TEACHING RELIGION AT TURKISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A THEME OSCILLATING BETWEEN FAITH, CULTURE, AND POLITICS?

Ayşe Zişan Furat

Istanbul University, Istanbul-Turkey
zisanfurat@istanbul.edu.tr
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2263-9780

Abstract

Since the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, many aspects of religious education in public schools, namely, those related to the status of religion courses, have been intensely discussed. However, developing sustainable policies that meet societal and political changes has not always been an achievable goal. This is evident from the interminable renewals of religious education curricula, which always evoke the same debate: "What should be the essence of religious education in public education? Should it aim to teach religion as a practice of faith, or should it approach religion as a cultural concept?" Focusing on this ongoing debate, this paper aims to offer an in-depth analysis of the Turkish endeavor to reconcile religious education with the secular schooling system. This paper concludes that these responses, although presented as part of pedagogical paradigm shifts, have not been impervious to the political turbulence in Turkey.

Key Words: Education policies, religious education, teaching religion in schools, religion in Turkey, Turkish religion courses

Ilahiyat Studies p-ISSN: 1309-1786 / e-ISSN: 1309-1719
Volume 11 Number 2 Summer / Fall 2020 DOI: 10.12730/13091719.2020.112.209

Received: July 12, 2020 *Accepted*: September 30, 2020 *Published*: December 31, 2020

To cite this article: Furat, Ayşe Zişan. "Teaching Religion at Turkish Public Schools: A Theme Oscillating between Faith, Culture, and Politics." *Ilahiyat Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 221-252. https://doi.org/10.12730/13091719.2020.112.209

Introduction

For the last 150 years, the sociocultural mechanisms in Turkey, and their religious component in particular, have experienced many challenges. The new Republic's revolutionary legislation generated sharp differences between the Ottoman legacy and the constitutional elements of modern Turkey, including in the realm of education.[1] In this regard, the Unification of Education Law enacted in 1924 was quite significant for religious education policies, as well as practices, since it provided for the transfer of religious instruction from religious authorities to the newly established secular state apparatus, i.e., the Ministry of Education. The new status of religion courses was introduced by various legal acts throughout the Republican period, the last of which was the Constitutional Law of 1982, which signified the completion of this transition by incorporating the religion course as a compulsory subject into school programs.

Being part of compulsory school subjects, the current religion course is designated *Religious Culture and Ethics* according to Article 24 of the aforementioned Constitutional Law. Although the primary motive behind the designation of the course title was explained differently by the scholars who closely observed the period,[2] it has generated two idiosyncratic features for the current religious education policy in Turkish public schools.

First, Article 24 did not define any organic relationship between the course and the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the state body that is constitutionally responsible for administering all matters regarding Islamic faith and its places of worship. Despite the fact that the existence of the Presidency in a secular state such as Turkey has been

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1 Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye'de Modernleşme*, 26th ed. (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2018), 532-536.

2 See, e.g. Beyza Bilgin, "Mezhepler ve Dinler Arası Eğitim ve İşbirliği," *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 39, no. 1 (1999), 2, https://doi.org/10.1501/Ilhfak_0000000830; Halis Ayhan, "Anayasa'nın 24. Maddesi Işığında Din Eğitiminde Yeni Arayışlar," in *Avrupa Birliği'ne Giriş Sürecinde Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve Sorunları Sempozyumu*, ed. Suat Cebeci (Istanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2002), 103.

a matter of continuous political and scholarly debates,[3] it is worth noting that the religion courses at modern Turkish public schools have not been under the auspices of any religious authority, in contrast to many other countries, with the exception of organizing and editing textbooks for a short time during the early Republican period.[4]

Second, Article 24 referred to a distinctive approach in regard to its religious content which, was conceptualized as *metadoxical and expandable to other religions*[5] in the years following the introduction of the course into the school programs. Such a definition designated the course curriculum as not being oriented to any given denomination within Islam. In addition, it should have included insights, predominantly into the cognitive domain of learning, about world religions other than Islam. Although the lack of consistency of the course's theoretical framework with respect to its content, and particularly with respect to its application in the classroom, has been addressed by many critics, this kind of orientation of the course reflects concerns for meeting the demands that originated from various actors in the religious education policy-making process.

When these two features of the course are juxtaposed to the nature of the Turkish Republic – a predominantly Muslim country that has defined itself as a secular state governed by the rule of law since 1937, Turkish religion courses have continuously sparked interest in academic and political circles throughout the Republican period.[6]

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3 Ufuk Ulutas, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 3 (2010), 389-399, https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200902899812.

4 The status of religious education in school programs is still among the primary research topics that attract investigators. Since a great number of country surveys is available, academic literature is being kept up-to-date through ongoing research activities. See, e.g. Holger Daun and Reza Arjmand, eds., *Handbook of Islamic Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53620-0.

5 Mualla Selçuk and Recai Doğan, "Religious Education in Turkey," in *Religious Education in Europe. Situation and Current Trends in Schools*, ed. Elza Kuyk et al. (Oslo: IKO, 2007), 211, http://www.evrel.ewf.uni-erlangen.de/pesc/ie-2008-selcuk.pdf, accessed September 15, 2019.

6 For the most recent contributions in relevant literature, see, e.g. Mehmet Bahçekapılı, "Türkiye'de Din Eğitiminin Politik Tarihi," in *Türkiye'de Eğitim Politikaları*, ed. Arife Gümüş (Istanbul: Nobel Yayıncılık, 2015), 371-402;

Although many factors account for the paradigm shifts that religion courses have been subjected to, the topics highlighted by these circles played a significant role in the transformation of its status, as well as its pedagogical and methodological features. Religious, pedagogical, and particularly societal concerns, such as promoting a sound understanding of Islam, fostering social integration between denominationally divided groups, building capabilities for meeting the contemporary individual and societal needs, etc. have been frequently verbalized. However, the new millennium signaled a certain shift in these discussions towards the issue of plurality in the classrooms, reflecting the repercussions of the most stimulating pedagogical discussions worldwide, and most importantly, due to the recently started negotiations for EU accession.

Whether it might be cultural, religious, or even societal diversity under question, the issue of how to deal with such plurality in the classrooms has to a great extent preoccupied the Turkish religious education agenda. While some scholars have discussed it simply from the perspective of representation of the various religions and convictions in the syllabus,[7] others have elaborated on its connection with citizenship education[8] and peace education.[9] Although the listed research publications explore the issue mainly through the religious and pedagogical aspects of religion courses, the historical

Abdurrahman Hendek, "Country Report: Turkey," *British Journal of Religious Education* 41, no. 1 (2019), 8-13, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2019.1532227.

