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REVIEW

Alevis in Turkey

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Abstract

This review analyses the recent contributions of Elise Massicard and Markus Dressler to Alevi studies. While Massicard employs methods of political sociology and transnational identity politics, Dressler is concerned with the intrinsic relation between the religious and the secular as well as the place of religion in nation-state building projects. Massicard argues that formulating Alevism is context and actor dependent and shaped simultaneously in its interaction with diverse actors, which she calls "identity movement without an identity". The emphasis on the audience in defining Alevism might stem from the inadequacy of the universal language of religion to accommodate Alevi expression. Similarly, Dressler argues that the modern Alevi tradition was constructed at the "intersection of Turkish nation building, modern religion discourse and Islamic apologetics" and criticises the modernist discourse on religion such as the heterodoxy/orthodoxy binary for its insufficiency to capture the complexities of different contexts

Keywords: Alevis; Alevi identity; secularism; secular-religious; Turkey.

This article is a review of two recent books on Alevis in Turkey by Massicard (2012) and Dressler (2013). The Alevi are the largest "religious" minority in Turkey, yet, without official state recognition. Although there is no statistical data, it is estimated that Turkey accommodates 12 to 20 million Alevis in 2004 (15-20%).[1] What marks them out as an interesting subject of study is the ambivalence to categorise their tradition (either religious, cultural or political) and thereby the difficulty to understand them through the given language of power embedded in secularist and modernist frameworks. They are often considered as a "somehow" Islamic tradition, while others categorise it as a separate religion or refuse to define it through religious lines. The two books under review provide well analysed insights to capture the complexity of the Alevi tradition. While Elise Massicard's book sheds lights on the dynamics of configuration of the Alevi movement from a sociological and political standpoint and thereby carry implications for transnational identity politics, Markus

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[1] European Commission Enlargement Strategy and Progress Reports (2004). Regular Report on Turkey's Progress towards Accession. http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/pdf/key_documents/2004/rr_tr_2004_en.pdf (last accessed 27 April 2015).

Dressler's book focuses on a very particular moment in history, where the Alevi tradition is constructed at the intersection of modernity, Islamic revivalism and Turkish nation-building and provides an in-depth methodological discussion for religious studies, especially for Islamic traditions.

Regarding their methodological and theoretical approaches to study Alevis, in order not to fall into categorisations, Massicard refrains from setting boundaries for Alevis other than considering them as "heterodox groups" and "an identity movement without an identity"; but does not clarify what one should understand from heterodoxy or what the implied orthodoxy is. Rather, her study is descriptive, seeking to provide details about the Alevi associations, their political alignment, and struggle for recognition. Her study mainly covers the Turkish context with a brief analysis of the German context towards the end of the book. Unlike Massicard, Dressler's book is considerably informed by methodological concerns. For instance, Dressler strongly argues against the use of dichotomies such as heterodoxy/orthodoxy unless for the purpose of dismantling normative frameworks, in which these dichotomies are embedded. Like Massicard, however, Dressler also tries to avoid labeling Alevis and pursues a genealogical approach by deconstructing the republican formulation of the Alevi tradition. To follow the methodological discussions Dressler engages with more comprehensively, Massicard's work will be reviewed first, as it deals with a larger historical context.

Massicard's book is an extended version of her doctoral thesis, which was completed in France in 2005 and in Istanbul in 2007. She applies the analytical methods of political sociology and transnational identity politics. In a way she draws on the identity politics of Alevis to understand in a broader sense the politics of Turkey and relates the case of Alevis to the literature of transnationalism, nation-state and globalising identity movements. The book addresses the Alevi movement in three contexts: a historical and cultural context at first; secondly the predicament of locating Alevism within Turkish politics; and lastly local identity dynamics of Alevis and its comparison to Alevis in Europe. Massicard argues that conceptualising Alevism is context and actor dependent and is shaped simultaneously in its interaction with diverse actors at national, local and international levels. Through the case of Alevis, she opposes seeing transnational identity movements as continuations of the same movement in the host country, since the formulation of the Alevi movement specifically depends on political context and therefore the institutional powers of the nation-state. Drawing on the case of the Alevis, she refutes claims of the diminishing power of nation-state vis-a-vis the establishment of transnational movements and globalisation.

