Confessional pluralism and the civil society effect:
Liberal mediations of Islam and secularism in contemporary Turkey

ABSTRACT
Practices and ideals of confessional pluralism and liberal interpretations of Islam have achieved new prominence in Turkish civil society in recent years. In this article, I marshal fieldwork conducted among a variety of Turkish Islamic civil society institutions to argue that confessional pluralism and liberal Islam have reoriented practices of politics and secularism in Turkey. As I demonstrate, liberal discourse about religious difference emerges within civil society as a foil to hegemonic, homogeneous visions of Islam on the part of the state. My principal theoretical contribution is the civil society effect: how the institutions and discourses of civil society are idealized and rendered distinct from state power. Ethnographically, I focus on two religious groups that have achieved organization within civil society: Turkish Alevi and supporters of the Sunni Hizmet Movement.

On a dreary February afternoon in 2007, I huddled near a coal- and wood-burning stove in a ramshackle building on the eastern fringe of Anatolian Istanbul. At the time, this cramped, unofficial gecekondu structure served as the sole office for the Sultanbeyli Pir Sultan Abdal Association and Cem House (Sultanbeyli Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği ve Cem Evi), an NGO serving the Alevi residents of the sprawling, poor district of Sultanbeyli. A clutch of paunchy men ringed the stove, each cradling a steaming cup of tea. Returning from the kitchen to warm our tea, Sadegül Hanım, the young president of the association, took her place opposite me and launched into a discussion of the trials faced by Alevi Turks in general and her organization in particular:

As you know, the state and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) do not recognize Alevism. They do not fund cem houses, they insist that we worship in mosques like Sunnis. We decided to build a cem house here, in one of Istanbul’s most conservative Sunni neighborhoods, to challenge this discrimination. We too have a right to be recognized as a religious minority (dini azınlık).

Several days later, I sipped a near-identical cup of tea in a context that was otherwise distant in every respect—geographically, economically, aesthetically, and doctrinally—from the Sultanbeyli Pir Sultan Abdal Association. I had come to visit Cemal Bey, the vice president of the Journalists and Writers Foundation (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı). The Journalists and Writers Foundation is the flagship organization of the Hizmet (Service) Movement in Istanbul, a loosely knit, transnational network of corporations, media outlets, private schools, and NGOs that draw inspiration from and advocate the teachings of the contemporary Sunni Turkish theologian Fethullah Gülen (Kuru 2003, 2005; Turam 2007; Yavuz and Esposito 2003). Cemal Bey and I sat opposite each other on the low, Ottoman-style “divan” couches that lined the foundation’s conference room; above me, an enlarged photograph of Fethullah Gülen embracing Pope John Paul II formed the centerpiece of a meticulously curated montage of images.
Among the personages in the photographs, I identified Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current Turkish prime minister and head of the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP); Deniz Baykal, the (now former) leader of the center-left Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP); deceased Turkish rock-n-roll luminary Barış Manço; and representatives of all of Turkey’s recognized religious minorities—Catholic, Syriac, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Christians as well as Jews—each posing gamely with Gülten himself or one of the foundation officers. Cemal Bey punctuated this pastiche of political and religious pluralism with a comment: “Here at the foundation, we aim to establish dialogue with all comers, especially members of different religions—Christians, Jews, Alevis, even Buddhists and Hindus. We believe that each religious community deserves to be recognized in and of itself.”

Why are these two anecdotes of interest? From the perspective of Turkish political society, Sadegül Hanım and Cemal Bey should occupy opposite sides of an incommensurable divide. As a spokeswoman of an Alevi organization, Sadegül Hanım would be expected to align herself with the CHP, which has traditionally been the most prominent political representative of and advocate for Alevis.4 Cemal Bey, by contrast, is the very image of the new, conservative Sunni Muslim bourgeoisie in Turkey, the bedrock constituency of the center-left Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP); deceased Turkish rock-n-roll luminary Barış Manço; and representatives of all of Turkey’s recognized religious minorities—Catholic, Syriac, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Christians as well as Jews—each posing gamely with Gülten himself or one of the foundation officers. Cemal Bey punctuated this pastiche of political and religious pluralism with a comment: “Here at the foundation, we aim to establish dialogue with all comers, especially members of different religions—Christians, Jews, Alevis, even Buddhists and Hindus. We believe that each religious community deserves to be recognized in and of itself.”

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In this article, I plumb the mediations of civil society, Islam, and liberal ideals and ideologies of religion in contemporary Turkey that these two anecdotes briefly illustrate. Most generally, I demonstrate how and why a liberal model of civil society has emerged in recent decades as a potent idiom of the politics of and about Islam in Turkey. In pursuit of this aim, I offer an ethnographic exposition of the discourses and practices of confessional pluralism—a religious project for the flourishing of religious diversity—that characterize Turkish Islamic civil society. Drawing inspiration from recent anthropological interrogations of liberal secularism (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005), I approach Islam and liberalism not as contrastive political ideologies but, rather, as modes of discursive practice that authorize, animate, challenge, and coordinate each other in contextually specific ways. Above all, these contextual mediations of liberalism and Islam within civil society defy the essentialist expectation that Islam and political modernity are fundamentally disparate domains that necessarily pose problems for each other when they interact (e.g., Gellner 1994; Lewis 1993).

**Nongovernmental politics, civil society effect, liberalism**

How are we to understand the corresponding ideals and practices of civil society actors who are otherwise politically at odds? Political discourse within Turkey offers a reductive response to this question: However similar Alevi and Sunni institutions and discourses may seem to be, an inexorable political and theological gulf separates them. This dismissal emerges from a more pervasive political skepticism that maintains hegemony in Turkey: the notion that every public institution, actor, and event is ultimately determined by and oriented to state power, regardless of appearances or claims to the contrary (Walton 2010a). According to this perspective, civil society is no more than an epiphenomenal extension of political society, in which the “true” cleavages of society achieve representation and adjudication.

NGO actors tend to advocate a diametrically opposite model of the relationship between civil society and political society. Rather than reducing civil society to an instrument or prosthesis of political society, apologists for civil society draw a strict cordon between “politics” and their own activities. For them, civil society is an apolitical domain of authentic desires and identities, entirely separate from the messy turf of political society. From this second perspective, any disagreement between Alevis and Sunnis is rendered insignificant because it is merely political—civil society, the ostensible domain of social truth, authenticity, and interreligious harmony, constitutes proof of the pettiness of this political friction.

Neither of these responses—the reduction of civil society to political society, on the one hand, and their rigid distanciation, on the other—attends to the distinctive political practice of civil society itself. I pursue a reading of civil society and Islam in Turkey that navigates between the Scylla and Charybdis of these two perspectives. My reading of civil society and its constituent other, political society, draws broadly on Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) classic theorization of the two concepts. With keen Marxist attention to the relationship between ideology and structures of power, Gramsci reframed civil society as a domain of hegemonic consent, in contrast to earlier visions of civil society, from Adam Ferguson through G. W. F. Hegel, as the domain of private interest.6 Gramsci (1971:12) theorized political society, on the contrary, as the domain of state coercion. While recent theorists of civil society inspired by Michel Foucault’s
(1991) concept of “governmentality” (see also Lemke 2001; Potte-Bonneville 2007) have highlighted the continuities of governance between civil society and political society. I pause on Gramsci’s distinction because it accents the different political modalities, consensual and coercive, that define each domain. As I discuss at length below, the actors and institutions that I analyze are liberal, rather than Marxian, in their own conceptions of civil society—they valorize civil society as a prepolitical domain of social authenticity and truth. My task in this article is to read against the grain of this romance of civil society to trace the political disciplines and effects of this very romance; Gramsci’s model offers a charter for just such a reading.

With Gramsci in hand, we can approach civil society as a distinctive modality of politics. I part ways with Gramsci, however, in viewing civil society as solely hegemonic; rather, civil society is a ground on which both hegemonic and counterhegemonic political discourses intersect, challenge, and animate each other. In Turkey, in particular, globally hegemonic liberal principles and ideologies achieve counterhegemonic valence in relation to questions of Islam and civil society. How might we approach this distinctive politics of civil society, within which global and national hegemonies and counterhegemonies situate each other? Michel Feher’s concept of “nongovernmental politics” offers a suggestion. Feher summarizes nongovernmental politics as

neither apolitical nor governmental. To be involved in politics without aspiring to govern . . . what nongovernmental activists of every stripe recognize is that both the legitimacy and efficacy of their initiatives demand that they refrain from occupying the realm of governing agencies—whether with the purpose of taking them over, filling them with worthy stewards, or doing away with them. [2007:12]

Feher goes on to argue that nongovernmental politics is a constitutive feature of neoliberal contexts around the world, particularly in the global South. As elsewhere, the ascendency of nongovernmental politics in Turkey is a mark and index of an emergent neoliberal order, a point I address more thoroughly below. For the moment, however, I highlight the distinctive relationship between liberal religiosity and nongovernmental politics that characterizes Turkish Islamic civil society. In contexts such as Turkey, defined by a strong state tradition (Heper 1991), nongovernmental politics is not a fait accompli but an achievement. This achievement—the rendering of the politics of religion as nongovernmental—is precisely what unites otherwise disparate theological and social projects within Turkish civil society.