7 Recep Kaymakcan, "Christianity in Turkish Religious Education," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10, no. 3 (1999), 279-293, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419908721187; Cemal Tosun, "Andere Religionen innerhalb des Religionsunterrichts in der Türkei," in *Religiöse Bildung und interkulturelles Lernen: Ein ErasmusPlusProjekt mit Partnern aus Deutschland, Liechtenstein und der Türkei*, ed. André Ritter, Jörg Imran Shröter, and Cemal Tosun (Münster &New York: Waxmann, 2017), 109–25.

8 Recep Kaymakcan and Hasan Meydan, "Demokratik Vatandaşlık ve Din Öğretimi: Yeni Yaklaşımlar ve Türkiye'de DKAB Dersleri Bağlamında Bir Değerlendirme," *İnönü Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (2010), 29-53; Bayramali Nazıroğlu, "İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programında Vatandaşlık Eğitimi," *Dinbilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 11, no. 2 (2011), 73-95.

9 Hüseyin Yılmaz, "Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlâk Bilgisi Dersi ve Barış Eğitimi," *EKEV Akademi Dergisi - Sosyal Bilimler* 9, no. 22 (2005), 35-48.

development of religious education practices in Turkey has proven the existence of another vital dimension, i.e., the political implications, in the evolution of religion courses.

Since the early years of the Republican period, the introduction of reform laws, including the Unification of Education Law in 1924,[10] the transition to a multiparty system in 1946,[11] the military coups d'état in 1980,[12] the EU accession process[13] and the latest – the decisions of European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on the Turkish compulsory religion course[14], have been frequently exemplified as the milestones in reforming religion courses and reinterpreting their aims and contents. Although respective research periodically indicates that the focus of religious education discussions should be maintained towards its pedagogical dimensions, pedagogical and political realms are inextricably intertwined in Turkey. Nevertheless, as this paper also argues, political concerns still have precedence in Turkish religious education policies at the expense of pedagogical advancements.

By providing an in-depth analysis of the evolution of Turkish religion courses throughout the Republican period, this paper aspires to explore the variety of solutions offered to the challenges encountered in a context in which religious differences are still one of the main identifiers of Turkish sociocultural and political life. Using the Turkish case as a core theme, acknowledging its unique religious composition, of which the Muslims constitute approx. 99% of the whole population, although the number is distributed among different denominations, this paper also revitalizes one of the oldest debates in the field of religious education: "What should be the essence of religious education in public schooling: should it aim to teach religion as a practice of faith, or should it approach religion as a cultural

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10 Recai Doğan, "Cumhuriyetin İlk Yıllarında Tevhid-i Tedrisat Çerçevesinde Din Eğitim-Öğretimi ve Yapılan Tartışmalar," in *Cumhuriyetin 75. Yılında Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi* (Ankara: Türk Yurdu Yayınları, 1999), 227–88.

11 Kaymakcan, "Religious Education in the Multi-Party Period in Turkey," *Estavest Education* 17, no. 1 & 2 (1996), 91-107.

12 Ayhan, "Anayasa'nın 24. Maddesi Işığında Din Eğitiminde Yeni Arayışlar."

13 İbrahim Turan, *Avrupa Birliği Sürecinde Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi Politikaları* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2013).

14 Turan, "Ulusal ve Uluslararası Hukuk Açısından Türkiye'de Din Eğitiminin Yasal Dayanakları," *Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 32 (2012), 77-109.

concept?" This fundamental question, which is closely related to the tasks assigned to the schools by the policy-makers, is still of significance for the Turkish context for two primary reasons: (1) it reflects continuous debate between the visions of the policy-makers and the demands of the different societal strata, and (2) it refers to the contemporary challenges that multicultural societies encounter in the field of religious education. These challenges have emanated from unsolved tension between majority and minority groups in terms of their representation in the religion courses – a topic that has been gradually emphasized since the early 2000s. Focusing on this longstanding question, the paper aims to analyze policy makers' responses to the issue by offering elaborated insight into the Turkish endeavor to reconcile religious education with the secular schooling system.

Although this paper evaluates the Turkish context only by addressing the evolution of policies regarding religion courses, it should be noted that religious education practices in Turkish public schools are complex in nature. The essence of this complexity is the uneasy combination of different segments that follow miscellaneous but not necessarily concerted objectives. All these segments require further distinctive analyses based on *sui generis* schemes.[15] Therefore, while retrospectively elaborating on the main turning points and paradigm shifts, this paper limits itself to the compulsory religion course, i.e., the current Religious Culture and Ethics course. Since secondary school programs (between 9th and 12th grade) are a continuation of the primary level (between 4th and 8th grade) in terms of their approach and implementation, the paper concentrates only on primary level education. Accordingly, it also offers a generic framework for the developmental process of Turkish religious

[15] In addition to the Religious Culture and Ethics course, three more courses on teaching Islam as a system of faith, i.e. Basic Religious Knowledge (Islam I-II), the Life of Prophet Muḥammad and the Holy Qurʾān, were included in the school programs as elective subjects in 2012. Moreover, *Imam Hatip* Schools, originally established as vocational schools at the secondary level to train future imāms and other religious functionaries, embraced an Islam-oriented program aimed at raising practicing Muslims. At the higher religious education Faculties of theology, Islamic Studies and Religious Studies are different in name but follow the same program comprised of subjects on Islamic Studies, Religious Studies, and Islamic Arts and History.

education policies to be fully comprehended by addressing the question of how and to what extent political changes in Turkey have affected the pedagogical aspects of the religion course.

I. From Religious Instruction to Instructing Religion

Although the compulsory religion course in its current form was introduced to school programs during military rule by the 1982 Constitutional Law, its roots date back to the late Ottoman period. Since the early 18th century, as was previously elaborated,[16] the then existing educational system had already started to encounter many challenges due to different factors, such as insufficiency in meeting contemporary necessities of the time, increasing numbers of students, a lack of necessary human resources, and most importantly, changing political discourse. As part of the larger modernization and secularization efforts directly coordinated by the State, Ottoman education institutions went through many fundamental reform acts. In regard to religious education, these reform acts found their reflections in two interrelated developments: the transformation of the *madrasah*s,[17] the backbone of the Ottoman classical education, through the implementation of a Western style of teaching, and the introduction of religion as a course subject into the newly created Western style public schooling. Nevertheless, the main breakthrough for religious education did not occur in these schools, rather in their new rivals, i.e., *maktab*s.

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[16] Ayşe Zişan Furat, "18. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Eğitiminde Dönüşüm: Islah mı? Yenilenme mi?," in *Sahn-ı Semân'dan Dârülfünûn'a Osmanlı'da İlim ve Fikir Dünyası, Âlimler, Müesseseler ve Fikrî Eserler XVIII.Yüzyıl*, ed. Ahmet Hamdi Furat, Nilüfer Kalkan-Yorulmaz, and Osman Sacid Arı (İstanbul: Zeytinburnu Belediyesi, 2018), II, 249-278.

