

# Religion and Secularism in the Modern World: A Turkish Perspective

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## About the Author



Professor Mehmet Görmez completed his undergraduate studies in the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University. Parallel to his service in the Directorate of Religious Affairs, he completed

his doctorate degree (1995), for which he received the best researcher award in the field of Islamic studies. Promoted to full professorship in 2006, he has researched and taught in Kazakhstan, Egypt and the United Kingdom. After teaching at Hacettepe University, he was appointed as the Vice President of the Directorate of Religious

Affairs in 2003 and assumed his post as the President of the Directorate in 2010. He has published numerous books and articles in Turkish and other languages, and presented papers at domestic and international conferences.

## Abstract

*This policy brief presents an alternative perspective on the relationship between religion and politics by employing an inter-disciplinary framework. Identifying two problematic approaches to the role of religion in modern world – viewing religion as an artifact of the past and neglecting the everyday realities of religion – the author proposes to view religion from a more comprehensive perspective and rejects the arguments that juxtapose religion and secularization. He argues that the Muslim world, which is going through a process of evaluating its own age, manifests different forms of secularism, though in an unconventional sense. The author also dwells on various ramifications of religion in contemporary political developments and maintains that religion needs to be taken into consideration while developing policies for addressing the root causes of tensions and conflicts that arise at the national and international levels. He discusses the growing religious divide and polarization in Turkey's neighborhood, maintaining that Turkey's interpretation of religion in the contemporary age, emanating from its own tradition, offers a viable alternative.*

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# Religion and Secularism in the Modern World: A Turkish Perspective

Mehmet Görmez

Each and every one of us must be sensitive to the political and cultural contexts of the country, region and world that we live in. As the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry argued, it has become difficult to do anything without taking into account the entire world. In talking about religion, we need to be aware of the specific national, regional and global contexts as well as the specific issues and concepts relevant to the issue.

Though religion, whatever its form, vehicules essentially the same meaning, it carries important signifiers that allow its multiple interpretations in different parts of the world. If we adopt a sociological perspective, we can explain varying religious interpretations as simply pertaining to the daily lives of individuals and then analyze its implications on individual and social processes. If we analyze religion from a theological perspective, however, the criteria for evaluation will necessarily be different. Since the role that religion plays in the global context is too wide to be captured by the standards of any specific discipline, my evaluation will be based on an inter-disciplinary framework. In other words, it is necessary to consider a broad-based spectrum that stretches from linguistics to hermeneutics, from sociology to anthropology and from political science to theology.

## Two Problematic Approaches to Religion and Secularism

It will be useful to discuss two problematic approaches to religion, as have been widely applied in recent years. One of these approaches views religion as an artifact of the past. This

perspective maintains that religion, sooner or later, will complete its lifespan in the modern world, lose the prestige that it somehow gained and become reduced to a mere historical myth. Formed in the popular scientific atmosphere of the nineteenth century, this approach survives today as positivism. Those who insist on this approach, however, have difficulty explaining the ongoing relevance of religion on a global scale in the modern age, and their attempts to identify a rational explanation for the persisting existence of religion lead even positivists to depart from their claim of objectivity. Another problematic approach neglects the everyday realities of religion. Although it assumes that religion, regardless of how it is defined, is a common human denominator, those who advocate this approach forget that religion in fact aided people in organizing their daily lives.

The problem that both approaches have in common is their neglect of parts of human existence. One downplays the realities of religion and rejects it, while the other overlooks the

everyday representations of religion as it glorifies it. Today there exists a popular view that we live in an increasingly secularizing world; at the same time, we also witness the insufficiency of approaches that rule out religion in interpreting daily events. Analyzing these two seemingly contradictory assumptions marks an important step toward understanding the proper place of religion in today's world.

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## An Alternative Approach to Secularism

Let us borrow from one of the leading philosophers of our age, Charles Taylor, to define the concept of secularism: simply put, secularism is not having to encounter God in the public sphere

against one's own will. One might argue that we must give up the perception that the history of secularism is that of renouncing religion and tradition. Secularization, unlike Max Weber's claim, is not purification from metaphysics, but rather is a process involving transformation of a tradition. Precisely for this reason, different cultures and religious traditions have produced forms of secularization unique to their conditions.

We will take a great leap forward in understanding the status of religion in the world when we begin to see secularism as the transformation of a tradition that has strong religious references. Seen from that perspective, piousness in the United States, the existence and legitimacy of the Vatican, the role of religion in the Middle East and East Asia and different interpretations and

representations of religion in Turkey all have something to do with this transformation and the differences in tradition. More importantly, in none of these examples is religion a residue of the secularization process, which somehow has managed to

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protect its existence. Rather, religion has shaped this secularization or the relationship between the secular and mundane.