In summary, we might think of civil society as a nongovernmental idiom of politics. John L. and Jean Comaroff (1999) argue that this idiom of politics hinges on a “naturalistic” ideology of civil society, the notion that civil society inherently allows and encourages the flourishing of pre-political identities and desires. As the Comaroffs point out, this romance of civil society implies and produces a concomitant dystopia of the state—inasmuch as civil society is idealized and valorized as a domain naturally independent from power and coercion, the state is demonized as a locus of coercion and heteronomy. The critical question for the ethnographer, then, is how best to capture the production and politics of this romance of civil society.

Timothy Mitchell’s (1999) influential concept of the “state effect” suggests a provocative parallel in this regard. Mitchell arrives at the concept of the “state effect” by way of interrogating deceptively self-evident distinctions between state and society and state and economy: “What is it about modern society, as a particular form of social and economic order, that has made possible the apparent autonomy of the state as a freestanding entity? Why is this kind of apparatus . . . the distinctive political arrangement of the modern age?” (1999:85). In analogous fashion, we might interrogate the contemporary hegemony of civil society, its seeming inevitability and self-evident autonomy from the state. Taking a page from Mitchell, we might ethnographically query the “civil society effect.” What institutional practices, micropolitical contexts, and ideological formations produce civil society as a self-evident domain of freedom and authenticity (cf. Taylor 1994), especially in the regnant era of neoliberal globalization? More specifically, what are the possible relationships between religion and the civil society effect? The discourses and practices of confessional pluralism offer an avenue by which to pursue these questions. Confessional pluralism depends on and stitches together an integrated romance of civil society, religion, and political liberalism. Above all, confessional pluralism hinges on a liberal model of religion as a nonpolitical, voluntary mode of social life that demands recognition and protection under the aegis of the ostensibly universal values of liberty and equality.

Recent years have witnessed a groundsweb in ethnographic and historical analyses of liberal discourses and systems of governance (e.g., Larson 2004; Mehta 1999; Povinelli 2002; Rose 2006) that interrogate latter-day apologies for liberalism (e.g., Habermas 1991; Rawls 2005). Critiques of liberal secularism (Asad 1993, 2003; Mahmood 2005), in particular, have underscored the incapacity of the liberal concept of religion as individual, privatized belief to comprehend the myriad ethical disciplines and communities that have come to constitute religion outside the heartlands of Western modernity. This purchase on the powers of liberal secularism has been especially fruitful for anthropologists of religion working in postcolonial contexts, such as South Asia and Egypt, which still bear the imprint of British liberal law and its distinctive configuration of religion (Agrama 2010; Chatterjee 1998, 2004; Hansen 2000;
Mahmood 2005). Nevertheless, this body of work does not fully tackle the questions that concern me here: How might liberal ideals and religious projects coincide within and on the basis of civil society? What defines the nongovernmental politics of liberal, civil religion?

To address these pressing questions, we first require a clearer understanding of the distinction between liberalism and secularism. Liberalism, with its broadly British genealogy (Mehta 1999) represents only one modality of secularism; the French–Jacobin tradition of laicism, which forwards a robust culture of statism as a means of policing religion in the public sphere, is a distinct model of secularism, with divergent implications for religious practice and organization. Ahmet Kuru (2009), for one, has stressed the importance of the distinction between liberalism and laicism—"passive" and "assertive" secularism in his terminology—to the study of secularism in Turkey. When anthropologists and social scientists of Turkey discuss secularism, they unanimously refer to Kemalism, the Jacobin–laicist model of secularism that continues to animate the Turkish state's monopolistic approach to matters of religion. Because laicism remains the dominant ideology and practice of secularism within the institutions of the state, a liberal model of religion, with its ideology of individual freedom of belief, increasingly constitutes a viable, vocal criticism of Turkish state secularism. In short, liberalism is a lived political project on the part of Turkish civil society institutions and actors that deports significantly from state-based liberalism as it is understood in the North Atlantic and much of the postcolonial world. This emergent liberalism, grounded in Turkish civil society, is defined by and expresses a tension between two distinct political dimensions: the global, neoliberal domain, within which liberal principles are increasingly hegemonic, and the national Turkish context, within which liberal discourses and imaginaries are counterhegemonic in relation to the illiberal state tradition. Therefore, to set the stage for the remainder of my argument, I first offer a brief review of the history of the illiberal, homogenizing ideal of laicist Turkish secularism, or Kemalism (Atatürkçülük, Kemalizm) as it is known colloquially within Turkey.

**The Kemalist project of laicism and national homogeneity in a neoliberal age**

The enigma of the homogeneous ideal of Turkish identity, with its ineluctable relationship to questions of religion and secularism, is coeval with the foundation of Republican Turkey. From the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, rent asunder by World War I and the subsequent Allied occupation of Istanbul, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his cohorts fashioned a state premised on an ethnonationalistic nationalism that was, rather paradoxically, both religious and antireligious at once (Berkes 1965:461ff.; Lewis 1961:262ff.; Mango 2002). In the transition from a multiethnic and multireligious empire to the homogeneous Turkish nation-state, Islam—in particular, Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School of jurisprudence—was taken to define Turkishness itself (Lewis 1961:255). Almost immediately, however, Atatürk's robust central government in Ankara began to enact a series of stringent curtailments of practices and expressions of Islam. Above all, the authority to define the legitimacy of all Islamic precepts and practices was vested exclusively in the state itself, in particular, in the Directorate of Religious Affairs, heir to the office of the Sheik-ul-Islam, the supreme authority on matters pertaining to Islam during the Ottoman period (Gözaydın 2009; Shankland 1999:29; Yılmaz 2005:100). The political history of Islam and secularism in Republican Turkey can be understood as the interplay between these two divergent imperatives: privatization and minimization, on the one hand, and monopolization and homogenization, on the other.

Undoubtedly, the schematic, abstract hegemony of Kemalism has always been hypothetical rather than actual in Turkey, at least to a degree. As Şerif Mardin (1989), Michael Meeker (2002), and Brian Silverstein (2011) have detailed in different ways, the Turkish state's aspirations to monopolize and enforce the privatization of Islam did not entirely deny continuities of and accommodations to practices, discourses, and institutions with distinct historicities and more complex sociologies. Nonetheless, the fates and trajectories of both Kemalism and Turkish Islam have changed radically over the past quarter century. Since the early 1980s, Turkey has experienced an efflorescence of civil society in tandem with a neoliberal turn in both domestic economic policies and electoral politics (Heper 1991; Oniş 2004; Tugal 2009). While the initial interventions of the neoliberal reforms of the eighties were economic—a large number of state industries were rapidly privatized and protectionist, import-substitution policies were overturned—reverberations in Turkey's sociocultural and political spheres followed closely on their heels. One particularly striking outcome of Turkey's neoliberal turn has been the proliferation of NGOs devoted to a congeries of causes, both spiritual and mundane. Whereas the state had carefully regulated and often curtailed religiously oriented civil society organizations earlier in the history of the Republic (Çizakç 2000:86ff.), the novel economic and political terrain of the eighties and nineties proved to be a salubrious context for the rapid expansion of charitable foundations (vakıflar) and associations (dernekler). All of the organizations that I discuss in this article, both Alevi and Sunni, were established during this era.

Academic interrogation of the neoliberal Turkish present has become a burgeoning cottage industry for scholars of Turkey in recent years. Among recent ethnographers of Turkish Islam and political life in the neoliberal present, Cihan Tugal (2009) offers a suggestive model
for tracing the shifting relationships among Islam, political society, and civil society in Turkey. Tuğal’s ethnography analyzes the process by which the governing party, the AKP, achieved hegemony in an impoverished Istanbul neighborhood; in achieving this hegemony, Tuğal (2009:147ff.) argues, the AKP successfully integrated Islamic civil society and Islamic political society. Without detracting from the novelty and importance of Tuğal’s argument, my own ethnography pursues a different route: I emphasize how civil society organizations articulate and practice a mode of religiosity, confessional pluralism, whose politics is defined precisely on the basis of its distinction from political society and the state. As the initial anecdote concerning Sadeg Hanım and Cemal Bey suggests, confessional pluralism within civil society is remarkable precisely because it unravels and transcends many of the oppositions that define Turkish political society itself.