[17] Institutionalized in the 11th century in Seljukian Baghdad, *madrasah*s rapidly became widespread throughout the Islamic world. Although they were private initiatives in origin due to the *waqf* law, the Ruler's *madrasah*s expectedly gained a special reputation. Aside from the apparent nature of the *madrasah*s, i.e. providing religious education, it is well established that the *madrasah*s served their purpose for centuries for educating the *qāḍī*s i.e., the deputies of the sublime authority of the State, and for institutionalizing Sunnī doctrine. Ayşe Zişan Furat, *XV. ve XVI. Yüzyıllarda Osmanlı Medreselerinde Eğitim (Sahn ve Süleymaniye Medreseleri Dönemi)* (Konya: Adal Ofset, 2009), 12-14.

The idea of public schooling was a completely new concept for Ottoman understanding of education at the earliest in the late 18th century. Realizing the power of education in reaching out to its subjects, the Ottoman State, similar to the other contemporary states that were struggling for survival, resolutely started opening public schools, referred to as *maktab*s, first for military purposes, and then for civilian ones, financing them from its own budget.[18] This rapidly but efficiently expanded the public schooling network that was designed in accordance with the new modes of Western style education and was subordinate to the Ministry of Education. Soon, it created an alternative track to the *Shaykh al-islām* supervised religious-oriented *madrasah* network.[19] Moreover, the transfer of administration and supervision of *ṣibyān maktab*s, the traditional neighborhood schools established for religious instruction of children, to the Ministry of Education constituted a major milestone towards secularization of Ottoman education, although *ṣibyān maktab*s maintained their initial purpose until the beginning of the Republican Era.[20] *ʿIlmiḥāl* (Islamic Catechism), next to the Qurʾān Reciting class, continued to be one of the main subjects in *ṣibyān maktab* programs with an aim of providing students with a practical guide to the basics of Islam in its three interrelated dimensions: faith, worship, and ethics. On the other hand, the opening of *rushdiyah*s, middle schools aiming to prepare students for further education and providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge for employment, heralded a drastic change for religious education, as it took the form of a regular course subject among other school subjects, such as Math, Literature, and Music, rather than being the *raison d'être* of the newly introduced school system.

The religion course was assigned the name *ʿAqāʾid-i dīniyyah* (the Doctrines of Religion [Islam]) and, much later, *ʿUlūm-i dīniyyah* (Religious Studies), although it pursued a similar framework as

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18 See, Selçuk Akşin Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire 1839-1908 Islamization, Autocracy and Discipline* (Leiden, Boston & Köln: Brill, 2001).

19 Şerif Mardin, "Turkey: Islam and Modernization," in *Religion and Societies: Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Carlo Caldarola (Berlin & Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 1982), 176, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823530.171.

20 Salih Zeki Zengin, *Tanzimat Dönemi Osmanlı Örgün Eğitim Kurumlarında Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi, 1839-1876* (Ankara: MEB Yayınları, 2004), 44.

ʿIlmiḥāl in *ṣibyān maktab*s in terms of its approach and content.[21] It is also worth noting that the emphasis of the new school programs moved gradually to instilling the professed national values, particularly during the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1918). In line with this tendency, the Temporary Law for Primary Education of 1913 stipulated the raising of both devoted and patriotic students among the tasks of primary schools.[22] As might be expected, national values and patriotism were highlighted during the period of the National War of Independence (1919-1923). Although it would be overrated to claim that religion courses were restructured accordingly, the nationalization of the school program was operationalized by including several topics, such as *responsibilities to the motherland*, into the religion course syllabus in 1922.[23]

Reflecting the growing impact of state secularization, two important developments were introduced regarding religious education during this period: conceptualization of religious education as a need for pledging happiness in the afterlife and inclusion of an ethics course to the school programs.[24] Although they embraced different perspectives, both impinged upon the students by generating an insulated approach towards religion that confined religious teachings to the realm of doings for the sake of the afterlife rather than for daily practices. Moreover, they presented for the first time the idea that religion and ethics might not come from the same source, contrary to previous practice, which treated them holistically. Even though both matters were challenged in a short time, they opened a new era for religion courses that was characterized by the progressive instrumentalization of religious education for, ironically, secular purposes – a process which should have been postponed until the security concerns of the newly established republic were settled. Considering the

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21 See Hatice Arpaguş, "Bir Telif Türü Olarak İlmihal Tarihî Geçmişi ve Fonksiyonu," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 22, no. 1 (2002), 25–56.

22 *Tadrīsāt-i Ibtidāʾiyyah Qānūn-i Muvaqqati* (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿa-i ʿĀmire, 1329 H), 3.

23 Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Hükümeti Umûr-i Maârif Vekaleti, *İlk, Orta Tedrisât Mektebleri Müfredât Programı* (Ankara: Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Hükümeti Umûr-i Maârif Vekaleti, 1338 H), 14.

24 Zengin, *Tanzimat Dönemi Osmanlı Örgün Eğitim Kurumlarında Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi*, 34, 76.

circumstances of that time, removing the religion course from the school programs was seen as the best option by policy makers.

II. Removal from the School Programs

Introduction of the Unification of Education Law in 1924, shortly after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic, as mentioned briefly in the introduction, constituted one of the major breakthroughs in the modern history of Turkish education and maintains its importance even today. Not only did it reconstruct the entire education system by gathering all educational facilities under the same roof, i.e., the Ministry of Education, but it also provided for the removal of religious elements in the system.[25] This law also offers valuable insights about how the issue of education was perceived by the founders of the Turkish Republic. The law did not stipulate any specific provisions regarding religion education at public schools, yet it introduced two short-lived novelties for its application: opening of *imam-hatip* schools for the purpose of educating religious functionaries and establishing a faculty of theology at the only higher education institution of that time, *Dārulfünūn*, for training experts on religion. Briefly open, they were both consecutively shut down on the grounds of lack of student interest for attendance and remained closed until the political transition into a multiparty system occurred in 1946.[26] Apart from those, perhaps the most important consequence generated by the law was the closure of *madrasah*s by the order of the Minister of Education, although its closing was not explicitly mentioned in the text. All these developments signified the end of the traditional religious education and the beginning of a new era in which rules were determined by the secular state, not by the religious authorities. Religion courses in public schools were at the forefront of this transition.

The first school program after establishment of the Republic was introduced in the same year as the Unification of Education Law (1924). It included 2 hours per week of *The Holy Qurʾān and Religion* course from 2nd to 5th grade – a provision which unified two topics that

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[25] İsmail Kaplan, *Türkiye'de Milli Eğitim İdeolojisi ve Siyasal Toplumsallaşma Üzerindeki Etkisi*, 6th ed. (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), 159.