For example, the ability of the Pope to make both diplomatic and religious visits as well as the existence of the Vatican as a State are not indicative of the victory of Catholicism against modernity. On the contrary, it is the transformation of a Christian tradition in the form of secularization. Similarly, this transformation is also one that produced Protestantism. Personal piety of the people is insufficient to explain the attention that the Pope received in Europe, particularly during his visit to Germany. A secular mentality is at work here. The secular structure placed the Pope in its own system, thereby making it possible for the Pope to visit Germany "without having to encounter God." In other words,



an institution representing Catholicism at the highest level is put in a secular context, and its actions are explained in pragmatic terms. While saying this, we cannot ignore the fact that for millions such a visit has a religious connotation and represents a unique spiritual experience for them. In terms of discourse, however, this visit was a secular one since it took place within a secular European framework.

When we look at the Muslim world, it would be insufficient to portray the transformation process taking place there as a clash of opposite poles, as claimed by Samuel Huntington. On the contrary, the Muslim world is going through a process of evaluating the contemporary age. Though classifying this process as secularization is not necessarily helpful, it would not be incorrect to identify it as such, either. The secular world realizes that its self-definition will remain incomplete as long as it positions itself against the reality of Islam and perceives the Islamic world and worldview as a threat. Islamophobia, just as any other fear, has much to do with the beholder of the fear itself. The Muslim world, as it goes through a major socio-economic transformation, does not offer an Islamic alternative to secularism. Indeed, the culture produced by the Islamic civilization increasingly manifests different forms of secularism, though not in the conventional sense. It will offer an alternative form that will call into question the existing variants of secularism. The possibility of such an alternative path is a major factor that will affect the global positioning of Muslim countries.

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Understanding secularization in this alternative manner might seem oxymoronic to many observers. This reaction is largely due to the fact that religion and secularization have always been juxtaposed and have been perceived to be in eternal conflict.

However, many contemporary studies have demonstrated that secularism is enmeshed with multiple religious references. The dilemma of secularization, when it is interpreted as purification from metaphysics, points to the impossibility of such an extreme interpretation of the term, as well. Hence secularization should be perceived as an expression of a specific metaphysical tradition in today's modern industrial conditions rather than completely divorcing ourselves from metaphysics. However, this interpretation also entails suggesting a metaphysical look at the current age, and it seems that this dimension is the one that is largely overlooked.

## Social and Political Implications of Religion



The social implications of the religion are among the most contentious issues of the last century. Some tend to see religion as an essential element of politics. At the same time, there are many attempts that view religion as a problem that has to be fought against all odds, even if that requires waging crusades against it. For instance, the failed Soviet regime sought to abolish not only the general teachings but also all aspects of religion from daily

life. Undoubtedly, similar practices by different regimes continued to hurt people leading different lifestyles in various parts of the world. While religion was completely removed from daily life in the Eastern bloc countries, it also faced containment in the Western bloc. This attitude was such that the past century turned into a race between those who abolished religion and those who contained it.

In the applications of laicism that showed variations across countries, the visibility of religious representations, symbols and rituals, and their reflections in the public sphere have been

subjected to substantial criticism. The applications of laicism in Jacobin countries such as France and their imitators have caused great damage and left deep scars. Religion as the main point of reference to understand human nature, be it Islam or any other religion, has come under attack by rigid applications of laicism. There has been a direct assault to undermine the power of religion and erode the sphere of meaning it represented. Today, it is interesting to see how religion, whose voice can be heard in almost any corner of the world, still remains the only source of hope for humanity despite many such attacks against it. Today, religion rejuvenates itself with its own meaning and existence from South Asia to Eastern Europe and from America to Australia and emerges as an ancient phenomenon that is taken into account within State activities.

So, what must be done to understand all these issues discussed above? In this context, not only the institutionalized authentic religions, but also new religious formations gain importance. It is quite common to come across people all around the world who are looking for bliss via some cult figures. Almost all traditions are being restructured with new ways of interpretation and practice that open the way for deeper religiosity. Indeed all these are not new and for most of us there is nothing surprising in such exciting developments. Religion continues to manifest itself in a calm manner as the consciousness of the humanity and the heart of life after a relative withdrawal and suppression in modern societies.

*Today it is possible to see the role of religion behind many political borders, tensions and divisions in Turkey's neighborhood.*

Ever since the Crusades, religion has often been the motivating tool behind the tensions that have deeply shaken the world. The debate on Islam, which has become a matter of remarkable division line throughout the world after 9/11, still remains highly charged. We come across some unpleasant examples that might support the argument of those who claim that the European

Union is a Christian Club. The important question is not what the EU is, or what its political or cultural references are. In fact, the point worth emphasizing here is that as a great experience the EU has been unable to overlook religion. During the preparations of the EU constitution, for instance, this became one of the most controversial issues and a considerable majority insisted on the inclusion of a religious reference at least in the preamble of the constitution. In the same context, it is worth wondering how the people of the East and the West who are not in coherence perceive their religion, faith and the symbols of their faiths in the contemporary world order that is affected by the American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The aforementioned examples were discussed to demonstrate how religion is embedded in different types of policies throughout the

world. At a more profound level, however, there is the issue of the genuine role of religion in the realities of life.

In essence, religion cannot be confined exclusively to either individual or social spheres. While religion's sociological manifestation is reflected in

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society, its spiritual dimension organizes the inner world of the individual. Being aware of this fact requires one to take religion into consideration while developing policies for addressing the root causes of the tensions and conflicts that arise at the national and international levels as the phenomenon of religion is a core element in all these processes.