The nongovernmental politics marshaled by Turkish Islamic civil society institutions, and the civil society effect in particular, achieve efficacy in direct relation to Turkey’s state culture of laicism. This does not imply, however, that Turkish Islamic civil society is merely national in its orientation, causes, or effects—globalization, understood as an ensemble of transnational mobilities, opportunities, and constraints, is equally central to the organizations of my study. On an institutional level, most Turkish Islamic NGOs maintain strong ties with like-minded organizations outside Turkey itself; this is especially true of Sunni Hizmet organizations, each of which maintains close relations with private schools, NGOs, and businesses devoted to the theology and philanthropy of Fethullah Gülen in Europe, North America, Central Asia, and elsewhere (Hendrick 2011; Turram 2007). In a distinct but related manner, Alevi institutions in Turkey have responded to the articulation of a diasporic Alevi identity on the part of European (especially German) Alevi organizations (Sökefeld 2003, 2008).

More abstractly, the intersection of liberal discourse and religious initiative, so characteristic of Turkish Islamic NGOs, gestures to the expanding hegemony of liberalism as a political idiom on a global scale. My interlocutors do not conceive of the appeal to liberal values of equality, autonomy, and recognition as a political act—for them, these values are assumed to be universal, global, and therefore prepolitical. Here, we encounter one of the fascinating, constitutive paradoxes of liberal politics: Despite its relative novelty within the Turkish political sphere and inseparability from neoliberal economic and political transformations, liberalism’s unique particularity is its incapacity to acknowledge its own political particularity. While the intricate relationship between political liberalism and politico-economic neoliberalism—a matter of both mutual imbrication and tension—is beyond my purview here, the seemingly incontestable authority of liberal political ideals throughout the neoliberal world is a central backdrop to the story of Turkish Islamic civil society that I narrate. Above all, this story centers on the civil society effect in relation to Islam in Turkey. As I argue, the civil society effect is a critical hinge linking national debates over the relationship between the Turkish state and Islam to global discourses and practices of religion and neoliberal civil society.

**Negotiating between the difference of the community and difference within the community: Confessional pluralism of and for Turkey’s Alevi civil society organizations**

After leaving the Pir Sultan Abdal Association, I huddled against the cold at the Sultanbeyli bus stop, on the first leg of the protracted journey back to the center of Istanbul, pondering the lessons of the day. As usual, I had been struck by the tensions that underpin the articulation of Alevism within Turkish civil society. Several weeks earlier, I had engaged in a similar conversation with the president of the Hacı Bektaş Foundation (Haci Bektaş Vakfı), a flagship Alevi institution in Ankara—like Sadeg Hanım, he had cited questions of collective recognition and state discrimination as definitive Alevi concerns. In both instances, I had the keen sense I was witnessing an exemplary instance of liberal identity politics. Throughout my research, nearly all of my Alevi interlocutors, both official representatives of civil society organizations and casual acquaintances, regularly rattled off the key words and phrases of identity-based civil and political rights movements: equal protection before the law, end to discrimination, tolerance and respect, recognition. Clearly, it seemed to me, these claims necessitate a coherent, circumscribed identity as the grounds for recognition and equal protection. And yet, in these very same contexts, I witnessed impassioned, often contentious arguments over the very definition of Alevism itself. At the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, an assembly of dedes hotly debated the question of whether there are Kurdish, as well as Turkish, Alevis.11 During my afternoon at the Sultanbeyli Cem House, a smaller group of Alevi men argued over the “sources” (kökler) of Alevism, with particular disagreement over the importance of the inheritance of central Asian “shamanistic” (şamanizm) traditions.

These arguments over the definition of Alevism are inseparable from the civil society effect itself. For the image of civil society as a domain of authentic desires, identities, and communities to achieve traction, discourses and ideologies of authenticity must have a coherent object. Debate over the proper definition of Alevism is a crucial process for establishing this object for Alevis. Turkey’s Alevi NGOs, then, all grapple with a constitutive dilemma of liberal nongovernmental politics: How does organizational mobilization itself demand, privilege, and produce certain discourses of collectivity and community? For each of my Alevi interlocutors, the prospect and project of confessional
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pluralism offers a plausible resolution to this dilemma. The effort to establish Alevism as one among a plurality of equal, legitimate religious identities is the dynamo of Alevi activity within civil society. In what follows, I examine the relationship among confessional pluralism, collective identity, and nongovernmental political mobilization that motivates the sanctioned discourses and activities of three Alevi institutions. Two of these organizations, the aforementioned Hacı Bektas Foundation and the Cem Foundation (Cem Vakfı), are among the most prominent Alevi institutions in Turkey; the third, the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation (Ehl-i Beyt Vakfı), fascinates precisely because of its marginality to Alevism as a whole.

Orthodoxization and aspirations to equality: The Cem Foundation

The sprawling offices of the Cem Foundation were a frequent destination for me during my fieldwork. The building that houses the foundation—a modern, boxlike, six-story structure built from thick steel beams covered by a carapace of cobalt reflective glass—dominates the neighborhood of Kocasinan, one of the many anonymous, lower-middle-class and blue-collar residential districts that have rapidly mushroomed on the outskirts of Istanbul over the past half century (see also Erdemir 2005:944). Upon my arrival at the Cem Foundation, I was conveyed immediately to the foundation chairman and vice president for the ritualized greeting offered to “esteemed guests” (değerli misafirler), especially foreign researchers such as myself. Following this brief presentation, I descended to the library and conference room, where Ayhan Bey, one of the foundation’s staff researchers (araştırmaçılar), awaited me in his office.

From the perspective of the Cem Foundation, Ayhan Bey explained, Alevism is, above all, a coherent religious tradition that incorporates elements of both Central Asian mystical–shamanistic practices and Twelver Shi’a Islam. One of the primary activities supported by the Cem Foundation is research into the historical roots of Alevi traditions to provide a comprehensive definition of Alevism. Ayhan Bey summarized this definition of Alevism as devotion to the Ehl-i Beyt (the family unit of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatma, his son-in-law and cousin Ali, and Ali and Fatma’s sons Hasan and Hüseyin), Hacı Bektas, Pir Sultan Abdal, and other Alevi “saints” (pirler, veliler) as practiced in the cem ceremony, within the unique ritual space of the cem house. He was adamant concerning the relationship between Alevi identity and the cem: “Those who do not perform the cem cannot call themselves Alevis.” Additionally, Ayhan Bey championed the “traditional” (geleneksel) gender integration in the cem ceremony as evidence for the “primordial” (ilkel) modernity and liberalness of the Alevi community. Taken as a whole, Ayhan Bey’s discourse about Alevism suggests a moment of “orthodoxization,” the production of a singular vision and version of belief and practice, the very sort of transformation that Hart (2009) has traced among Sunni Turks in a rural Aegean village. In the case of the Cem Foundation, however, this process of orthodoxization hinges on the civil society effect: The articulation of an Alevi orthodoxy pivots on an optimistic vision of civil society as an instrument for the excavation and representation of Alevism as a pristine pious tradition and community.

Over the course of our many conversations, I pressed Ayhan Bey to reflect on the emphasis on coherence that frames the Cem Foundation’s research into and definition of Alevism. Gradually, Ayhan presented an intriguing commentary rooted in a political rationalization. He began by pointing out the continual refusal of the Turkish state, as embodied by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, to recognize Alevism as a “true minority” (gerçek bir azınlık). This lack of recognition has two lamentable consequences: Alevis, unlike their Sunni counterparts, do not receive state funding for their places of worship (cem houses), and Alevi children are forced to learn an exclusively Sunni interpretation of Islam in mandatory religion classes (zorunlu din dersleri) taught in Turkish public schools. After reciting these familiar Alevi complaints, Ayhan Bey adduced an explanation for the state’s discrimination rooted in the social history of Alevism itself. While he acknowledged morosely that the Directorate of Religious Affairs remains a staunchly Sunni institution, he also bemoaned the lack of organization and the dispersion of Alevis, both socially and doctrinally. The Directorate of Religious Affairs is able to ignore Alevis’ collective demands for recognition because, in contrast to the ostensible uniformity of Sunni Islam in Turkey, so many different practices and beliefs characterize Alevism. From Ayhan Bey’s perspective, Alevis suffer from a deficit of orthodoxy. To make matters worse, the association of Alevis with leftist political movements and the claims made by certain prominent Alevis that Alevism is “outside of Islam entirely” (İslamiyet’in dışında) only reinforce Sunni and state-based biases against Alevism. The Cem Foundation struggles to counteract this bias by lobbying the state, primarily through informal means, to recognize Alevism as a coherent religion (din) or sect (mezhep) defined by its own distinctive traditions. This lobbying is rooted strongly in a discourse of confessional pluralism: The Cem Foundation has no interest in denying the right of Sunnis to practice their own traditions but merely wants to establish Alevism on an equal footing with Sunni Islam. The two indispensable criteria of equality are the inclusion of Alevism in mandatory religion classes and the provision of public funding for cem houses and other Alevi institutions, in proportion to the monies that the Directorate of Religious Affairs provides for the construction and upkeep of mosques, the training of imams, and other Sunni religious matters.