[26] Mustafa Öcal, "From the Past to the Present: Imam and Preacher Schools in Turkey-An Ongoing Quarrel," *Religious Education* 102, no. 2 (2007), 192-193, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080701285477.

had been addressed separately in the school programs until that point. The program stated its primary aim as "to plant love towards Islam in the hearts of the students"[27] and left the more detailed and information loaded subjects, such as the *Pillars of Islam*, for the upper classes, i.e., 4th and 5th grade. Although the course seemed primarily focused on the affective dimensions of religion, the absence of the idea of divinity and the intrinsic features of religion not only became a subject of severe critique,[28] but it also signaled that the content of the course would adjust itself to the upcoming secularization process in the state.

The next curriculum in 1926 contained evidence of this transformation by presenting more elaborate instructions for implementation of the course.[29] In particular, it specified that teachers should not inculcate any bigotry among the students and should correct the students' misconceptions about religion, as well as their superstitions. Another highlighted topic included warning against the unnecessary inclinations towards the afterlife. Dissimilar to the previous curriculum, this time, it urged teachers to avoid any emphasis on the afterlife by underlining that Islam does not allow certain attitudes, such as considering indigence equal to modesty, or slackness equal to submission. Moreover, the idea that Islam welcomes and praises living in maximum prosperity both as individuals and as a nation became the focus of the new course content.

This new framework of the religion course, aimed at serving a rather social function and reshaping the social context at the expense of its increasing dissociation from the afterlife teachings, indicated a careful instrumentalization of religious education in accordance with the transformed secular interpretations of the state. Moreover, the curriculum introduced two novel and still existing concepts: (a) sound religion and (b) religious education for [building] national welfare, which would both eventually converge in the primary aim of the new programs, i.e., raising good citizens.[30] While the former concept

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27 Maarif Vekaleti, *İlk Mekteblerin Müfredat Programı* (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿa-i ʿĀmire, 1340 H), 13-14.

28 Doğan, "Cumhuriyetin İlk Yıllarında Tevhid-i Tedrisat Çerçevesinde Din Eğitim-Öğretimi ve Yapılan Tartışmalar," 275.

29 Maarif Vekaleti, *İlk Mekteblerin Müfredat Programı* (Istanbul: Milli Matbaa, 1926), 45-46.

30 Mustafa Köylü, "Religion and Citizenship Education," in *Islam and Citizenship Education*, ed. Ednan Aslan and Marcia Hermansen (Wiesbaden: Springer

reflected the new state's fear of any threat that might arise from religious circles, the latter was a result of acknowledging the expediency of religious education in promoting nationalist ideas.

Although religion courses appeared very practical for achieving nationalistic goals, they were gradually excluded from school programs. Their exclusion was finalized by 1931 in urban schools and by 1938 in rural schools. Some researchers[31] explained it as part of the secularization process, which reached its peak during that period, as attested by the addition of laicism to the Constitutional Law in 1937. However, other researchers described this process as part of the transition towards a modern secular state that called for conceptualizing and operationalizing the notion of *nation*. For example, Bilgin[32] explained the nationalization of the school programs as a result of the efforts of the new Republic to build a nation state independent of religion. Thus, the state's quest for identity formation relied heavily on inclusion of national elements at the expense of religious ones.

Nonetheless, both viewpoints fell short in explaining why the religion courses were discredited while they were on the verge of being transformed into a supportive instrument for citizenship education. Regardless of the factors underlying the cessation of religious instruction at public schools, they apparently did not endure for long, and the political landscape changed again with the transition of Turkish politics into a multiparty system in 1946 – a development that heralded new changes, as well as challenges, for the religion course.

III. Resurgence of Religion Courses

Shortly after the gradual removal of religion courses from school programs, the lack of spiritual and moral content in the formal settings

Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2015), 202, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-08603-9_14.

31 See, e.g. İsmet Parmaksızoğlu, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1966), 26.

32 Bilgin, "The Understanding of Religious Education in a Country Where There is Separation of Religion and State: The Example of Turkey," *British Journal of Religious Education* 15, no. 2 (1993), 39, https://doi.org/10.1080/0141620930150207.

became a subject of debate both in public and government circles. First, salient efforts for their reinclusion in the school program were undertaken by the Grand Assembly during the budget discussions in 1946.[33] Discussions revolved around two main current issues of the time: the increasing number of violent acts among youths and the expansion of radicalized ideologies. Religion courses were presented as a practical remedy for both issues.

In reference to the first issue, the exclusion of religion courses from school programs was considered the main cause for the perceived severe moral corruption of youth, as the content of the course was substantially related to moral values. Accordingly, the younger generation was allegedly exposed to a great danger of falling prey to harmful ideological trends. During the assembly discussions, the term *harmful ideology* was used not only in reference to the spreading Communist ideas at that period but also to address the potential harm originating from alternative sources of religious education outside formal schooling. Since state schools were not offering any course on either religion or ethics, the youth was leaning towards other religious education initiatives undertaken by conservative religious groups, which were acting as political agencies outside the school system.[34] In addition, traditional religious instruction that families were only capable of giving to their children at home was threatening the system since it was also discordant with ideas that secular education was promoting.[35] Therefore, for those who defended the inclusion of religion courses in school programs, religious education was considered among measures to combat the spread of these harmful beliefs among the youth. The counter arguments during the discussions, however, reflected early republican concerns about preserving the secular nature of the newly established state. The provision of religion courses in school programs was perceived as incompatible with the secular education system because religious

[33] TBMM [TGNA], "Yirmiikinci Birleşim" (Ankara: TBMM, 1946), 426-446, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/TUTANAK/TBMM/d08/c003/tbmm08003022.pdf, accessed October 25, 2019.

[34] Richard F. Nyrop et al., *Area Handbook for the Republic of Turkey*, 2nd ed. (Washington: US Goverment Printing Office, 1973), 123-124.

[35] Parmaksızoğlu, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi*, 27-28.

instruction continued to be associated with the backwardness of the late Ottoman State, which was perceived as the reason for its demise.[36]

One year later, in 1947, discussions were undergoing in the General Assembly and inside the Republican People's Party (RPP), the ruling party of the single party era, which signified that discourse of the political discussions was gradually deviating from the compatibility of religion courses with laicism.[37] In addition to being a contributing factor for promoting moral awareness among the youth, religion was then recognized as an essential instrument of national defense against harmful ideologies. Apparently, the benefits of state-supervised religious education had surpassed the potential risks of its implementation.

Whether because the tension between religious and secular spheres in the early Republican period was adequately settled or because the multiparty system generated political pressure on RPP for gaining more votes from different segments of Turkish society, including religious circles, religion became a nongraded two-hour-per-week elective course for the 4th and the 5th grade in 1949. A detailed description in the official order regarding the status of the course as an elective one[38] clearly eliminated further questions about its inclusion in school programs. The order postulated that teaching any specific religion or its particular interpretation in the form of a compulsory school subject was not compatible with the principles of the secular state.

