, and which depicts Alevism as a religion (din) within the Islamic civilization (İslamiyet)… There is no place for CEM within the Alevi-Bektashi organizations. (quoted in Önal 2003)

The ABF is the largest Alevi umbrella organization in Turkey and claims to represent roughly 400,000 Alevis through its local and national member associations, which include the PSAKD (Alevi Bektaşî Federasyonu 2002). Politically it is closely connected to the FACG. It strongly disputes CEM’s legitimacy as an authentic Alevi organization. Kazım Genç, the president of the PSAKD, accuses CEM of having dismissed initiatives for a broad Alevi alliance such as the ABF, instead opting to pursue its particularistic interests and promoting the “idea of the Alevi Islam thesis.” He denounces the creation of the DRSA as contradicting basic Alevi values of democracy and laicism and regards it as an act of treason against the Alevi faith: “[It] intends to assimilate

17 In 1997, he repeated his position in a parliamentary debate on the DRA’s budget for 1998. Since the previous year, Alevis received a relatively small amount of money from the state’s budget (Massicard 2005a: 127). Ulusoy suggested that the Alevis should reject money from the state in order to preserve their independence—however, the Alevi associations opted to accept (Şahin 2001: 232f.; Shankland 2003: 161–163).
Alevism and is even more dangerous than the Diyanet [DRA] and the mandatory religious education it imposes” (Genç 2003).

The differentiation within Alevism along religious and political lines is a serious problem for all Alevi activists who try to enhance their legitimacy against a state which capitalizes on these divisions for its assimilation politics. While the competing Alevi organizations are united in their complaints against the state and the non-Alevi public concerning continuing discrimination, their visions of the nature of Alevism and its ideal positioning toward the Turkish state differ significantly. This disagreement is reflected in intensifying competition on symbolic and material resources. The polemical debate surrounding the foundation of the DRSA highlights the degree to which the question of Alevi representation is connected with the religious definition of Alevism. Ultimately, the answer to the question as to whether there should be a place for the Alevis within the state’s structure depends on how Alevism is defined in Turkey. If one conceives of Alevism as a religion (din) in its own right, then one might argue that it should get far-reaching autonomy in its religious affairs, as the recognized minorities already have. If Alevism is conceived as a legitimate branch of Islam (mezhep), then it is possible to demand its representation within the DRA or alternatively the creation of an official Alevi Directorate parallel to the DRA. Either option, however, requires a formal clarification of the religious status of Alevism. The debate takes place against the backdrop of continuous anti-Alevi prejudices in the non-Alevi public, where notions of Alevism as a deviation from the right path of Islam, that is a heresy, are still widespread. Such a view legitimates assimilation politics, which aims at redirecting Alevism toward the Islamic mainstream.

In fact I argue that it is the grammar of Turkish laicism that renders the question of the legitimate place of Alevism a religious one. Almost all of the publicly discussed interpretations of Alevism, whether put forward by Sunni Muslims or by laicist state representatives, employ religious terminology. Alevis do so, too, for example, when they describe Alevism as the true Shia, as a particular form of secular Turkish Islam, as a legitimate Islamic subgroup (mezhep), as the kernel of Islam, as mystical Islamic philosophy or Sufi order (tarikat), or as religion (din) in its own right. In competition with those religious interpretations, other Alevis conceived of it as a philosophical worldview, “way of life,” or as a revolutionary ethics, i.e., a kind of premodern class struggle philosophy. However, even those Alevis who reject the religion thesis are, given its dominance in public discourse,
inclined to relate to it. In a sense, Turkish laicism’s obsessive anxiety about religion and its regulation pushes Alevism in a more thoroughly “religious” direction. The Sunni-dominated discourse as molded through Turkish laicism exerts a strong pressure on Alevis to streamline and theologize their beliefs. In order to be taken seriously as a player in Turkey’s religio-political field, many Alevis feel that they have to first systematically reconstruct and solidify their tradition. Paradoxically, they can obtain official recognition by the laicist Turkish state only if they identify their place in relation to the symbolic universe of the Islamic tradition. Thus, they increasingly refer to Alevism in Islamic terms. In Turkey, the notion of Alevism as a distinct religious tradition independent of Islam is thus relatively marginalized.