Although he did not discuss the matter explicitly, Ayhan Bey’s remarks drew on a precise perspective on the...
nature and culture of secularism in contemporary Turkey. By arguing that Alevi should receive proportional representation in religion classes and proportional funding for matters of religious practice, Ayhan Bey tacitly accepted the statist dispensation of secularism that already exists in Turkey. In colloquial terms, from the perspective of the Cem Foundation, the “system” itself is not flawed; it merely needs to live up to the liberal, pluralist goal of allowing equal participation and representation of minority religious communities. For instance, the Cem Foundation does not lobby for the complete removal of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and tends to emphasize equality and brotherhood among Sunni and Alevi Muslims. In summary, for the Cem Foundation and its sympathizers, the object of nongovernmental politics is to reform governance in keeping with egalitarian principles. As I discuss below, however, the same is not true of all Alevi organizations.

Horizons of liberal secularism: The Hacı Bektaş Veji Anatolian Culture Foundation

On a dusty afternoon in August 2006, I met with a young employee of the Hacı Bektaş Foundation in a smoky, Marxist café near the metropolitan bustle of Kızılay Square in downtown Ankara. Our chosen meeting place spoke volumes: We would be unlikely to encounter an affiliate of the Cem Foundation in such an establishment, as the Cem Foundation has largely eschewed the leftist political orientation that was once pervasive among Alevis, particularly in the 1970s. Over incessant cigarettes and cups of tea, which eventually transformed into large mugs of Efes, the de facto national brand of pilsner in Turkey, Cahit described his duties and activities at the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, along with the aims of the organization as a whole. Gradually, the conversation turned to the Directorate of Religious Affairs and its role in Alevi life. Cahit’s comments, and his comparison between the Cem Foundation and the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, in particular, were striking:

We don’t want anything to do with the Directorate of Religious Affairs. We’d prefer that it not exist. And that’s the basic difference between us and the Cem Foundation: They claim that the state should support both Sunnis and Alevi. In our opinion, the state should support neither Sunnis nor Alevi. Each community should attend to its own needs, separate from the state. This is the true meaning of secularism.

Unlike Ayhan Bey of the Cem Foundation, Cahit was not content merely to demand equal representation and compensation from the state as it already exists in Turkey. To adapt a model forwarded in the Indian context by Partha Chatterjee (1998:358), whereas the Cem Foundation emphasizes the principle of equality, which requires that the state “not give preference to one religion over another,” the Hacı Bektaş Foundation contends that the principle of liberty—“that the state permit the practice of any religion”—necessitates absolute nonintervention by the state in religious affairs. For the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, a thoroughly liberal model of secularism as the absolute nonintervention of the state in religion, which many of my interlocutors referred to as the “American model” (Amerikan model, Amerika örneği) after the well-known U.S. firewall between church and state, trumps the principle of equality. One of the primary activities of the foundation is to sue for the removal of institutions that are perceived to act as an impediment to the principle of religious liberty and, hence, the “true meaning of secularism” (laikliğin gerçek anlağı). In pursuit of this aim, the foundation has opened several court cases suing for the removal of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and an end to mandatory religion classes. While the lawsuits against the directorate have been unsuccessful, the foundation’s lawyers have made partial inroads against mandatory religion classes. In a 2006 decision, a midevel court held that Alevi children could not be forced to learn from textbooks that only include Sunni beliefs and practices.

As with the Cem Foundation, the nongovernmental politics of representation that the Hacı Bektaş Foundation espouses and marshals relates directly to its interpretation of Alevi tradition. Whereas the Cem Foundation demonstrates intense concern for orthodoxy by attempting to streamline and formalize a unitary corpus of beliefs and practices that constitute Alevism, the Hacı Bektaş Foundation is far more content to sanction a multiplicity of different interpretations of Alevism. This relative acceptance of Alevi plurality corresponds to a more lenient attitude toward the Central Asian and shamanistic aspects of Alevism as well as less emphasis on establishing a canon of definitive Alevi texts. More precisely, the definition of Alevism as a “religion,” with a characteristic tradition or set of traditions, is not of particular interest to the Hacı Bektaş Foundation. The Hacı Bektaş Foundation and its affiliates subordinate the question of whether Alevism is best understood as a religion, a folkloric tradition, or even an ethnicity to criticism of the state, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs, in particular. Concomitantly, the Hacı Bektaş Foundation champions a substantially different ideal of confessional pluralism than the Cem Foundation. For the Cem Foundation, the state is the necessary guarantor of pluralist equality among different religious communities. For the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, by contrast, pluralism, religious or otherwise, can only exist in the absence of state intervention in communal identification and practice. While members of both foundations uniformly stress equality among religious communities, they differ sharply in their respective visions of the means by which confessional pluralism should be realized.
**The compelling marginality of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation**

“Most Alevi have no idea what Alevism is, you know. They think that it’s mysticism, or communism. That’s why our foundation is so important: We are trying to teach Alevi to understand and to be themselves.” I was sitting in the gleaming offices of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation, on the second floor of an office building overlooking the central square of Zeytinburnu, a middle-class neighborhood located on the shore of the Marmara Sea near Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport. As I struggled to finish the ample meal of *kuru fasulye* (stewed beans) that had been placed in front of me, Fermani Bey, the chairman of the foundation, explained the foundation’s plans for an international Alevi University. Fermani Bey’s son, a chic, New York-educated man several years my junior, had joined us (for my benefit and comfort, I suppose) and underscored or revised his father’s presentation as he felt necessary. After I had finished struggling with my yogurt and fasulye, I broached my standard series of questions: How does the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation understand Alevism? What beliefs and practices constitute it? Fermani Bey proceeded to explain that Alevism is, at its basis, no more or less than “the essential truth of Islam” (*Islamın özü*), as practiced and believed by Muslims the world over. In particular, he emphasized the centrality of the Ehl-i Beyt as the inspirational light of Islam. He lamented the tragedy of Hüseyin’s death at Kerbala and underscored the importance of Hacı Bektas as a renewer (*müceddii*) of Islam. At the same time, he bemoaned the “infiltration” of Alevi ritual by Central Asian mystical and shamanic practices as well as the association of Turkish Alevi with leftist political movements, which he described as “reactionary” (*irtica*).

The most intriguing aspects of Fermani Bey’s understanding of Alevism were latent in what he did not say. For instance, although his emphasis on the Ehl-i Beyt and the Battle of Kerbala is typical of Shi’a Muslims throughout the world, he strictly avoided using the term *Şia* in association with Alevism—to make such an association is politically fraught in Turkey, given the strong association of Shi’a Islam with Iran, which is a bugbear of “fundamentalism” (*şeriatçilik*) for most secular Turks. Nor did Fermani Bey mention the cem ceremony, which many Alevi consider definitive of Alevism itself. From the perspective of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation, the cem is a “ritual innovation” (*adet değişikliği*), with roots in Central Asian (rather than Arab–Islamic) religious traditions and, therefore, contrary to the “essence” of Islam. In place of the cem, Fermani Bey and the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation advocate prayer in mosques, a ritual practice that most Alevi dismiss as a “Sunni” activity with no relation to Alevism (see Tambar 2009b). A similarly inspired, careful choice of wording is found in the description of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation’s activities and goals on the foundation website. A section describing the annual celebration of the philosophy of Hacı Bektas sponsored by the foundation announces that “ceremonies which honor Hacı Bektas Veli in a traditional manner are coordinated by the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation every year” (emphasis added). Although these “traditional” ceremonies almost certainly resemble a cem, the word *cem* itself is avoided. Equally provocative, the website goes on to say that the foundation organizes activities dedicated to Rumi (Mevlana), the famous Sufi theologian and poet of Persian–Afgan heritage, whose tomb complex is located in the Anatolian city of Konya and who was decidedly not Alevi or Shi’a (see Dündüz Ehl-i Bey Vakfı 2008). Finally, Fermani Bey did not mention the Directorate of Religious Affairs at all during our tête-à-tête; for most of my other Alevi interlocutors, complaints about the directorate took on a fetishistic quality.