The course was designed in the form of a simple *ʿIlmiḥāl*, presenting its content through an informative and consulting approach, described by Kaymakcan as "interested in faith, worship, and ethics, while ignoring the social and political dimensions of Islam."[39] The syllabus for 4th grade addressed the basics of Islam in three main topics: (1) love towards parents, nation, and God; (2) principles of Islam, including prophethood; and (3) ethics in Islam.

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[36] Ahmet Koç, "Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme," *Din Eğitimi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7 (2000), 292.

[37] *C.H.P. Yedinci Büyük Kurultayı* (Ankara: n.p., 1948), 448-469.

[38] MEB [MoNE], "İlkokullarda Din Öğretimi Hk.," *Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Tebliğler Dergisi* 11, no. 524 (1949), 153.

[39] Kaymakcan, "A Comparison of Religious Education in Secondary Schools in Turkey and England: With Special Reference to the Teaching of Islam" (PhD diss., Leeds: The University of Leeds, 1998), 91.

However, in the 5th grade, the emphasis was shifted to more intrinsic matters of Islamic faith, such as the pillars of faith and worship.[40] Although Kaymakcan's remarks on the nature of the program might be criticized by arguing that the line between theological and social aspects of any religion is not always an easy one to draw, the course was limited to certain concise references to Islam's role in social life.

One year later, the Democrat Party's victory in the 1950 general elections heralded an upcoming paradigm shift in the course content. While the Democrat Party's policies mostly concentrated on the struggle against Communism, redefining laicism by merging it with national religious values,[41] their special emphasis on national and moral values found its reflections in the field of education. In 1953, the 5th National Education Council disclosed that the primary school curricula had become a subject for comprehensive reform acts. One of the main topics during the discussions was the need for religion courses in the struggle against perceived ignorance that had been spread by traditional religious education facilities, i.e., *neighborhood maktabs*, as stated by the then minister of education, *Tevfik İleri*.[42] Promoting "sound" religious education became the new focus of the program. Religious courses were touted as an active agent of social integration and welfare as they were associated with the social functions of Islam and would thus help empower the state.

After the introduction of religion courses at the primary level of education, they were also subsequently included in the middle school program three years later, in 1956. This program deserves special interest because, for the first time, it included units depicting Islam as an essential part of Turkish cultural life. The contribution of Turks to the development of Islam throughout history, as well as the role of Turkish charity institutions, were among those units. The space allocated to religion as part of Turkish culture expanded in the curricula in accordance with the increasing emphasis on the convergence of national and religious elements in Turkish identity formation, indicating a shift from the Republic's nationalist education

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40 MEB, "İlkokullarda Din Öğretimi Hk.," 153.

41 Nuray Mert, "Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi'nde Laiklik ve Karşı Laikliğin Düşünsel Boyutu," in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce, vol. 2: Kemalizm*, 6th ed. (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2009), 208.

42 MEB, "Beşinci Milli Eğitim Şurası - 1953," in *Beşinci Milli Eğitim Şurası* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1991), 381-389.

policy in the first half of the century, which was focused on establishing the secular foundations of the new republic but was apprehensive of acknowledging religion as part of the Turkish national identity.

One of the reasons for the shifting focus of the religion course towards the social and cultural components of Islam was the growing impact of Turkish Islamic Synthesis.[43] Stressing the close link between national and religious values, the Turkish Islamic Synthesis envisaged Islam as the essence of the Turkish cultural and social life, which could unite all of the various segments of Turkish society.[44] In addition, the military rule's policies, and particularly the Turkish religious education policies as its extension, also accounted for this shift.[45]

Thus, the real leap in the Turkish history of religious education praxis occurred in the year 1982. The Constitution of 1982, which was issued after the military *coup* in 1980 and is still enforced, defined the introduction of religion course in primary and secondary schools as a compulsory subject. Article 24, under the title "Freedom of Religion and Conscience," described the form of religious education at school in detail, along with other religious rights, including acts of worship. The name of the religion course, which was to be taught under state supervision and control according to the article, was defined explicitly as *Religious Culture and Ethics* [*Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi*]. The compulsory nature of the course has been the central topic in discussion forums since then. Nevertheless, the real challenge was promulgating the title and content, which indicated that the course orientation would soon give priority to culture over faith.

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[43] Although its roots date back to the late Ottoman period, the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis became an influential intellectual movement promoted by Aydınlar Ocağı (the Intellectuals' Hearth Association) during the post-coup period. See Bozkurt Güvenç et al., *Türk-İslam Sentezi* (Istanbul: Sarmal Yayınevi, 1991).

[44] Sam Kaplan, "'Religious Nationalism': A Textbook Case from Turkey," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 3 (2005), 107-108, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-25-3-665; See also, M. Necati Öztürk et al., *T.C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Din Eğitimi Çalışma Grubu Raporu (Hizmete Özel)* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1981).

[45] Kaymakcan, "A Comparison of Religious Education in Secondary Schools in Turkey and England," 38.

According to Bilgin,[46] who personally participated in high level official discussions on the process of including the religion course in school programs in 1982, the main reason for the compulsory nature of the course and the choice of its title was to create a steady inclusive ground for the various Islamic sects. The aim was to socially engage their followers to prevent their possible interventions into the Turkish official religious education praxis. The course program ensured the accomplishment of this goal by providing general information on Islam without engaging in details regarding differences between the Islamic sects and by focusing on the ethical and cultural aspects of religion that could be perceived and accepted as a common foundation for all sects. Apart from the fact that it still reflected the concerns towards any party, or any religious group which may pose a threat against the secular nature of the state, the program introduced the concept of supra-denominational religious education, which would constitute the core of subsequent course programs.

However, modifications regarding the course were not only limited to its nature or title. Its content, as well as its theoretical and theological framework, reflected an extraordinary precautionary approach due to the military rule ensuing from the 1980 *coup*. Analysis of the religion course suggests that the social and political concerns of military rule were determinant in specifying the limits of course content. These concerns surfaced in the articulation of the primary aims of the program.[47] They were described as providing students with the basics of Islam in accordance with laicism, guarding them against superstitions by concentrating on the rationalist and modern interpretations of Islam, and instilling students with values that would contribute to establishing national unity and solidarity. While the first set of aims referred to concerns for the protection of the primary principle of the state, i.e., laicism, the second set described the means for bringing stability to Turkish society. Accordingly, four themes dominated distribution of the units in the course syllabus: (1) the principles of Islamic faith and religion, (2) Atatürk's opinions on

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[46] Bilgin, "Mezhepler ve Dinler Arası Eğitim ve İşbirliği," 2; Bilgin, "Örgün Din Eğitimi'nde Yeni İhtiyaçlar ve Yönelişler," *Din Eğitimi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 6 (1999), 37.