The first part of the book provides a well-documented background for political and historical dynamics of Alevism and discusses multiple dimensions of configuration of Alevism as a dynamic and organic movement fed by fragmented interpretations. Massicard suggests that the Turkish nation-building project primarily aimed at distinguishing itself from the Ottoman in

terms of the place of religion. This marked the re-configuration of Alevis by the republicans as "heterodox" Muslims, who carry the traces of archaic Turkish beliefs, as opposed to heretic Kızılbaş traditions, as labeled by the Ottoman. She also identifies this phase of Turkish nation building as the emergence of the "paradoxical relations between the Kemalist state and Aleviness" (p. 20) (this paradox is further explored by Dressler).

Similar to other studies of Alevis, Massicard also reckons that the developments after the 1980 coup were instrumental in shaping the Alevi movement. From this point of view, she locates the mobilisation of Alevis in a global context of the resurgence of identity politics and yields how the Alevi self-definition relies on and reacts against the definition of "other" and its audience. She elaborates on the semantics of Alevis and explains how different symbolic figures or icons of Alevi culture alter in the usage of different ideologies. For instance, based on multiple narratives of Alevism, one can embrace the sword of Ali, *zülfikar* or Pir Sultan Abdal to demonstrate a more leftist and non-Islamic view of Alevism, whereas the figure of Hacı Bektaş might imply Turkishness of Alevism. The symbolic construction of the community is grounded on "every individual [who] acts as an interpreting subject and so there are a plurality of ways of identifying with Aleviness" (p. 67). Massicard's findings reveal the influence of the modernist project on individual interpretations of the Alevi, as community members endeavour for scientific and "real" knowledge of the Alevi to present themselves to the outside world. She argues that for the Alevi, the "other" is controversial and so are the boundaries of Alevism. This is important to further underline the ever-shifting ground for Alevis in situating themselves in a polarised language of modernity. The emphasis on the audience in defining Alevism might stem from the inadequacy of the universal language of religion to accommodate Alevi expression.

Massicard presents an inventory for the main Alevi associations in Turkey and Germany vis-a-vis their disputing ideologies in a political and historical context. She analyses the approaches and strategies of Alevi organisations and modes of action in establishing a public face for the Alevi and formulating their demands in political, religious or cultural realms. Following a discussion of modes of action embraced by the Alevi in making claims to legitimacy, she finds that the Alevi fail to present themselves as a political or religious movement due to the Turkish state's excluding approach as well as that of other institutions, such as political parties or the media. In this process, the law has become the primary site to make claims for recognition, since it does not need mass mobilisation, which might be difficult to successfully achieve, and does not need to attract important media attention, which might result in increased xenophobia. Besides, legal action is indeed more result oriented than political or social actions as observed in the court cases ruled by ECtHR against Turkey. Yet, Massicard does not analyse thoroughly the reasons and implications of such a move to the realm of the law and shortcomings of the secularist

framework that law operates as grounded on the dichotomy of religious and secular.

Based on her field work, Massicard demonstrates the diversification of the Alevi movement in different contexts. In her analysis of the local identity dynamics of Alevi associations, she observes that sub-branches of the main Alevi associations at local level do not necessarily pursue the national agendas of these associations. Instead, being an interlocutor and thereby having access to resources are their primary concerns, which drive their actions instead of ideological differences. At local level contemplating on what Alevism is remains unaddressed as they think of practicality. Her case studies in Okmeydanı and Gazi neighbourhoods of Istanbul and in the cities of Sivas and Malatya, find a tendency of keeping low profile in historically marginalised areas due to the fear of further marginalisation. Therefore, these associations act with extra caution and tend to be more state-oriented. In Okmeydanı, for example, the Alevi association is careful to distinguish itself from the radical left by an exclusive emphasis on Alevism, isolated from other identity politics. This also shows the limitations imposed by state politics and a concern to explain Alevism to society onto the articulation of Alevi identity.