As I quickly learned during my research with a variety of Alevi NGOs, the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation does not enjoy much respect or good will among Alevis outside of its own supporters. My mention to other Alevi friends that I had interviewed officials from Ehl-i Beyt was frequently greeted with scoffing and a skeptical comment along the lines of “They’re Alevi who want to be Sunnis” or, more politically, “They’re members of the AKP.” Since its creation, the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation has promoted itself as a representative Alevi institution among political and civil society circles associated with Sunni revivalism in Turkey; for precisely this reason, many Alevis vehemently criticize the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation as “assimilationist” (*asimilasyoncu*). Tellingly, the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation was first recommended to me by a member of a Sunni NGO. Ehl-i Beyt’s links to the governing AKP are equally evident. The foundation website features prominent photographs of Fermani Bey with such AKP luminaries as President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan; moreover, on the very day that I first met him, Fermani Bey had just returned from a memorial service (*anma töreni*) commemorating the death of former prime minister Turgut Özal, who is now revered as an architect of neoliberalism and the political legitimization of Sunni Islam in Turkey (Öniş 2004). From the limited perspective of party politics, the idea of the chairman of an Alevi foundation rubbing elbows with the Sunni-oriented political establishment is rather shocking, yet Fermani Bey and the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation have readily accepted this affiliation, and have, therefore, been dismissed as cynical opportunists by many Alevis. Crucially, these very criticisms of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation draw on the ideological grammar of political society and civil society that I have outlined: Alevi critics of Ehl-i Beyt argue that, at least in this particular case, civil society is no more than an appendage of political society.

Of course, it is not my desire or place to evaluate the specific political aspirations of the members of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation. Rather, I am interested in delineating how Ehl-i Beyt coordinates a nongovernmental politics of representation on the basis of a specific interpretation of
Alevism. The Ehli Beyt Foundation’s conception of Alevism actively downplays both the Central Asian roots of Alevi practices and, more generally, all differences within Islam as a whole. As the foundation website proclaims, “From the perspective of the Ehli Beyt Foundation, there is no disagreement, there is unity, compassion and affection, there is no Alevi-Sunni distinction, there is the brotherhood of Islam and the brotherhood of humankind.” With this phrase in mind, one might say that the confessional pluralism of the Ehli Beyt Foundation unravels the dilemma of collective representation by altogether denying that Alevism constitutes a difference that must be recognized. This denial of much of what is generally considered to be “Alevi tradition” (especially the cem ceremony), and the political possibilities that accrue to this denial, have provoked marked skepticism and disdain on the part of those Alevis (in my experience, the vast majority) who continue to aspire to a space for their own legitimate religious difference.

Above all, the marginality of the Ehli Beyt Foundation highlights a fundamental tension in the Alevi commitment to confessional pluralism. As I have discussed, some Alevi organizations tolerate a multiplicity of definitions of “Alevism” itself. Moreover, heated debate concerning the sources and constituent practices of Alevism has by no means ceased—indeed, the vast diversity of civil society organizations devoted to Alevi concerns suggests that these very differences of interpretation and practice both bolster and stem from institutional multiplicity. Nonetheless, there is one interpretation of Alevism that falls beyond the pale of toleration for most Alevis: the conception of Alevism that denies its distinctiveness altogether. Although the members of the Ehli Beyt Foundation do not overtly deny this distinctiveness, their proximity to Sunni political parties and civil society organizations, along with their dismissal of Alevism’s central ritual practices, has led most other Alevis to condemn them as “assimilationist.” Simultaneously, the very indifference of the Ehli Beyt Foundation to the collective concerns expressed by the Sultanbeyli Pir Sultan Abdal Association, the Cem Foundation, and the Hacı Bektaş Foundation has encouraged its emergence as a privileged interlocutor within a broader field of Sunni organizations. While a politics of difference defines the general Alevi commitment to confessional pluralism, the Ehli Beyt Foundation has established a space within Turkish Islamic civil society on the basis of a politics of proximity.

**Alevism and the civil society effect**

The three foundations that I have discussed—the Cem Foundation, the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, and the Ehli Beyt Foundation—evidence sharp divergences in their institutional perspectives and conceptions of Alevism itself. Despite these differences, however, they share a more basic discursive and political logic. As I have emphasized, the process of organization and articulation within civil society continues to transform understandings of Alevism tradition, doctrine, practice, and identity in manifold, active ways. However, each of the institutions that I have considered conceives of this transformation as the excavation or reemergence of a pristine, authentic identity. Civil society is understood by all of the different Alevi actors and institutions I discuss as a domain free from power, which encourages the seamless translation of Alevism into an identity that is suited for representation and recognition. Although civil society itself is thoroughly mediated by political logics and state disciplines, NGO actors only conceive of politics as an ex post facto activity that logically and temporally follows the ideologically prepolitical coherence of an authentic Alevi identity. I have emphasized the different practices of defining this identity among distinct groups and institutions, but each of them shares in this primordialist logic of identity in relation to civil society and political action. This, in brief, is the civil society effect in action.

A prepolitical conception of civil society also unites these different institutions as liberal. For each of them, politics consists of a confrontational relationship between, on the one hand, an authentic, prepolitical community, and, on the other, the state and its apparatuses. As Nikolas Rose has argued (2000:98), this concept of the authentic community is a distinctive feature of political formation within late liberalism; as I show below, it is equally characteristic of the Sunni organizations affiliated with the Hizmet Movement. On the basis of the supposedly inherent legitimacy of the prepolitical Alevi community, Alevi institutions endeavor to contest, criticize, and persuade the state in myriad ways. This project of contestation, critique, and persuasion is an exemplar of nongovernmental politics. Indeed, it is notable that my interlocutors from the Cem Foundation, the Hacı Bektaş Foundation, and other Alevi organizations were all reliably cynical about partisan politics in Turkey as a means of achieving their goals, and they were particularly dismissive of the CHP’s traditional political representative of Alevis. This dismissal of political society is not merely strategic or tactical—for each of the organizations I have discussed, civil society constitutes a uniquely legitimate and salubrious domain for collective representation. Concomitantly, even criticisms of these institutions, such as those leveled at the Ehli Beyt Foundation, proceed by denying the authenticity of an institution’s commitment to civil society—the most effective dismissal of an NGO is the claim that it is a mere “front” for political society.

Despite the massive institutional efforts of Alevi NGOs, Alevism is not as airtight and settled as my interlocutors from Alevi institutions propose. The premium that Alevi civil society organizations place on Alevism as a cohesive, authentic identity (cf. Taylor 1994) also produces moments of irony and confusion. On one visit to the Cem Foundation, I was introduced to a “truly authentic Alevi bard from
the village” (gerçekten otantik köylü bir ozan), who was visiting Istanbul from the northeastern province of Erzincan. I spoke with this “authentic bard” for several minutes, querying his own understanding of Alevism; gradually, I realized that, despite (or, rather, because of) his authenticity, he had very little sense of “Alevism” as an abstract identity at all. For him, “Alevis” were kin and neighbors within his village, defined by their ritual distinction in opposition to the “Sunnis” in other villages (see Shankland 1993); the notion of Alevism as an identity beyond kinship networks and ritual practice was of little interest to him. On another occasion, I witnessed a surreal prelude to a cem ceremony at the Hacı Bektas Foundation in Ankara. The dede who officiated spent some twenty minutes prior to the ceremony explaining that it used to be performed in certain ways in Anatolian villages, but because urban, modern Alevis have forgotten many of the “traditional” (geleneksel) aspects of the ritual, he would merely summarize them verbally for the audience (which he then proceeded to do hastily). As both of these anecdotes suggest, the civil society effect—the ideological production of a prepolitical identity that authorizes representation within civil society—necessarily involves the transformation of ritual practice, doctrine, and communal identity rather than their mere ex post facto representation. The ironies of the authentic bard who cannot speak to “Alevism” in general and the urban cem ceremony that inadvertently cites forgotten aspects of ritual practice both point directly to this formative and transformative power.

For most Alevi civil society organizations, the problem of confessional pluralism is, in essence, a problem of the state’s definition and promulgation of a certain type of religion. If the state were to treat all religious communities equally or not interfere with their ability to worship as they choose, then religious pluralism would necessarily flourish. For Turkey’s Sunni civil society organizations, by contrast, the dilemmas of confessional pluralism are not so clearly defined as a problem of state discrimination among religious communities and identities. As I describe in the next section, groups affiliated with the Hizmet Movement practice confessional pluralism and advocate a liberal interpretation of Islam in response to the Kemalist definition of Islam and its proper, privatized place, in general.

**Neo-Ottoman liberalism and pluralist publicity: The Hizmet Movement**

After completing his paean to interreligious dialogue and pluralism, Cemal Bey, of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, strolled to a nearby multimedia console and pressed play on the DVD player. A screen on the wall opposite displayed a portrait of Fethullah Gülen superimposed with footage of an eagle soaring in the azure firmament. I sat patiently through a 15-minute promotional video for the foundation, which focused exclusively on the themes of “Love, Peace, Tolerance, and Interreligious and Intercivilizational Dialogue” (Sevgi, Barış, Hısr, Dinler Arası ve Medeniyet Arası Diyalog). The famous photograph of Gülen and Pope John Paul II made another appearance in the video. After the film had finished, Cemal Bey beamed proudly and asked me perfunctorily whether I had liked the presentation. I remarked that the film had effectively articulated the ideals and aspirations of the foundation as I understood them—something of an understatement.