[47] MEB , "Temel Eğitim ve Ortaöğretim Din ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Programı," *Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Tebliğler Dergisi* 45, no. 2109 (1982), 155-156.

religion and laicism, (3) patriotism, and (4) religion in Turkish social and cultural life.

IV. Shift in the Religious Education Paradigm

As indicated in previous chapters, many issues regarding religion courses were allegedly clarified with the transformation of the course into a compulsory school subject after the coup in 1980. However, the beginning of the new millennium brought additional challenges that would ultimately urge policy makers to reconsider the status of religion courses, as well as their approach and content. Although some researchers explained the post-2000 developments with the introduction of new religious education approaches, such as the phenomenological and interpretative methods in Turkish academic platforms,[48] the main incentive was generated as a result of the emerging relations between Turkey and EU rather than due to pedagogical discussions.

Official recognition of Turkey as a candidate for full EU membership on December 12, 1999 at the Helsinki summit of the European Council triggered momentum in almost all state institutions to adjust to EU standards. Accordingly, religious instruction in the schools was given special emphasis by the progress reports, questioning its compulsory nature.[49] The EU's concerns for the status of the religious education revolved around the issue of minority and majority rights addressed in the reports. As a result, a question of the rights of local cultural and religious minorities set, expectedly, a new agenda for Turkish religious educators for the new millennium.

During the process of adjusting the religion course to European standards, a modification in 2000 concentrated on the theoretical framework of the course and particularly on its approach to religion. By underlining the importance of religion for social integration, the curriculum followed the tradition of the last curricula and embraced religion as a living cultural subject, while perceiving it as an

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[48] See, e.g., the discussions in MEB, *Din Öğretiminde Yeni Yöntem Arayışları Uluslararası Sempozyum Bildiri ve Tartışmalar 28-20 Mart 2001-İstanbul (New Methodological Approaches in Religious Education International Symposium Papers and Discussions 28-30 March 2001-Istanbul)*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2004).

[49] Turan, *Avrupa Birliği Sürecinde Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi Politikaları*, 274-276.

operational tool for establishing peace and welfare among people.[50] It even proceeded one step further and addressed religion as the primary unifying element of Turkish societal life by embracing a more inclusive tone. It kept Islam as its primary focus; however, it removed biased descriptions regarding other religions and included some information about other religions and sacred books. However, the 2000 program did not prevent filings of parents' demands for the exemption of their children from the compulsory religious education in the public schools. One of the prominent law cases in the Turkish education history, the case of Hasan and Eylem Zengin vs. Turkey at the ECtHR,[51] has left longstanding marks on religious education discussions and placed the ECtHR decisions not only in the center of the forthcoming EU progress reports' critiques but also among the primary determining factors for subsequent modifications.[52]

The case was seen by the court based on two interconnected criteria: whether the content of the religion course was taught in an objective, critical and pluralist manner and whether appropriate provisions existed to ensure that parents' religious and philosophical

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50 Talim Terbiye Kurulu [Board of Education], "İlköğretim (4, 5, 6, 7 ve 8. Sınıf) Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programları," *Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Tebliğler Dergisi* 63, no. 2517 (August 22, 2000), 913-915.

51 Hasan Zengin, an adherent to Alevism, which is the largest non-Sunnī Muslim minority in Turkey according to the Court, submitted requests in 2001 to different administrative units of the Ministry of National Education before the administrative courts for his daughter Eylem to be exempted from the Religious Culture and Ethics class. After his requests were dismissed, he brought the case to the ECtHR in 2004. See Case of Hasan and Eylem Zengin vs. Turkey (No. 1448/04) (European Court of Human Rights January 9, 2008).

52 See, Commission of the European Communities, "Turkey 2005 Progress Report," Progress Report (Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, November 9, 2005), 31, https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/Turkey_Progress_Report_2005.pdf, accessed September 12, 2020; Commission of the European Communities, "Turkey 2006 Progress Report," Commission Staff Working Report (Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, November 8, 2006), 16, https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/Turkey_Progress_Report_2006.pdf, accessed September 12, 2020; Commission of the European Communities, "Turkey 2007 Progress Report," Commission Staff Working Report (Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, November 6, 2007), 17, https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/turkey_progress_report_2007.pdf, accessed September 12, 2020, etc.

convictions were respected. Although the Turkish Ministry of National Education modified the course program before the Court issued its final decision in 2006, the case's real importance for Turkish religion courses stemmed from the fact that it indicated the need for an update in the content of the curriculum through the inclusion of not only other religions but also other religious groups within Islam. At the time the Court was assessing course content, information on Judaism, Christianity, and other religions was already included,[53] and students who certified their adherence to other religions, namely, Judaism and Christianity, were already granted the right of exemption from the compulsory religion course.[54] However, the request of an Alevi family for exemption of their child from the course was based on the claim that the course was indoctrinating their daughter with the Sunnī faith, adding a new variable to the equation. This circumstance underscored the inconsistency between the stated theoretical framework of the course, which consistently underlined the primary aim of the course as bringing national solidarity among the different Islamic sects,[55] and its actual practice and implementation in the classroom. Considering this factor, the Court concluded as follows:

> If this is indeed a course on different religious cultures, there is no reason to make it compulsory for Muslim children alone. Conversely, if the course is essentially designed to teach the Muslim religion, it is a course on a specific religion and should not be compulsory to preserve children's and their parents' religious freedoms.[56]

The decision of the ECtHR introduced a series of subsequent issues

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53 Tuğrul Yürük, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Din Öğretimi Program Anlayışları" (PhD diss., Ankara: Ankara University, 2011), 146.

54 MEB, "Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersine Girmek Zorunda Olmayan Öğrenciler," *Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Tebliğler Dergisi* 53, no. 2317 (July 9, 1990), 553.

55 One of the gridlocks in discussions regarding the representation of Alevism in the school programs was whether Alevism should be regarded as an autocephalous religious body or a sub-sect of Sunnī Islam. This issue has yet to be settled based on theological, social and political concerns of the parties involved. See İbrahim Turan, *İnkârdan Diyaloğa Türkiye'nin Alevilik Politikaları* (Istanbul: İdil Yayıncılık, 2017).

