

## Watch Turkey!

*The Religion and Society Debate*

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According to Omer Faruk Genckaya, a professor at Bilkent University in Turkey, “Secularism is the most defining element of the establishment of the republic. It is a kind of religion in Turkey that is as important as Islam.” (Quoted by Vincent Boland, “In Ataturk’s Shadow,” *Financial Times*, 5/3/07.) Boland then goes on to say, “The idea of secularism as religion is a paradox, but it helps to explain the singular notion of what Turkish secularism actually means.”

Turkey is one of the most important places in the world today in which to observe the dynamism of religions (including secularism) competing at root to shape society and government. This is a country of 74 million people, most of whom (above 90 percent) are Muslim. Yet its state structure, established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923, has been absolutely secular, meaning the exclusion of all Muslim practices—even the wearing of head scarves—in the affairs of government and in much of the economy and education.

Ataturk had reason in 1923, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, to worry about the stability and success of an Islamic state in such a large and populous territory. Taking a cue from French *laicism*, which had forcefully displaced public Christianity with secularism, Ataturk set out to define government and citizenship in terms of secular nationalism rather than Islam.

In many respects, Ataturk was successful beyond most expectations. Secular nationalism was taught so well in schools and enforced so strongly in public life that it became an article of faith and not merely a practical discipline. Not everyone was converted to the new public religion, but most accommodated themselves to its requirements enforced by secularist elites, especially the military.

Yet, isn’t the privatization of Islam a contradiction in terms? Muslims believe in a God who transcends all human political authority. There can be nothing higher than the law of Allah. It might be one thing for Muslims to accommodate themselves somewhat uncomfortably to a regime that disallows full public expression of Islam, but to demand of all citizens that they accept public secularism as a matter of faith is another thing altogether.

Since 1923, many kinds of rebellion and resistance to Turkey's secularism have arisen from among the people, but none was able to change the system. Whenever it appeared to be necessary, the military put down rebellions, ousted governments, and made clear to everyone that force was on the side of "Kemalism"—political secularism.

However, over time and particularly in the last two decades, quieter popular movements arose to address the needs of the middle classes and the poorer communities in Turkey's cities, villages, and countryside, needs that were not being met by the increasingly complacent elites. Leaders among the common people focused on jobs, health care, and other public services, and the development efforts were expressive of obligations incumbent on the Muslim faithful. Before long, some of these leaders were elected to city councils and then eventually to mayoral offices, and finally, through the rapidly expanding Justice and Development Party (the AKP), to the prime minister's office in 2002. The relatively new AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who became prime minister, won the support of masses of ordinary people—mostly faithful Muslims—who had not been served well by the secular nationalists.

Here was something new, a political party that did not hold to or insist on the ideology (religion) of secularism but did accept the practice of democracy with no evident intention of seeking governmental power to establish Islam as a public monopoly. Erdogan and his supporters fostered economic growth, built up the infrastructure, and worked harder than any prior government to move Turkey toward entrance into the European Union. And the AKP has demonstrated that it is not necessary for citizens *to believe* in secularism in order to enjoy full citizenship in the republic. In essence, the AKP is putting something new into practice, different from both monopolistic secularism and monopolistic Islam. We might call it public pluralism through which people of all faiths, including both secularists and Muslims, are given room to live out their faiths in public life without any one of them being allowed to monopolize the political arena.

The thing to watch in Turkey now, with the upcoming July election for president (the only office not yet won by the AKP), is whether the AKP government can maintain popular support for public pluralism and an open democratic society. Will the more radical Islamists support such a society in which they have more room to express themselves but cannot dominate? And will radical secularists, including the military leaders, accept a system that gives believing secularists continued access to political life but no longer a monopoly on government, the military, and the bureaucracy? If so, Turkey may well be developing a model that could have potent significance for other Muslim countries, for religiously diversified countries such as India and Indonesia, and even for Western countries such as France and the United States.

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