Of all of the organizations with which I conducted research during my time in Turkey, the Journalists and Writers Foundation is the most overtly dedicated to a cosmopolitan project of interreligious tolerance and confessional pluralism. The overarching purpose of the foundation is to provide both domestic and international support for the theological, pedagogical, and cultural projects of Fethullah Gülen (Kuru 2003; Turam 2007). Gülen himself is a contemporary heir to the late Ottoman–early Republican theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and has achieved fame, admiration, and controversy by expanding the incipient ideal of interreligious conciliation found in Said’s opus, the Risale-i Nur, into a global project of interreligious dialogue and pious love for humanity as a whole. The Journalists and Writers Foundation carries the ensign of Gülen’s aspirations with enthusiasm. In addition to publishing widely on topics of religion, tolerance, and dialogue (including Gülen’s own works), the foundation organizes a staggering number of national and international conferences, typically based on themes and ideals championed by Gülen himself.

At an initial glance, the ideals of the Journalists and Writers Foundation might appear to be a whole-cloth borrowing of discourses of multicultural pluralism and political toleration as practiced in the liberal democracies of western Europe and North America. However, the members of the foundation consistently emphasize that their liberal commitments spring from a separate historical tradition, that of Ottoman Islam (Walton 2009, 2010b). Although Gülen himself has occasionally downplayed the importance of the Ottoman heritage to the Hizmet Movement, affiliates of Hizmet, and members of the Journalists and Writers Foundation in particular, regularly valorize Ottoman aesthetic and political forms. Over the course of several interviews, Cemal Bey outlined the Ottoman heritage of religious tolerance that inspires the activities of the foundation. This nostalgic version of Ottoman liberalism rests on two separate bases: the Ottoman millet system and the Ottoman foundation system (vakıf sistemi). The millet system, for its part, offers an Islamic precedent for a liberal model of tolerance and coexistence among religious and ethnic communities. According to the foundation’s rather rose-tinted view, the Ottoman millet system ensured both autonomy and equality for the minority religious communities of the empire—Jews and a variety of ethnically and doctrinally distinct Christian communities.
Cemal Bey emphasized that foundations, notably this millet-based ideology of himself and Cemal Bey (a mouthpiece), as underpinned by religious identity is identical to the Alevi understanding of collective identity: Communal identities are organic, coherent, and prepolitical in and of themselves and only interact with political institutions in a contingent manner. This spirit of equality among and autonomy of the millets directly inspires the nongovernmental activism of the foundation. I had the opportunity to witness a rekindling of the millet ideal at many of the conferences sponsored by the foundation. One particular symposium, focusing on global hunger and poverty, brought together representatives from Turkey's different religious populations, the Armenian, Greek, and Syriac Orthodox Churches as well as Jewish and Sunni Muslim communities—the contemporary heirs to the Ottoman millets. In this context, interreligious dialogue based on a recuperation of the millet ideal acted as both a means to confessional pluralism and a sufficient demonstration of pluralism in its own right. Certainly, my interlocutors at the Journalists and Writers Foundation contend that dialogue is a necessary step in the process of achieving and promoting interreligious tolerance. However, as instantiations and signs of a sincere commitment to pluralism, these spectacles of interreligious dialogue also count as moments of tolerance in and of themselves.

It is especially notable that members of the Hizmet Movement regularly assimilate the Ottoman category of “the millet” to the category of “community” (cemaat). Like their Alevi counterparts in civil society, liberal Sunnis idealize “community” as pure gemeinschaft, a locus of organic, authentic, and voluntaristic ties that both precedes and subverts politics. Rose’s (2000) argument concerning the centrality of “community” to late liberal governance is again pertinent here. Muslim intellectuals affiliated with the Hizmet Movement in Turkey often wax poetic over “community” as an expression of and vehicle for piety. For instance, Ali Buluç, a prominent writer, intellectual, and op-ed columnist for the daily newspaper Zaman (a mouthpiece of the Hizmet Movement), valorizes the freedom that supposedly inheres in the category of “community”:

One of the most common errors of Turkish intellectuals is to confuse communities (cemaatler), which rely upon the preferences of individual free will and voluntarism and express themselves through civil initiatives, with classical social structures such as tribes and clans, which depend on ties of blood and family. However, this fictional image bears absolutely no relation to the true reality of communities. The communities of a modern Muslim city depend upon voluntarism and free individual choice, operate through initiatives in the civil sphere and pursue their existence through free will. Within such communities, the strict and imperious hierarchy that is often witnessed in traditional society does not exist. [2007:15, my translation]

Buluç makes several related points in this subtle passage. First, he argues that the community is a contemporary sociological form that only emerges within the modern city—thus, in a historical sense, communities are not Ottoman. Despite the modernity of community, however, the mode of interreligious recognition that applied to the Ottoman millets applies equally to contemporary religious communities—a point that both Buluç himself and Cemal Bey frequently emphasized to me in conversation. In other words, practices of religious tolerance that supposedly characterized the Ottoman model of confessional pluralism—the millet system—remain valid despite the distinct sociocultural forms in the contemporary urban environment, embodied in the “community” (cemaat). Finally, according to Buluç, the institutional domain best suited to religious communities is civil society itself—his contention that voluntaristic communities necessarily “operate through initiatives in the civil sphere” precisely encapsulates the civil society effect that I have discussed throughout this article.

Like the category of the millet, the concept of civil society espoused by liberal Sunnis such as Cemal Bey and Buluç partakes in an Ottoman heritage. The preeminent and preferable crucible of civil society for the Hizmet Movement is the foundation (vakıflar), as understood in its Ottoman form rather than its later, Republican iteration. Cemal Bey emphasized that foundations, rather than the Sultanic state, were the principal providers of community services—ranging from soup kitchens to orphanages to religious schools—during the Ottoman era. Furthermore, he explicitly advocated this civil dispensation of service over a state-based model. As he put it, “The Ottoman state wasn’t really engaged in anything other than military affairs. All of the necessary services were provided by foundations (vakıflar). And, in this way, the services were also separate from politics.”

As I note in my opening discussion, Sunni Turks such as Cemal Bey, Buluç, and the other members of the Hizmet Movement are typically considered to be the antagonists of Alevi within political society. It is all the more remarkable, then, to find Sunni and Alevi civil society institutions voicing identical ideals of liberal religious pluralism. In the quotation above, for instance, Cemal Bey marshals a critique of the state rooted in the same logic and presuppositions as the criticism of the state made by Alevi organizations. In both cases, the state is conceived as an agent of infelicitous interference and an inevitable detriment to the organic relationship between religiosity and public life. Equally, both Alevi institutions and the Journalists and Writers Foundation evince the civil society effect—the Journalists and
Finally, both Alevi and Sunni civil society activists claim that we are only interested in state political society is yet another stirring exhibition of the civil society effect. Notably, the Journalists and Writers Foundation's valorization of the Ottoman vakıf system articulates the civil society effect on the basis of a discourse of pious nostalgia (Walton 2009, 2010b)—just as the Ottoman Empire represents the triumph of liberal Islam and confessional pluralism historically, so too contemporary civil society constitutes a locus for these ideals in the current moment.23 Finally, both Alevi and Sunni civil society activists consistently voice skepticism and cynicism over Turkish political society in general. Just as my Alevi interlocutors were dismissive of the relationship between Alevis and the CHP, so too did Cemal Bey, Buluç, and other Hizmet activists express tempered scorn over the activities and aspirations of the AKP. In both instances, political society, as such, is conceived as a domain of problematic entanglement within which the ways and means of power taint more authentic identities and aspirations. This whole-cloth denigration of political society is yet another stirring exhibition of the civil society effect.

For Gülen-related institutions in particular, denigration of Turkish political society draws force and legitimacy from the global network of NGOs, schools, private businesses, and media outlets that loosely constitute the Hizmet Movement. As a number of social scientists have noted (Hendrick 2011; Turam 2007), domestic Turkish institutions such as the Journalists and Writers Foundation represent only a sliver of the transnational scope of Hizmet. While the institutional activities and specific arrangements of state and civil society vary widely across these different contexts, activists within Turkey imagine and valorize the transnational space of the Hizmet Movement as coextensive with their depoliticized vision of piety within civil society. Crucially, the global thrust of the civil society effect—the comprehension of civil society as a transnational, prepolitical space of voluntary religious activity—parochializes the specific politics of Islam and public life within Turkey. As Cemal Bey once remarked to me, “Strict Kemalist secularists (koyu Atatürkçiler) claim that we are only interested in state power, but what do conferences in the Philippines and the United States, or Turkish schools in Kazakhstan and Nigeria, have to do with Turkish politics?” This is not to claim, of course, that Hizmet activities outside Turkey are necessarily apolitical or uncontroversial or even that these activities bear no consequences for political life within Turkey. However, as Cemal Bey’s remarks emphasize, the global horizons of the Hizmet Movement are taken to authenticate the nongovernmental politics of Gülen sympathizers within Turkey. By conceptualizing civil society as a transnational domain of nongovernmental action, Hizmet actors aspire to defuse the fraught questions surrounding Islam and secularism within Turkey, at least to a degree.