In the close of her book, Massicard briefly touches on the context of Germany, since it accommodates the most well-organised and populated diaspora Alevi population. She first describes the cultural and political formations of the Alevi movement until 2000, when Muslims were granted the status of religious community. This development marks as a turning point for the Alevi movement, who awakened in a rather unexpected way to see the potential of making legal claims through minority rights and the principle of freedom of religion. For example, although the officials of Alevi associations were former left-wing political activists and indeed had opposed producing religious arguments for the Alevi prior to 2000, they shifted their approach pragmatically to a religious one for legal recognition. In her comparison of the Turkey-Germany context, Massicard finds that: "the emergence of dominant organisation in Germany and it positioning within the realm of religion indicates that the failure to entrench Alevism at the national level in Turkey is not attributable to the nature of Aleviness, but to the way the Turkish political system operates" (p. 210). From her analysis, one understands that the articulation of the Alevi movement within the realm of religion is somehow a success. Pushing the Alevis in the realm of religion by both state officials and scholars is indeed popular. Yet, Massicard fails to criticise this kind of articulation of the Alevis. It may seem for Massicard that Germany is neutral to the Alevis as a religious minority. However, this has certain implications: The transition from presenting Alevism within a cultural domain to a legally recognised religious community has resulted in the re-invention of Alevism in line with the secular framework in Germany. This led the Alevis to flag *Buyruk* as a religious doctrine amongst various scriptures that Alevis inspire, to try to establish a "Dede council" for religious authority, and construct *Cemevis* as

places of worship. For instance, relocating *Cem* rituals from ordinary and temporary places to specifically designated places in *Cemevis* makes possible the formulation of the Alevi tradition solely within the realm of the religion, in accordance with the guidance German secular law provides. Secular framework of Germany provides a clear agenda to "become" a religious community, whereas in Turkey the distorted transplantation of the secular framework with its historically embedded controlling mechanisms of the state over religion produce more ambiguous messages to the Alevis. Developments in Germany reiterate the ever shifting ground of the formation of the Alevi tradition. Alevis maneuver between secular and religious realms and cannot find a place for accommodation without tailoring their tradition. This may emanate from the deficiencies of the secularist and modernist framework that dictates the language of the universality of religion. Dressler's book, however, aims to deconstruct this normative framework.

Dressler's third monograph *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevism* is his latest contribution to Alevi studies. Dressler is concerned with the intrinsic relation between the religious and the secular as well as the place of religion in nation-state building projects. Throughout the book, the reader may infer how religion plays a crucial role in nationalist discourses and how modernist projects render new religious realms thereby generating the realm of religious and secular, which serves for the state to implement its disciplining power over civil subjects. For this, Dressler traces the genealogies of the conventional conceptualisation of Alevis in Turkey vis-a-vis the Turkish nation-building project. He then dismantles the normative framework that this conceptualisation is grounded on through an empirical study on the legacy of M. F. Köprülü, an influential scholar of the Turkish nation-building project. Through his study on Köprülü, he launches into methodological and theoretical discussions for the study of religion and Islam. Dressler criticises the religious-secular dichotomy as a normative framework of the secularist and modernist project. Instead, his genealogical approach, following Asad's (2003) framework, focuses on the changing meanings of concepts of the secular and the religious, as shaped historically.