56 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), "Third Report on Turkey" (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, adopted on 25 June 2004, published on 15 February 2005), 20, www.coe.int/ecri, accessed March 14, 2019.

to be addressed. Granting Alevi students an exemption from the course would mean admitting that the course was applied through a confessional approach, although it is described and promoted as embracing a nonsectarian methodology. Moreover, the instructions at the prologue of the course clearly demonstrated that the course was supposed to instill a sense of unity and solidarity, using religion as a cultural adhesive among different segments of society. Granting exemptions to some religious groups, on the other hand, as was the case with non-Muslim children, was also contradictory to the prescribed nature of the compulsory religion course. Two options were left to the Turkish religious education policy makers: (1) changing the status of the course, either by turning it to an optional confessional course, or by installing an exemption mechanism if it remained among compulsory courses or (2) in the case of the latter option, keeping its compulsory status, but changing its content. The Turkish authorities opted for the second option, which paved the way for the 2006 modification of the course.

As was explained by the masterminds behind the modification,[57] the new curriculum adopted a respect-based approach based on five concepts: "respect for humankind, respect for thought, respect for freedom, respect for anything moral, and respect for cultural heritage." By locating religion within cultural contexts, it defined itself as "metadoxical" (not oriented to any particular denomination/not involved in any denominational discussion) and "expandable to other religions."[58] This meant that while Islam, through its main sources, i.e., the Qurʾān and Sunnah, still constituted the core of the curriculum, other denominations and religions were also to be included. The course program responded to the abovementioned critiques of ECtHR by introducing the units "Interpretations of Islamic Thought" and "Religions and their Universal Advice" in the 8th grade. Thus, Alevism and other religious beliefs within Islam were added to the syllabus for

[57] Mualla Selçuk, "Developing an Interfaith Dimension in RE: Theological Foundations and Educational Framework with Special Reference to Turkish Experience," in *Religious Education in a World of Religious Diversity*, ed. Wilna A.J. Meijer, Siebren Miedema, and Alma Lanser-van der Velde, Religious Diversity and Education in Europe (Münster: Waxmann, 2009), 145-147.

[58] MEB, *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi (4, 5, 6, 7 ve 8. Sınıflar) Öğretim Programı ve Kılavuzu* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2006), 2.

the first time.[59] These parts were broadened by forthcoming modifications to the program, without any alteration to its main framework.[60]

Not only did the decision of the ECtHR become a primary motivation for the state authorities to introduce modifications of religion courses, but it also raised some critiques among the political and pedagogical circles against the current state of the course. Coupled with preparations for a constitutional change, many NGOs, academics and state bodies proposed different prospects for religion courses.[61] One of the leading proposals during that period was transforming the course into a compulsory informative course about religion or/and ethics and offering optional confessional courses for respective religions. In other words, the compulsory religion course should remain in the school program but should be transformed into either an informative course on religion (not Islam) or/and an ethics course. In addition, an optional confessional course should be added into the school program for students who wished to learn more about their own religion. Verbalized strongly by the Education Reform Initiative,[62] an independent nonprofit think tank[63] that released reports on religion

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[59] For further discussion on the inclusion of Alevism in the program, see Hüseyin Yılmaz, "Alevîlik-Sünnîlik Açısından Din Kültürü ve Ahlâk Bilgisi Dersleri," *Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 13, no. 2 (2009), 189-209.

[60] For 2010 program, see MEB, *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi (4, 5, 6, 7 ve 8. Sınıflar) Öğretim Programı ve Kılavuzu* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2010).

[61] For a detailed analysis on the proposed changes in the constitution and their relevance to religion courses, see Nevzat Yaşar Aşıkoğlu and M. Fatih Genç, "Yeni Anayasa Tartışmaları ve Zorunlu Din Dersleri," *Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 16, no. 2 (2012), 7-20.

[62] Aytuğ Şaşmaz et al., *Türkiye'de Din ve Eğitim: Son Dönemdeki Gelişmeler ve Değişim Süreci* (Istanbul: Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2011), 11.

[63] The Initiative was established in 2003 in close association with Sabancı University. Its 2005 and 2011 reports on religion courses in particular fueled discussions not only in academic circles but also in the popular media. Reports also included results of workshops that the Initiative organized as a part of EU funded Rights in Education Project Education Reform Initiative, "Religion and Schooling in Turkey: The Need for Reform." Although the reports fell short of reaching a common ground for all stakeholders, the fact that the reports drew academic and media attention was still of significance for including voices from different segments of society in the discussions.

courses in 2005, 2007, and 2011, the proposal also indicated that the course content as well as its status, should be changed.

One of the most important features of ERI's reports, particularly the one issued in 2011, was its endeavor to clarify several intermingled terms, e.g., religious education and education about religion, optional and elective courses, by referring to their pedagogical framework. According to the report, the term "religious education" suggests a religion course, which aims to interiorize pillars and practices of a certain religion or faith by giving explicit or implicit references to it[s substance] and approaches other religions from that point of view.[64] On the other hand, the term "education about religion" refers to the courses that approach religion as a social and scientific phenomenon, treating all religions and faiths equally, while including basic knowledge about world religions, their history, their pillars of faith, their impact on culture, language, literature, and arts, etc. Another key point of the report was the distinction made between the nature of optional and elective courses; an optional course was described as the course that a student attends outside school hours by making a special request to take it, while the elective course was the one that a student would attend during school hours by choosing among the alternative course subjects with the condition that one of the alternatives should be taken. In accordance with these definitions, the initiative insisted that religious education be in the form of an optional course. Such a proposal became a target of the most severe critiques, which conversely opted for elective courses referencing the history of religious education praxis in Turkey. However, it is still of significance for that the related research literature eventually began to turn to pedagogical explanations rather than to those that have political characteristics.

After long discussions on the nature of Turkish secularism, consistency between the status and the approach of the course, Basics of Religious Knowledge (Islam 1-2), Recitation of the Qurʾān and the Life of the Prophet Muḥammad were offered within the elective course set of "Religion, Ethics, and Values" for students in the second stage of primary schools and in secondary schools in 2012. Inclusion of these three elective courses, i.e., Basics of Religious Knowledge (Islam 1-2), the Life of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Holy Qurʾān, into school

[64] Şaşmaz et al., *Türkiye'de Din ve Eğitim*, 17.

programs also heralded the transformation of the compulsory religion course.

V. Introduction of a Brand New Concept: A Values Oriented Model

The 2018 curriculum came as a result of extensive revision, which was described as a comprehensive reform act in Turkish education as indicated in the official press release.[65] During the course of the reform, all programs were renewed in accordance with the new teaching philosophy of the Ministry of Education. The Religious Culture and Ethics course was not an exception; on the contrary, it was reformulated to a great extent within the limits of the Ministry's reconceptualization of education, which was defined through two pillars of education: value-oriented and competence-based. Among them, value orientation was of particular significance for the religion course as it shed light on a highly debated topic within Turkish religious education circles from the early 2000s: what is the relationship between values education and religious education? Promoting the value orientation as 'the primary focus' and the 'main improvement' of the new school curricula, the Ministry chose a set of ten values, i.e., justice, friendship, honesty, self-control, patience, respect, love, responsibility, patriotism, and benevolence, as core values to be taught across all school subjects.