The civil society effect and the erosion of Kemalist statism

To this point, I have focused principally on the relationship between the civil society effect and the practices of self-definition and confessional pluralism that characterize both Sunni and Alevi NGOs in Turkey. I have argued that the civil society effect exemplifies and encourages two key features of the liberal model of religion: the conception of religious community and identity as primordially authentic and prepolitical and the assertion that all such communities and identities deserve equal recognition and treatment by the state. While these two points remain the major contribution of my argument, the institutions that I have discussed in this article are also deeply involved in material, socioeconomic transformations that, taken together, index the progressive erosion of Kemalist statism in Turkey.

As all students of the Republican Turkish state tradition well know, Kemalism is not merely a laicist–secularist ideology about religion—it is also an overarching project for the provision of all societal needs by the state. From the ideological perspective of this statist dispensation, the state should satisfy all of the ratified, public needs of the citi- zenry, ranging from piety to health care, from education to national mass media. It is especially striking, then, that nearly all of the NGOs I consider here do not merely concern themselves with theological, ritual, and identitarian matters; they also provide services that mirror and compete with the traditional service functions of the Turkish state. For instance, both the Cem Foundation and the Hacı Bektas Veli Foundation also house a health clinic and emergency room. During one of my visits to the foundation, I was able to speak to a patient at this health clinic. When I asked her to explain her decision to seek health care at the clinic, her response was rooted in pragmatism rather than collective identity: The clinic was simply the most convenient in her immediate neighborhood. Even the modest Sultanbeyli Cem House, described at the outset of the article, aspires to provide a variety of services to the Alevi residents of the district, including an after-school program for Alevi children, a lending library, and a funeral home.

Several anthropologists have recently underscored the centrality of education to more general debates over public culture, citizenship, Islam, and the state in Turkey (Kaplan 2006; Özgür 2012). It is no coincidence, then, that Islamic NGOs have robustly entered debates over education
in Turkey, not only by making arguments about the relationship between religious identity and national education but also by providing educational services themselves. As numerous scholars have noted (Agai 2003; Turam 2007), education is a hallmark of the Hizmet Movement on both a national and global scale. Within Istanbul, the Journalists and Writers Foundation maintains ties and coordinates activities among the twenty-odd private Hizmet schools in the city. At an early point in my research, I had the opportunity to visit one of these schools, the Coşkun School in the Çamlıca region of Asian Istanbul. After visiting a fifth-grade class and touring the campus, I shared a cup of tea with the assistant principal of Coşkun. His response to my query concerning the school’s relationship to both other Hizmet institutions and to Fethullah Gülen’s theology in general was telling: “Our goal at Coşkun is to provide a world class education to students that unites the intellectual and moral (zihinsel ve ahlaki) aspects of learning. We serve as moral guides and custodians (veliler) to the children. While Gülen inspires us, we do not teach his beliefs, or for that matter religion at all, in a direct sense.”

While the response from the assistant principal of the Coşkun School raises key questions concerning the form that public religion takes in the contemporary world (cf. Casanova 1994), I emphasize another dimension of the civil society effect that it illuminates. The bulk of my presentation has focused on how officials and other affiliates of Islamic NGOs conceptualize religious community, identity, and practice in relation to civil society and the state in contemporary Turkey. As I have argued, the civil society effect—particularly evident in the discourse of confessional pluralism—fosters a liberal understanding of religion as a prepolitical, authentic mode of voluntary sociality. Alevi and Sunni NGOs alike base their legitimacy on a liberal concept of religion that hinges on the civil society effect. That said, however, the ensemble of activities and services that these institutions offer, from health care to education, reaches far beyond explicit debates over the nature and politics of religion. It is in these contexts—clinics, classrooms, radio studios, and the like—that the civil society effect achieves dispersion in a broader, less institutionally regimented social terrain. Furthermore, it is precisely at the border between civil society proper and this more diffuse social terrain that the erosion of Kemalist statistism in Turkey appears most vividly as a congeries of social, political, and ideological frictions, transformations, and innovations.

**Conclusion: Confessional pluralism and its discontents**

A mere month after the end of my fieldwork in March 2007, the Journalists and Writers Foundation hosted a symposium on Alevism, in which “many atheist, Sunni and Alevi scholars, academics, intellectuals, etc. came together and discussed various aspects of the Alevi reality, sociopolitical situation of Alevis, state-secularism-Alevi relations, Alevi identity, definition of Alevism [sic], Sunni-Alevi relations and so on” (Yılmaz 2007). This conference received wide media coverage and praise as a watershed moment of interconfessional cooperation and rapprochement between Turkey’s Alevis and Sunnins.25 Only two months later, Sadegül Hanım and several of her colleagues at the Sultanbeyli Cem House were arrested by municipal police officers on the basis of a technicality after they objected to an attempt by the Sultanbeyli Municipality to build a road directly through the middle of the association’s property. Later that summer, the AKP Municipal Administration of Sultanbeyli initiated yet another court case to close the Cem House, igniting protests throughout Istanbul’s Alevi community.26

As these two events briefly indicate, the topography of confessional pluralism in Turkey today is extraordinarily uneven. On the one hand, a liberal model of religion and the confessional pluralism that this model supports and presupposes constitute a potent ideal for an array of civil society institutions, Sunni and Alevi alike. On the other hand, the practice and legitimacy of this ideal remain contingent and frequently subject to curtailment by state forces. Nor can confessional pluralism, understood as a means of producing recognizable, legitimate religious difference, necessarily accommodate all theologies or identities that might aspire to its imprimatur. Certain strains of Islam—notably Naksibendi Sufism (Mardin 1991; Silverstein 2008)—remain illegal in Turkey. In the context of my own research, I recall the exasperation of a Greek–Turkish friend and board member of a foundation responsible for one of Istanbul’s Greek hospitals.27 When I asked him to reflect on the changing dynamics of Istanbul’s Greek community, he replied, with evident aggravation and exhaustion, “Of course, the EU Process has improved our lot, but the Greek community is so small that even full rights and recognition won’t make much of a difference.”

Even as the horizons of confessional pluralism in Turkey remain obscure and circumscribed in myriad ways, the frequency and volume of calls for interreligious tolerance shed unique light on the shifting arrangement of secularism, liberalism, civil society, and Islam, both in contemporary Turkey and globally. The Alevi and Sunni institutions that I have detailed throughout my discussion articulate pious practices, discourses, and ideals that not only emerge from within civil society but also valorize, naturalize, and ultimately constitute civil society itself. They vividly evoke the civil society effect and, therefore, demand comprehension as formations of liberal religiosity. Most crucially, this civil, liberal Islam offers sharp critiques of illiberal Turkish laicism, with its twin imperatives of Kemalist privatization and statist monopolization of Islam. However, this
contestation of illiberal secularism does not mark Alevi and Gülen foundations and actors as somehow antisecular. Rather, the institutions of my study negotiate and articulate new constellations of Islam, secularity, and civil society, ensembles that defy the simple antinomies of religion and secularism, liberalism and orthodoxy, nation and globe, and public and private. These new, shifting arrangements offer lessons not only to scholars of Turkey but to all anthropologists who endeavor to comprehend how secularism and liberalism operate as lived projects, subject to both tensions and commensurations in the crucibles of distinct political contexts.

Finally, my argument suggests a series of conceptual and ethnographic openings for anthropologists of Islam and civil society in general. The aspirations and activities of Turkey’s Alevi and Sunni NGOs, mediated by the civil society effect, demonstrate that the relationship between Islam and civil society has undergone massive transformations since Turkish sociologist Mardin’s pessimistic assessment that civil society, “the dream of Western societies, has not become the dream of Muslim societies” (1995:295). While anthropologists and social scientists in both Turkey and elsewhere have productively plumbed the relationship among civil society, Islam, and democratization (Hefner 2000; Tuğal 2009; White 2002), my analysis in this article shows that the relationship between Islam and civil society cannot be reduced to questions of democracy and Islam’s compatibility or incompatibility with it—a deceptive, false dualism in any event. Rather, and most expansively, the relationship between civil society and Islam is central to the very conditions of possibility of the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad 1986) in the neoliberal present. As I have argued, the very practices and notions of community and identity that distinguish and define civil Islamic institutions in Turkey constitute a synthesis of both liberal and Islamic discursive traditions. The ethnographic task, which I have only initiated here, is to articulate how these discursive traditions meld and affect each other in relation to the ensemble of aspirations, institutions, and sensibilities that we gloss, both problematically and provocatively, as “civil society.”