## Religious Polarization in the Middle East and Turkey's Interpretation as a Way Forward

Today it is possible to see the role of religion behind many political borders, tensions and divisions in Turkey's neighborhood. Shiism is extending its turf each day as a sect and the historical division of Islam risks being re-actualized. In the Persian Gulf, Shiism

claims leadership role over Islam's role in the traditional East-West tension. On the other hand, extreme reactions from Salafism – a relatively modern movement – reject philosophy, culture and interpretation and seek to understand religious texts by isolating them from everyday realities of modern life. Salafism then turns these interpretations into legal texts which have now emerged as candidates for mainstream Sunni interpretations of Islam against Shiism. Shiism's bid to represent Islam vis-à-vis the West and the desire of various versions of Salafism and Wahhabism to turn into a hegemonic power that confronts Shiism generates a political climate that cannot be ignored. These developments taking place in Turkey's neighborhood are among the most important challenges that Muslims and the rest of the world will have to face in the coming years.

At the same time, Turkey's rising influence and prestige offers an alternative way to ease the tensions among different religious discourses in the region. Turkey is now better positioned to defend its interpretation of the contemporary age which it produced from its own tradition dating back to the pre-Republican period. We believe that this power stems from the strength of Turkey's rich religious tradition, as well as the ethical and all-embracing nature of Islam's message. Hence it is hoped that the prejudices that divide people along religious and sectarian lines are set aside and attention is paid to the suggestion implied by Turkey's interpretation as well as other equally strong ones.



## Directorate of Religious Affairs: A Unique Turkish Experience

At this stage, it is worth mentioning the increasing appreciation of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs on a global scale. Owing to its vast experience and strong internal structure, not to mention its foundations being on the principles of balance,

depth and high quality services, the Directorate has received a wide and considerable appreciation in the world. Turkey's rational and liberal approach to the issue of religion has made very strong contributions to the extension of peace and happiness in Turkish society as well as in other Muslim communities. Today, religion is seen as a source of the quest for peace and comfort while some steps aiming to limit the religious sphere through controversial policies have been abandoned. The Directorate is leading a prestigious organization of religious services both in a regional and global scale. This endeavor is supported by Turkey's unique interpretation of secularism and freedom of thought and faith which are legally guaranteed.

We should not forget the existence of people in different parts of the globe who are resisting pressures against assimilation and trying to protect their identity despite various difficulties. In particular, Turks in Europe need the support of the Directorate for protecting their religious and cultural roots in the face of assimilationist policies that they sometimes encounter. Similarly, Turkey's brothers who are the legacy of Ottoman State in a wide geographical area ranging from the Balkans to the Turkic Republics are struggling for the protection and recognition of their identities and references. They too are in need of the Directorate's support.

Shiite and Salafi encroachments, however, are seeking to undermine Turkey's influence in these regions. The Directorate appreciates the urgency of the situation when traditional Orientalism and modern Islamophobia, which have gained a systematic structure, are added to the picture as well. In this context, the Directorate is the protective shield for Turkey's religious and cultural traditions, both domestically and abroad. In this endeavor, the Directorate undoubtedly acts independently from political authorities and pursues an approach that is above any political and sectarian considerations. The Directorate clearly prefers a prestigious referee position instead of taking sides which is in accordance with its half century long experience and accumulation of knowledge in the field of religious affairs.

## Further Readings

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## About SAM

Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (SAM) is a think-tank and a research center which is chartered by law and has been active since May 1995. SAM was established as a consultative body to provide Turkish Foreign Policy decision makers with scholarly and scientific assessments of relevant issues, and reviews Turkish foreign policy with a futuristic perspective.

SAM conducts research, organizes scholarly events relevant to the ever expanding spectrum of Turkish Foreign Policy in cooperation with both Turkish and foreign academicians, its counterparts from around the world as well as various universities and government agencies. SAM provides consultancy to the foreign ministry departments as well as some other state institutions in foreign policy issues while also establishing regional think-tank networks.

In addition to its role of generating up-to-date information, reliable data and insightful analysis as a think-tank, SAM functions as a forum for candid debate and discussion for anyone who is interested in both local and global foreign policy issues. Increasingly, SAM has become a center of attraction since it successfully brings scholars and policy makers together for exchange of ideas in panels, in-house meetings, seminars and training programs for young diplomats.

SAM has a widening range of publications. Along with its traditional publication, Perceptions, which is a quarterly English language journal that hosts distinguished Turkish and international scholars within its pages, SAM recently initiated Vision Papers which expresses the views of H.E. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Davutođlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and SAM Papers that will cover the current debates of foreign policy by various scholars.

With its commitment to contribution to the body of knowledge and constructive debate particularly in Turkish Foreign Policy, SAM will continue to serve as an indispensable think-tank and research center given its role promoting interaction and mutual benefits among the MFA, NGOs, other think-tanks and the broader scientific community and hence strengthen the human and intellectual capital of Turkey.