Redefining Dedelik

The religionization of Alevism is epitomized in the new role of the Alevi dedes. With the Alevi revival, the dedes gained new respect and were assigned an important function in reconnecting Alevism with its traditions. For the survival of Alevism as a religious tradition with more than merely folkloristic appeal, the question of how to sustain the dedelik became a central concern. In the context of traditional, rural Alevism, the dede conveyed ritual, social, and judicial authority. He moderated conflicts, and represented sociopolitical power. His main ritual obligation was to lead the ayin-i cem (“celebration of community”), the central Alevi ritual. The dedes’ authority to perform the rituals and to instruct on the rules of the mystical path is derived from their descent from recognized sacred lineages. Today, especially in urban environments, the mediating functions of the dede seem to be gone; they had been tied into the socioeconomic fabric of traditional Alevism, which largely eroded due to urbanization and secularization. But the dede is still regarded as indispensable for the rituals, and larger cemevis (cem houses) usually have a practicing dede employed to conduct the rituals. Today, Alevis

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18 These different interpretations of Alevism are not static in any sense, although they might appear like that if employed in political debate. Rather, they should be understood as flexible approaches that can, to a certain extent at least, be combined and cross-layered in multiple ways.
19 For a comprehensive discussion of the modern transformation of the dedelik, see Dressler (2006) and also Sökefeld (2002).
20 Dedes claim to be seyyids, i.e., descendents from the prophet Muhammad.
21 There are, however, still Alevi villages where social practices of traditional Alevism are maintained. Some villages still, or again, have regular cem rituals and to varying degrees acknowledge the leadership of resident or visiting dedes. But even in the village, the authority of the dede is limited by state institutions (Shankland 2003).
discuss how to reform and revive the dedelik in trans-regional and transnational urban contexts. Many Alevis still regard the dedes as the most authoritative carriers of Alevi traditions. However, their role as a main source of Alevi knowledge is contested by non-dede Alevis and by the new secular Alevi organizations which provide social and cultural services, which are for many probably more important than the Alevi rituals in which only few participate (Şahin 2001: 204–207). Non-dede Alevis publish on Alevism and cover a wide range of themes such as mythology, history, beliefs, and practices and thus participate in the production of new Alevi knowledge. While they still play an important role in providing religious legitimacy, the dedes play only a marginal role in the leadership of Alevi organizations. These organizations are mostly led not by dedes but by middle-class talib professionals. Crucial for the efficacy of the new Alevi elite are organizational and communicative skills (Şahin 2001: 156–159). The new secular leaders, and most successfully those who are familiar with the cultural codes of the Kemalist middle class, represent Alevism in public; they publish, speak at conferences, and participate in radio and TV talk shows. Their thusly gained media charisma reaffirms their authority and adds to their standing within the Alevi community (Yavuz 1999).

One major concern for contemporary Alevis is the dedes’ state of education. Alevis are debating the kinds of knowledge a modern dede should have and the type of education he should receive. While some demand state support for Alevi-run dede education programs, others want to remain independent. Some Alevi organizations, such as CEM and the Alevi Academy (Germany), initiated programs for the education of dedes. In 2003, the Alevi Academy began an Educational Program for the Perfection of the Dede, developed in close cooperation with the FACG, covering an array of subjects from “The Alevi Path and Its Religious Principles” to “Comparative Religion,” taught, depending on the subject, by dedes as well as non-Alevi academics (Alevi Akademisi n.d.). This project has been revived and expanded in 2006 under the leadership of the FACG. Such institutionalized forms of dede education are conducive to a homogenization of Alevism. There have been attempts by CEM as well as by the dede council of the FACG to standardize the cem ceremony (Şahin 2001: 222; Sökefeld 2002: 174). CEM recently began to distribute within its network a handbook for conducting the cem ritual (Alevi İslam Din Hizmetleri Başkanlığı 2006). The FACG’s dede council has also published a calendar of sacred days

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22 For an excellent overview of Alevi literary production, see Vorhoff (1998b).
for Alevis, providing information on how to celebrate Alevi holidays (Şahin 2001: 222). While voices pushing for a standardization of Alevi belief and ritual are becoming more prominent (Yaman 2003: 344), critics urge not to sacrifice the plurality of Alevi practices which they regard as constitutive of the Alevi tradition.