Notes

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1. Gecekondu—literally, put up at night—is the catch-all term for extralegal constructions, shantytowns, and squatter settlements in Istanbul, Ankara, and Turkey’s other urban centers. See Keyder 1999 and Ünsal and Kuyucu 2010. Pir Sultan Abdal was a Turcoman Alevi poet and bard (ozan) who lived in the Ottoman Anatolian province of Sivas during the 15th and 16th centuries C.E. He was unsparing in his criticism of the local governor and was eventually executed for his insurgent tendencies. He is still cherished as an icon of resistance among contemporary Alevis, and many Alevi organizations bear his name, along with his iconic image, in which he is shown clutching a lute like a weapon defiantly over his head. See Bezirci 1986. The cem is a definitive ritual practice of Alevi Turks. There are different types of cem, which often include a reenactment of the Prophet Muhammad’s ascent into heaven (mirâq Arabic, mlraj) and glorification of Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law and the first of the Shi’a Imams. In general, a cem features circumambulatory ritual performances (semah) by both men and women, accompanied by bards (ozanlar) playing lutes such as the baglama and saz. For more detailed descriptions of cems, see Shankland 1993:140ff. and Stokes 1996.

2. While I consider the particularities and peculiarities of Alevism throughout the article, a minimal doctrinal and ritual definition of Alevism would include an emphasis on Twelve Shi’a history and beliefs, especially concerning the unique role of the Imams in the line of Ali ibn Talib and the martyrdom of his son Huseyn; the ritual practice of the cem (see N.1); and a heritage of central Asian mystic–shamanistic practices. Inasmuch as “Alevi” is not an official identity recognized by the Turkish state (and, hence, not included on census forms), precise demographic information about Turkey’s Alevi population is sparse; Alevis are estimated to make up 5 to 20 percent of the entire Turkish population of approximately 80 million.

3. Hanum and Bey are standard feminine and masculine honorifics in Turkish, similar to Miss and Mister in English. I use them throughout the article in reference to various informants.

4. The history of the political incorporation of Alevi Turks within the CHP is beyond my consideration here, but a few remarks are in order. As I discuss subsequently in the text, Alevi institutions and politicians have increasingly identified Sunni majoritarianism in Turkey as the primary threat to their communal identity; partially as a result of this sense of embattlement, Alevis have typically supported the staunchly Kemalist–secularist CHP; although increasing numbers have also begun to cast votes for the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (Milli Hareket Partisi, MHP). For a lengthier consideration of Alevi and party affiliation, see Ciddi 2009.

5. Although Fethullah Gülen and the Journalists and Writers Foundation have gone to some length to distance the civic–religious goals of the Hizmet Movement from the political goals of the AKP (Sevindi 2008:74), this distinction is regularly elided in both secularist media portrayals of Gülen’s followers and quotididian political discussions.

7. For anthropological approaches to civil society and neoliberalism that emphasize, among other matters, the identification between consumer subjects and citizenship and the political formations of development-oriented NGOs, see Yudice 1995 and Mazzarella 2010.

8. The Hanafi School of Sunni jurisprudence (mezhep; Arabic, madhab) was also the official school of the Ottoman state and its religious functionaries.


11. Alevi are generally divided into two genealogical lineages, dedeler (lit. grandfathers but in this context closer to instructors or ritual specialists) and talipier (suitors). Dedes constitute approximately 10 percent of all Alevi; members of dede lineages are still accorded great respect among Alevi in general (Shankland 1993:86–87). The dedes I observed here were debating cases like that of the Zaza-speaking Kurds of the province of Tunceli (Der-sim in Kurdish), who generally consider themselves to be Alevi but frequently experience resistance to this claim from Turkish Alevis. On this particular occasion, I witnessed an argument over this very question between a Kurdish man from Dersim–Tunceli and a Turkish dede from the province of Sivas. See also Munzuroğlu 2004.

12. See, for instance, the interview in Radikal Gazetesi with Kazım Genç, chairman of the Federation of Pir Sultan Abdal Associations, titled “Alevi Is Not a Part of Islam” (“Alevi İslam’ın içinde değil”; Düzel 2005). The debate over the relationship between Alevism and Islam is equally strident among Alevi organizations in Germany, despite the relative lack of pressure for German Alevis to identify as Muslims per se; for a fascinating comparison, see Sökefeld 2008:278ff.


15. Indeed, the very notion that a cem ceremony might have taken place is multiply undermined by an insistence that a cem ceremony might have taken place.

16. This theme of global tolerance and love is expressed in the titles of many of Fethullah Gülen’s own works, for example, Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance (2004) and İnsanın özündeği sevgi (The love at the heart of Humanity; 2003).

17. It is also worth noting that the Journalists and Writers Foundation has strong ties to Zaman Gazetesi, one of Turkey’s most widely read daily newspapers, which in turn has strong connections to the Gülen community as a whole. Cemal Uşak, the vice president of the foundation, is a frequent contributor to Zaman, and many of Zaman’s columnists, including well-known writers such as Ali Bulaç, are regular guests at the foundation.

18. For instance, in a 1997 interview with Hakan Yavuz, Gülen states that “rather than identitarian questions involving ‘Ottomanism,’ ‘Turkishness,’ or ‘Muslim-ness,’ my theory of ‘returning to the source’ describes the dynamics of a nation that is able to preserve the balance between state and nation and ensure vitality in both the era in which we live and future times” [Öze dönmek . . . bir ‘Osmanlılık, Türkülük ve Müslümanlık’tan ziyade, içinde yaşarkenmuş çağda ve gelecek çağlarda hayattiyetini ve devletleri—milletler denen- idekilerin ifade etmektedir] (Yavuz 1997:18). More generally, Gülen is particularly hesitant to valorize the Ottoman era when he is questioned about his relationship to Sufi orders (tarikatlar); his adamant insistence that the Hizmet Movement is not a Sufi order explains his compunction concerning Ottoman-era Sufism.

19. I am not claiming here that liberalism was an extant political project during the Ottoman Empire, although certain 19th-century Tanzimat-era reforms—notably the Gülhane Edict of 1839 (Hatt-i Şerif, Gülhane Fermand) and the Hatt-i Hümâyun (İslahat Fermand) of 1856, which together established individual legal equality for members of the empire's religious minorities—point to the incipient influence of liberal thought on Ottoman policy and politics. My argument is merely that the Ottoman era as a whole has been reinterpreted in a liberal vein by contemporary Sunni thinkers, activists, and institutions in Turkey. See also Silverstein 2011.

20. Again, I do not maintain that the foundation’s vision of the millet system is historically accurate or uncontested. As Peter F. Sugar (1977:43ff.) argues persuasively in his study of early Ottoman rule in southeast Europe, the millet system depended on and produced a congruities of asymmetric relationships of power, both between specific millets and the Ottoman state and within millets themselves.


23. A related but tangential question here is whether one can speak of “Ottoman civil society” in a historical sense. Although the late Ottoman era was characterized by the influence of Enlightenment republican and liberal philosophy and Ottomans themselves distinguished between the instruments of the state and various other institutions, it is unclear whether “civil society” as an abstract domain opposed to the state existed conceptually or institutionally in the Ottoman Empire. Mardin (2000) offers insight into this question. Provocatively, he notes that Namık Kemal, the doyen of Ottoman political philosophy, does not conceptualize “civil society” per se, even as he theorizes the distinction between state and society (Mardin 2000:304).

24. It is important to note that Alevis do not share this nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire and its dispensation of religious communities. While there are a variety of reasons for this difference relating to the politicization of Alevism within the Republic period, the most important factor is the relatively recent, post-Republican emergence of Alevism as a coherent identity itself (see Tambar 2009b).
25. While violent Sunni–Alevi clashes date back to at least the 1970s, the definitive moment of Sunni–Alevi strife occurred on July 2, 1993, when 37 Alevi intellectuals died in a hotel blaze in the city of Sivas. A colloquium of Alevi civil society organizations had sponsored a conference and festival at the hotel on that weekend. Reportedly, a group of incensed, conservative Sunni protesters ignited the building because of the presence of the famous writer Aziz Nesin, who had translated Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel The Satanic Verses into Turkish. See Kaleli 1994.

26. For reportage in Turkish on both of these events, see Sultanbeyli Pir Sultan Abdal Association n.d.

27. The Treaty of Lausanne, which ended the Turkish War of Independence in 1923, stipulated specific minority rights for three of Turkey’s communities, Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, and Jews. These three “Lausanne Minorities” (Lozan Aznıkları) were allowed to organize self-governing foundations (vakıflar) for their churches, synagogues, hospitals, and other institutions (Öztürk 2003). Given the frequent hardship experienced by Jews and Christians throughout Republican history, it is ironic that the stipulation of the “Lausanne Minorities” has consistently frustrated Kurdish and Alevi aspirations to official minority status.

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