His main argument is that the modern Alevi tradition was constructed at the "intersection of Turkish nation building, modern religion discourse and Islamic apologetics" (p. 27). In support of this argument, the book is divided into two parts: Dressler describes how the *Kızılbaş* tradition was re-formulated as the Alevism during late Ottoman and early Republican period in Turkey (1850-1920). He focuses on a particular historical moment when the *Kızılbaş* began being defined as Alevi by the missionaries as well as nationalist or pan-Islamist Young Turks during late 19th century. He strengthens his argument with an archive on the *Kızılbaş* traditions through a variety of missionary visits and subsequent Western political contacts via consulates to the region. Therefore, in the first part of the book, he looks at the multiple dynamics involved in the construction of the Alevi tradition at that particular moment of history:

Proselytisation agendas of missionaries, the Western intervention in the Ottoman affairs, and the unitary policies of the late-Ottoman looking for allies in the Eastern Anatolia. Subsequently, the discourse of Turkish nation-building formulated the Alevi tradition instrumentally as "insiders and outsiders: outsiders as transgressors of Islamic law and insiders due to the fact that they are still charged with committing offences against Islamic law and conventions" (p. 7).

Dressler also situates his analysis of missionaries' memoirs in the context of the emergence of "world religions" discourse in 19th century. Through several examples of the memoirs, the reader witnesses missionaries' confusion over the "essence" of *Kızılbaş*-Alevis perceiving them either as ex-Christians, heretical groups or "heterodox" Muslims. A missionary of the ABCFM (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions) asserts that "the 'Kuzzlebash', presented as a subgroup of the Kurds, would however be pantheist; while they accepted Christ as divine does not mean too much since they accepted other religious figures and living beings, as well as parts of nature, as divine" (cited at p. 46). Drawing on these memoirs, one may infer that *Kızılbaş*-Alevis indeed embrace various figures into their tradition and the circulation of these figures is different from their meaning in Islam or Christianity. The status of Ali in the *Kızılbaş*-Alevi tradition might be looked into closely as it may correspond to something else within the semantics of the Alevi tradition. Missionary memoirs also mention the difficulty of *Kızılbaş*-Alevis' conversion on the grounds that "their particular ideas of fate, pantheism, and the transmigration of souls make it difficult for them to grasp Christian doctrine" (cited at p. 48). This results in *Kızılbaş*-Alevis not being graspable by Western conceptions of "proper" religion. Dressler cites (p. 58), Masuzawa (2005: 18, 20) who argues that "for modern Europeans to work out the problem of their own identity and to develop various conceptions of the relation between the legacy of Christianity on the one hand and modernity and rationality on the other […]world religion discourse was a discourse of secularization". Contemplation of *Kızılbaş*-Alevis as a "heterodox sect" therefore paves the way for their conversion and absorption into the language of religion.

In the second part of the book, Dressler elaborates on his argument, set up in the first part, through his empirical analysis of the work of Köprülü, who contributed immensely to the Turkish nation-building project. Köprülü lived in an era of transition from multi ethnic Ottoman Empire to secular Turkish nation-state. Through an analysis of Köprülü's works, Dressler explains and discusses how the Alevi tradition was re-formed to serve nationalist discourse. For Dressler, Köprülü is important as he adopts religion as an instrument in constructing the nation-state discourse. His historical work pays a particular attention to the role of Alevis as the carriers of the archaic Turkish religion. Köprülü recasts the Alevis to establish a continuous historical link for Turks by attributing Shamanist tradition to Alevis and describing them as the "heterodox" Islamic tradition that the Turks of Central Asia forged.

From this viewpoint, Köprülü's writing is heavily informed by orientalist modernist ideas on the one hand and revivalist Islamic ideas on the other. Dressler analyses Köprülü in two ways: contemporary discourses on modernisation and religion as well as Islamic modernism (p. 21). Deconstructing the methodology of Köprülü's historiography, Dressler criticises Köprülü for adjusting to the modern discourse on religion by for example shifting from "people of Sunna" as used in his early work, to "orthodoxy / heterodoxy" dichotomy in his late works. Drawing on Köprülü's work formulating the Alevis as "heterodox" and "syncretic" as an amalgamation of archaic Turkish beliefs and Islam, he explores the concepts of syncretism and heterodoxy as the products of secular modernist project, which tends to think through binary oppositions that are static and normative. His opposition to the concept of syncretism is its inherent implication of authentic and superior in comparison to other traditions. Primarily, syncretism implies "roots" where this syncretism is generated and syncretism therefore indicates from what it has deviated and has negative connotations of heresy or falsity of an "original" or pure religion.