The integration of dedes into the Alevi associations and the establishment of dede councils by the larger Alevi organizations reflect a secular remodeling of Alevi hierarchies. This new structure secures the dede’s active participation in the Alevi reformulation process, while at the same time limiting his authority to a newly defined religious sphere, effectively rendering the dede a religious specialist. The only sphere still dominated by the dede is the field of Alevi ritual. This compartmentalization of authority is part of the religionization of modern Alevism insofar as it establishes and normalizes boundaries between religious and secular spaces and practices.

ALEVI RELIGIONIZING IN GERMANY

As a minority, Alevis are to a certain degree forced to adjust their endeavors for recognition to the dominant legal and political discourses. In Turkey, state institutions and political parties have, despite some significant Alevi successes in the courts, not been very accommodating in supporting Alevi claims.23 The stagnation of affairs leaves the Alevis with two principal options: either to oppose the hegemonic discourse, or to play by its rules and appropriate them as well as possible for their own purposes. Public and legal recognition of Alevism is in fact much further developed in Germany.24 Here, Alevis do not face the same pressure to assimilate into mainstream Islam, and Alevi activists are more likely to define Alevism outside of an Islamic and Turkish nationalist framework.

The Alevis’ turn to a more explicitly religious self-representation in Germany has been encouraged by factors particular to the European

23 A new debate on how to integrate Alevism more formally into the state administration of religion has been triggered from within the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in late 2007, promising among other things that it would consider recognizing cemevis as places of worship (İşik 2007). But as of yet (March 2008), no concrete steps in this direction have been taken.

24 Certainly, it has to be taken into account that the German situation bears other challenges for Alevis, which have to do with the local immigration discourse and the competition between Alevi and Sunni Turks for recognition and resources. Sökefeld (2003) provides an informed overview on the development of Alevi organization building and Alevi politics in Germany; see also Kehl-Bodrogi (2006) and Sökefeld (2008).
and German context. For one, since the end of the 1990s, German immigration politics began to recognize religion as an important factor for the integration of Muslim and especially Turkish immigrants into German society. Secondly, post-9/11 anxiety created an environment favorable for a modeling of Alevism as an alternative to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, with which mainstream (Sunni and Shia) Islam was associated in public discourse (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 12–14; Sökefeld 2008). Alevi adapted to these shifts in the political climate and increased the dose of religious language in their public representation. Besides that they were also aware that claims for religious originality and autonomy promised the greatest chance for success in their quest for legal recognition.

Religious Education and the Objectification of Alevism

Since the late 1990s, Alevi engaged in developing curricula for religious education at elementary schools. In 2001, the FACG published an outline of the motivations and goals of Alevi religious education within a cooperative project which aimed at the development of a joined Sunni-Alevi curriculum (Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu 2001a). The paper specifies Alevi topics to be incorporated in curricula for Muslim education and draws sharp lines between Alevism and Sunni Islam:

Contrary to Sunni Islam, women in Alevism are equal to men in doctrine as well as in religious practice… Alevism does not know separation of the sexes. Alevi doctrine does not regard the veiling of women a matter of faith. Polygamy is forbidden in Alevi doctrine… Alevi despise blood feud… Alevism does not recognize a divinely revealed sharia law… Alevi pray individually… and do not visit mosques… Alevi do not do the pilgrimage to Mecca. Alevi do not fast at Ramadan, but 12 days in the month of Muharram. Alevi do not proselytize and regard the secular and democratic state system as guarantee of their religious freedom and [therefore] support this system. (Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu 2001b)

The text shows how some Alevi try to capitalize on negative representations of Islam in Germany. In statements like this, Alevism is presented as an alternative Islam, indirectly claiming a sense of superiority over Sunni Islam.25 Presenting themselves as the more modern,

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25 The idea of Alevism as the other Islam once in a while receives academic support, as, for example, expressed in the booklet by Christoph P. Baumann (1994). It also finds appeal in the
secular, and democratic Muslims, Alevis attempt to convert their position at the margins of the Islamic tradition into an advantage. In their competition with Sunni Muslims for political resources, they use anti-Muslim stereotypes in order to emphasize their own compatibility with “modern” values and ways of life (Sökefeld 2003: 145–148; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 12–14).