The religion course followed the same trend as other school subjects.[66] In fact, the 2018 reform did not change the status of the course nor its workload; rather, it concentrated on adjusting the primary conceptual framework of the course to the Ministry's new education philosophy. Surprisingly, none of the detailed explanations for the necessity of a religion course in the school program, the compatibility of its existence with the principles of laicism, or other main topics that occupied Turkish religious education debates throughout the last century took place in the preamble of the curriculum. Likewise, the emphasis that previous curricula had placed on the concept of protecting pupils from superstitious beliefs, as well

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[65] Talim Terbiye Kurulu, "Müfredatta Yenilenme ve Değişiklik Çalışmalarımız Üzerine," July 18, 2017, https://ttkb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2017_07/18160003_basin_aciklamasi-program.pdf, accessed December 12, 2019.

[66] MEB, "Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı (İlkokul 4 ve Ortaokul 5, 6, 7 ve 8. Sınıflar)" (Ankara: TC Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2018).

as developing their identity through sound religious codes, was removed. Moreover, definitions regarding the religious approaches applied throughout the curriculum were shortened to only a short remark on the descriptive approach was noted, which the curriculum embraced towards Islam and other religions. Although such an articulation of the course framework can be interpreted as a result of the Justice and Development Party's (JDP)[67] strengthened influence on the education system or a divergence from the State's security-based approach towards religious education, it also signifies to a great extent normalization of the curriculum.

Moreover, the objectives set for the course, such as to comprehend the effects of religion on social life, culture, and the elements of civilization, to identify different beliefs and interpretations [in religions] and respect them,[68] indicated a clear emphasis on the social dimensions of religion. In addition, it exhibited an exclusive orientation towards the cognitive domains of learning, while the affective and psychomotor domains of learning were addressed primarily with regard to internalization of the values.

In terms of its religious approach, however, the curriculum followed the tradition of the 2000 curriculum, i.e., metadoxical [in Islam] and was expandable to other religions. Because the curriculum is not oriented to any denomination within the realm of Islam and covers other religions to provide students with a vision of the multicultural structure of the present world, it elucidates its approach to Islam and other religions briefly but separately. First, regarding Islamic content, it carefully notes that the principles of the Qurʾān and Sunnah are accepted as the primary basis of the religion, whereas different interpretations of Islamic thought are addressed scientifically

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[67] JDP has gradually gained strength through different state mechanisms after its win in the 2002 elections. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's famous expression, "Raising a pious generation" became the summary of the JDP's education policy. Embracing a conservative approach towards education, the beginning of the party's ruling period was marked by the opening of imam-hatip schools, religious vocational schools, and an increase in the number of religious courses in state schools. See Elif Gençkal Eroler, *"Dindar Nesil Yetiştirmek: Türkiye'nin Eğitim Politikalarında Ulus ve Vatandaş İnşası (2002-2016)* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2019).

[68] MEB, "Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı (İlkokul 4 ve Ortaokul 5, 6, 7 ve 8. Sınıflar)," 8.

and supra-denominationally. Basics of theological and legal schools, as well as Sufi orders in Islam, are included under the title "Interpretations in Islamic Thought" in the 7th grade, which indicate that interpretative differences in Islam shall be addressed descriptively in accordance with the students' level. The envisioned outcomes confirm that learning objectives shall be kept in the cognitive domain. Second, regarding living religions other than Islam, the curriculum describes its method as "scientific, expandable to other religions and phenomenological." As a result, units on Christianity and Judaism, as well as Indian and Chinese religions, were left to 11th and 12th grade curriculum (for secondary schools), respectively, similar to the previous curricula.

Conclusion

Religious education in modern Turkish schools maintains its significance in line with the social and political changes that Turkey has undergone during the last century. The frequent modifications that it has endured since the beginning of the Republican period attest to its role and importance in state building. The topic has been discussed inclusively by actors who played an active role in policy-making or policy implementation processes. Religious educators, among these actors, have gradually switched their academic focus to the pedagogical content of the course. However, questions related to the political domain, such as the status of religion courses and its relationship with secularism, have been central themes in their research. As this paper indicates, any conclusive answer to those questions cannot be provided without considering political fluctuations, if not turbulences, at both the national and international level.

Starting from the opening of secularized middle schools, *rushdiyah*s, in the early 19th century, a part of larger modernization of the Late Ottoman State, the religious education policy in Turkey went through many fluctuations in short separate periods of time. At the outset, religious education was transformed into a regular school subject instead of being the primary philosophy of the education system. In parallel with the secularization of the State apparatus after the proclamation of the Republic, new modifications were introduced. The content of the course had gradually broadened; social and cultural aspects of religion had been slowly but steadily included in the course program. Shortly thereafter, the course was removed from school

programs, despite its potential for supporting the State's nationalistic policies through generating 'sound religious' upbringing and building national welfare.

The transition to the multiparty system in 1946 and the military coup in 1980 constituted two important breakthroughs for the religion course. The first introduced it to school programs, and the latter made it compulsory. Both instrumentalized the religion course but through pursuing distinct goals. During the early multiparty period, the Democrat Party blended the religion course with national religious values following its aspirations for redefining nationalism through the help of religious values. The military rule after the *coup*, on the other hand, acknowledged the practical use of the religion course for providing national unity and solidarity.

The post-2000 curricula endeavored to reconcile the changing political contexts in Turkey due to the European Accession negotiations and the ECtHR decisions, which criticized the confessional elements of the course. The respective modifications took place mostly as an effort to transform the learning outcomes of the course into more cognitive ones. However, the JDP's conservative approach to religious education also found its reflections in the religion course but in a gradual way. Interestingly, JDP confined itself with increasing the number of religious courses; but the curriculum of the Religious Culture and Ethics course had not become the subject of large revision until more recently. The most recent 2018 revision was not restricted to the religion course per se. Although it was introduced as a long-expected move to meet current political requirements and local demands, as well as policy-makers' vision, neither the course framework nor its approach was revised. Its main approach, identified in the early 2000s as *metadoxical and expandable to other religions*, remained untouched.

The transition that the religion course has gone through during the modern Turkish history indicates that the efforts to respond to the demands of the different religious, cultural and political circles in Turkey, as well as to the consecutive decisions of the ECtHR, will inevitably necessitate future modifications of the course. This requires a more comprehensive approach to its revision, including the structural characteristics of the course. On the other hand, identifying an all-encompassing solution that would satisfy all parties involved in the discussions would not be easy to achieve in the short term.

However, concentrating more on the contemporary pedagogical challenges pertaining mostly to the plurality in classrooms rather than on the political requirements will contribute to generating long-lasting solutions for policy makers in Turkey.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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