Dressler is preoccupied with using appropriate methodological concepts so that we do not fall back on reading the past with today's modern concepts, which are normative in the sense that they serve political and religious ideologies. He suggests that the concepts of heterodoxy/orthodoxy or syncretism should only be used descriptively and in order to scrutinise the socio-political power dynamics of specific contexts. Following his insightful theoretical and methodological discussion, Dressler explores methods of and approaches to study the plurality of Islam. Dressler is concerned with retrospective usage of normative languages. He opposes examining history using contemporary concepts without paying attention to contexts in which these concepts were produced. He suggests a careful cross-cultural translation not to reduce the meanings into binary oppositions. He illustrates thus: "when those formerly referred to as rafizi, zindik, mulhid, or kizilbas are re-conceptualized as heterodox, then the specific meanings that had traditionally marked those who were labeled in this way get lost" (p. 229).

Bearing in mind his emphasis on the translation of concepts to avoid reducing contextual particularities, his suggestion for the study of Islam is first and foremost to avoid using normative concepts that carry their own theological and political baggage and being aware of the secularist modernist and revivalist Islamic concepts, while studying marginalised Muslim communities. Therefore, he calls for paying particular attention to concepts and language, since normative frameworks cannot fully capture the contextual complexities. Dressler suggests developing new concepts to capture the semantics of Islam and gives the example of Karamustafa's concept of "vernacular Islam" (p. 270). Refraining from using binary oppositions such as heterodoxy/orthodoxy, he also introduces the concept of "inner-Islamic difference" to study the traditions at the margins of Islam, "without contributing to socio-

political politics of normalization" (p. 270). He argues against drawing boundaries of Islam based on doctrine, since it excludes "charisma-loyal" Muslim orientations (p. 271). While recognising both "charisma-loyal" and "doctrine-loyal", he contends that these Muslim orientations are often incorporated and do not exclude one another.

As a conclusion Dressler provides a theoretical framework for the study of religion and Islamic studies. Yet, there is an issue, which needs to be clarified further. Throughout the book, the reader remains uninformed of the reason to consider the Alevi tradition within Islamic framework. Dressler simply does not discuss how the Alevi tradition is perceived as an example of "inner-Islamic difference" or the plurality of Islam or vernacular Islam and not vernacular Alevi path. As seen in Massicard's work, the Alevi tradition has been formulated in various ways; political, cultural or religious, depending on the context. Alevis tend to adopt the most practical and functional way to formulate their tradition, while making claims to legitimacy within the secular framework. As Massicard explains, it is rather coincidental that Alevis began constructing a religious tradition in Germany in order to fit in religious-secular framework. Germany provides Alevis with a "to do list" for recognition because, as Asad and Dressler argue, the modern nation-state disciplines its subjects through secular-religious dichotomy. In this disciplining process, Alevis generate a religion for the German state by coming up with the doctrine of *Buyruk* or establishing a clergy. The situation in Turkey is more complex given the transplantation of the secular framework onto Turkey and the inherited domination of state controlled Sunni-Islam. In this regard, it might be useful to also look into the articulation and circulation of Islamic figures such as Ali within the Alevi tradition, before jumping to conclusions about their "inner-Islamic difference", which may indeed produce the very problematic dichotomy of religious and secular, with its connotation to Islam. I agree with Dressler's criticism regarding the use of normative concepts and his suggestions for formulating new terms to study inner-Islamic differences. However, it might be wiser to be more attentive to the boundaries of plurality of Islam, for one may fall into considering any community whether Ezidi, Druze or Alevi and even Bahai as "inner Islamic" for the sake of avoiding being essentialist and hierarchical. This is not being obsessed with definitions and boundaries; but making sense of the subject of study holistically and considering the implications of these studies for policy-making and discourse-generation.

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