Unsurprisingly, attempts to create a joint Sunni-Alevi Islamic education failed. Alevis now focus on developing their own curricula independent from Sunni Muslim organizations. This forces them to go beyond their defensive stance against Sunnism and to represent Alevi belief in more positive terms. A summary description of the FACG’s Alevi religious education curriculum defines three major subjects on which religious instruction should focus: (i) the philosophy of the Unity of Being and the relationship between God and man, (ii) being human and/or liberation from egoism, (iii) and the meaning of mankind’s existence, or the unity of soul and body. With emphasis on belief rather than practice, Alevism is presented as a religious philosophy combining Sufi thought with modern humanistic values (the meaning of “being human,” emphasis on the responsibility for the protection of animals and the environment) embedded within a distinctively Alevi terminology (the unity of God-Muhammad-Ali) (Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu 2002).

Already in 2000 and 2001, the FACG applied in the name of its local constituencies in several federal states for the establishment of Alevi religious education (Kaplan 2001). The first voluntary Alevi religious education classes opened in August 2002 at several public primary schools in Berlin, just one year after the (Suni-Muslim) Islamic Federation (Islamische Föderation) began to offer religious education at some Berlin schools following a ruling in its favor by the Federal Administration Court in February 2000. The success of the Islamic Federation had created considerable unrest in the public due to its alleged fundamentalist tendencies, and the Berlin Senate’s subsequent willingness to grant the same right to the local Cultural Center of Anatolian Alevis (Kulturzentrum Anatolischer Aleviten), a member media. Most recently, a BBC report labeled the Alevis “an unorthodox, liberal branch of Islam” (Rainsford 2008).

26 References are made to the doctrine of wahdat al-wuğūd (“Unity of Being”), the fight against the nafs (carnal soul, or ego), the notion of dying-before-death, and the ideal of al-insān al-kāmil (“the perfect man”).

27 In Germany, school education is under the sovereignty of the federal states (Bundesländer).
organization of the FACG, was certainly at least in part motivated by the political wish to support a version of Islam supposedly more akin to German sensitivities—even if knowledge about Alevism in the German public remained negligible (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 11–12).

In order to offer confessional education at public schools, Alevis have to obtain recognition as a religious community ("Religionsgemeinschaft") in a legal sense. This requires first of all a certain coherence of religious dogma and the existence of an institutional body which could authoritatively define the teachings of the community, supervise the development of curricula, and represent the community vis-à-vis the state (Spuler-Stegemann 2002: 247–254). Following the FACG's application for conducting religious education, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia commissioned two scholarly reports to elaborate on the religious nature of Alevism and on whether the FACG fulfilled the criteria for a religious community. The first report, by Islamicist Ursula Spuler-Stegemann (2003), which discusses the religious status of Alevism from a religious studies perspective, concludes that the FACG in fact represents a religious community in the sense of the German law. The second report was written by a professor of jurisprudence, who approached the question of whether the FACG fulfilled the criteria for a religious community from the viewpoint of German law (Muckel 2004). This report, too, approved in principle of the FACG's compliance with said criteria, and in 2006 the status of religious community was granted to the FACG (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 15; cf. Sökefeld 2008: 287). It is interesting to note the state's practice of dividing religious and juristic competency in the evaluation of the FACG. As both Alevism's validity as religion and the FACG's fulfillment of secular legal criteria had to be assessed, theological and judicial judgments were intrinsically connected while still formally divided. Since their judgment on the religious and legal quality of the applying group had considerable weight, secular scholars were attributed a quasi-theological role in the evaluation process. This is particularly ironic in the case of religious studies scholars. Within secularist discourse, it paradoxically seems to be the supposed neutrality of "secular" religion scholarship that is regarded as precondition for objective quasi-theological assessment. Thus, the logic of the secular discourse constantly re-produces religion.

The application for the right to organize religious education at public schools heightened the Alevi-internal debate regarding the religious nature of Alevism. Developing curricula and teaching Alevism required its systematization in accordance with set standards for confessional education and further pushed the "discussion on how to define Alevism as culture or religion" (Şahin 2001: 224). The trend is toward
the latter. In the course of an overhaul of its statutes in September 2002, the FACG included therein a passus declaring that it would “define itself as a faith-based organization in line with the German constitution” (Kaplan 2005). While the turn to religious rhetoric is a general feature of the Alevi revival both in Turkey and Germany, Germany-based Alevi activists tend to be more inclined to openly differentiate Alevism from mainstream Sunni Islam, and sometimes from Islam altogether. A telling example is that of dede Hasan Kilavuz, former chairman of the FACG’s dede counsel, who inaugurated a heated debate when he publicly declared the incompatibility of Alevism with basic features of Islam:

Alevilik is a faith (inanç) in its own right. Alevis possess a faith which sees God everywhere in the universe. Alevis performed their worship and beliefs for a thousand years in a modest and extremely pure form…We cannot connect the faith of the Anatolian Alevis with the basic principles of the Islamic religion. (Kilavuz 2005)

While the contexts for the establishment and recognition of Alevism in Turkey and Germany are very different, in both cases Alevis are obliged to specify Alevism’s religious contours. Kilavuz’ position is just one example of this. The continuing debate contributes to the religious objectification of Alevism, which I understand with Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori as the process by which “religion has become a self-contained system that its believers can describe, characterize, and distinguish from other belief systems” (1996: 38). Contributing to this process is the increasing scriptural fixation of the predominantly oral tradition of Alevism, which seals, as Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi has put it, “the transformation of an esoteric doctrine into a public religion” (2006: 16). The driving forces behind this development are not the dedes, who play only a secondary role therein, but new secular Alevi elites.28 As a consequence of this opening of traditional authority structures, the debate on Alevism has been decentered, and while new centers are emerging, the variety of hearable Alevi voices has certainly increased. Thus, all Alevis who publish and publicly discuss aspects of Alevism participate in the undoing and remaking of Alevism—though to different extent depending on their weight within public discourse.

28 As an example, all but one of the members of the FACG’s commission for the development of an Alevi curriculum are talibs (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 16).
Scholars of Alevism are also involved in this process, since academic work is in various ways implicated in the debates.\textsuperscript{29}

The debate on Alevism in Germany and the increasing religious recognition Alevis receive here impact also on negotiations of Alevism in Turkey. Through personal and institutional transnational networks, as well as by way of the manifold political relations between Turkey and Western Europe, developments within the European diaspora have repercussions in Turkey, and vice versa. The relative ease with which Alevis in Germany are able to receive recognition as religion, and the possibility of independent Alevi religious instruction in public German schools,\textsuperscript{30} illustrates the extreme differences in the respective national discourses of secularism and religion in general, and Islam in particular. In the long run, it will be interesting to observe to which degree the respective adjustments to the national discourses of religion—other sociocultural, political, and economic factors notwithstanding—impact on the formation of different Alevi sensitivities in regard of religion, culture, and politics. Currently, it appears that the extreme differences in the Turkish and West European contexts for the development of Alevism are likely to further already strongly advanced processes of differentiation within Alevism along linguistic/ethnic, political/ideological, and religious/cultural lines. While this differentiation, which historically has been part of the formation of Alevism at least since the 1960s, has already led to an array of fairly well institutionalized and competing “Alevi” formations, there might be better chances for a rapprochement between them if the political pressure from outside were to soften. One notable difference between the Alevi movements in Germany and Turkey is that in the former Alevis appear to be much more homogeneous and less divided along political and religious lines than in the latter. The relatively strong ideological differentiation of Alevism in Turkey can at least partially be attributed

\textsuperscript{29} I found myself several times in the ambivalent position of being consulted on matters of Alevi faith by Alevis themselves. On the other side—less ambivalent but more troublesome—I have also been accused of providing scholarly legitimacy for the Alevis’ endeavor to define Alevism as religion (Gönültaş 2003).

\textsuperscript{30} In Turkey, such a step seems very unlikely to be realized in the near future. In October 2007 and March 2008, the European Court for Human Rights and the Turkish Supreme Court, respectively, ruled in favor of Alevi claimants who accused the mandatory religion education in public schools to be in fact—despite claims to the contrary—biased in favor of Sunni Islam (Radikal 2008). While the Ministry of Education, responsible for the courses on “Religious Culture and Ethics,” points out increased incorporation of Alevi topics into the curricula and course books, this inclusion is, as critics maintain, still selective and more assimilationist than emancipatory (an argument made, for example, by Alevi activist-academic Ali Yaman in the TV talk show “Enine Boyuna,” TRT1, 14 March 2008). It seems unlikely that the recent judicial decisions will in fact have major consequences in the short run.
to the extreme constraints Alevis face in the Turkish public sphere, characterized by severe ideological fault lines, which further competition for limited political and economic resources. However, the logic of the situation would change in case Turkish politics were to follow up on its promises regarding further political liberalization so strongly pushed for by the EU in the context of EU–Turkey membership negotiations. The trend toward differentiation of Alevi discourses in Turkey might then, if probably not be reversed, at least loose momentum.

CONCLUSION

Roughly two decades ago, Alevis initiated a revival of Alevism, which has since led to new organizational formations (Alevi associations and umbrella organizations) and institutions (as, e.g., the modern dede) as well as attempts to standardize beliefs and rituals. The objectification of Alevism, resulting from the appropriation of post-1980 languages of religious authenticity in Turkey and the opportunities offered by the status of “religious community” in Germany, takes on increasingly specific religious forms. Some of the thusly remodeled formations of Alevism distinguish between lay members and religious specialists, conceptualize beliefs and practices, and might even gradually establish an explicit Alevi theology—as already demanded by some Alevi voices (Bahadir 2003: viii). All of this is not to say that traditional Alevism lacked religious features. But now Alevis are for the very first time engaging in a systemic reconstruction of their tradition along the lines of an implicit *world religion* model, and define belief, practice, philosophy, ethics, and culture of Alevism within the grammar of the secular-religious—an approach alien to traditional Alevi practice and worldview and in line with the politics of the modern nation-state.31 Such new formations of Alevism are in line with a religion discourse that gives preference to objectified universality as opposed to a plurality of valid local interpretations as characteristic of traditional Alevism. Most significantly, the objectification process has consequences for the character of Alevism as a communal culture. The reformulation of Alevism as a universal religion, which aligns itself with humanist ideals, the public exposure of traditionally secret rites and beliefs, and its new accessibility undermine traditional boundaries and affiliations based on kinship and lineage and replace them by chosen allegiances based on

31 Traditional Alevi worldview and ethics are grounded in the mystical distinction between the inner (*batın*) and the outer (*zahir*), which cannot be equated with binary constructions such as sacred/profane, or religious/secular (Dressler 2003).
class, ideological preferences (political, religious, ethnic), and convenience. As for the latter, in noticeable contrast to the politics of Alevi activists and pressure groups, average individual Alevis often display highly eclectic and situational approaches toward Alevi symbols and narratives, reflecting a trend toward an individualization of Alevi subjectivities. On the level of Alevi high-politics, however, the debate over Alevism is loaded with singularizing ideological ideas, which deepen the fissures between rival Alevi currents. While all Alevi activists are concerned with strengthening the public voice of Alevism, their approaches differ widely. The traditionalist Alevis fear that changes in the Alevi tradition and its institutions might in the end only accelerate its dissolution, while reformist Alevis see the reformulation of Alevism as a prerequisite for its survival.

As I have tried to show, the ongoing objectification of Alevism in religious terms is embedded in complex economic, social, and political processes. Urbanization and the adaptation of Kemalist and socialist worldviews led to a dramatic dismantling of traditional Alevi practices in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Recent reformulations of Alevism, whether framed religiously or not, are historically and logically connected to the secularization of traditional Alevism, and relate strongly and programmatically to Turkish nationalism and laicism—positively or negatively. Within the parameters of this discourse, most reformulations of Alevism are negotiated in a grammar and language, which clearly distinguishes between religious and secular spheres and practices. This is what I refer to as Alevi religionizing.

The comparison between Turkey and Germany exemplifies how the modes of Alevi religionizing depend on local identity and religion politics, and the opportunity spaces it provides. While the German context provides Alevis with the freedom to conceptualize Alevism even outside of an Islamic framework, Alevis in Turkey face strong pressure to remain within the Turkish-Islamic discourse if they want to advance their case. In either context, religion functions as a matrix against which a distinct Alevi identity is established, and this is true even for those Alevis who reject the religious framing of Alevism and prefer to imagine Alevism as a culture, social practice, or philosophical worldview. The debates on Alevism circle around questions of origin and essence, and are articulated through a language which is based on the dichotomy of the secular-religious. In that sense, they are radically modernist. While critical discourse on religion has reached its post-secular turn as an act of emancipation from the modernist paradigm, the case of Alevism’s religionization is a compelling example for the continuous thriving of modernist semantics in public discourses on religion.
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