THE TURKISH ALEVIS: IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY

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Introduction

The Turkish Alevis are members of specific religious communities that comprise the largest faith minority in Turkey, though they are not acknowledged as such. These communities are nowadays reclaiming their identities: after hundreds of years of persecution they emerged from seclusion in the early years of the 20th century as the bearers of Turkish culture. During their revival in the last decade of the same century they presented themselves mainly through their music and whirling (the *semah*), which form the main parts of their rituals. Demanding the freedom to practice their faith, their presentations became gradually more and more political and therefore subjected to the dangers of reductionism, essentialism, universalism, and the urge to identify themselves in specific, finite ways. However, this manner of identification adopted under the influence of Western scientific thought was not appropriate and was hardly adaptable to the nature of the Alevi religion and tradition, which are much more fluent and changeable than a firm definition would allow. This kind of identification in the fixed terms of Western scientific thought therefore poses a threat to the vividness and aliveness of the traditionally adopted way of life and worldview of the Alevis.

Thus the question of Alevi identity is a microcosm of the ways in which the Western sciences spread their methods and doctrines of rationalization and universalization to various fields of knowledge and an example of how biased orientalism is still very much present even in the postcolonial world. Even if defining their customs and religion in traditional scientific ways brought the Alevis some recognition, it denied their identity its own perpetually fluid repositioning in culture and society. This paper shows some aspects of this problem by presen-

ting some of the most widespread accounts on Alevi identity, of specific sources about these communities, and especially by following the lead of two researchers that were among the first to single out this problematic point of view, namely David Shankland and Marcus Dressler. Before addressing the main problem of Alevi identification, first a quick insight into the criticisms of Western sciences is offered, followed by a short introduction to the beliefs and ways of life of Alevi communities in Turkey.

Researching the Religion of the Other

A specific critique of the Western sciences emerged in the second part of the 20th century, namely the fact that they are elitist and Eurocentric. One of the milestones in recognizing this bias in scientific development was Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*,[1] which gives a thorough presentation of the problem of the West when turning towards the East in order to objectify it and make it understandable for the West itself. Said's discussion about the stereotypes surrounding the Orient and Islam, "otherizing", the reckless acceptance of the authority of tradition, the politicization of scientific discourse, etc., is still relevant nowadays, regardless of how differently postcolonial studies treat the subject. Said was not the only one who warned about the fallacies of Western scientific discourse. A year later Alain Grosrichard published his *Sultan's Court*,[2] which also acknowledged the attitude of superiority in Western sources as regards Oriental lands. Grosrichard's presentation of the Sultan's Court as the core of the despotic social order is a typical example of the ethnocentric perspective towards the Ottoman sultanate of the 17th and 18th centuries that was present in the European world as a phantasma, a fascination with the concept in both science as well as literature. Also, the author claims, the West projected onto the East

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1 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, reprint with new preface (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

2 See Alain Grosrichard, *Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron, introd. Mladen Dolar (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

its biggest fears and restrictions with the aim of self-confirmation and self-reconciliation.

Awareness about the Eurocentricity of science spread from Oriental studies among other disciplines to anthropology and religiology. Among the authors that connected these fields of thought there is Talal Asad, whose work *Genealogies of Religion* practically shook the foundations of the concept and definition of religion. Namely, he claimed that understanding religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomena, which is the default approach of the prominent modernistic norms of separating religion and politics, is unsuitable for a thorough understanding of religion. "[T]here cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."[3]

Richard King was another author who tried to bridge orientalism and religion, focusing on the study of construction of the meaning of "mystical" from the perspective of the Western understanding of religion, a study that this author has mainly applied to Indian religions. In his work he calls for a reconceptualization of the notion of religion in a way that would not be directly connected to speculation cunducted by Christian theology. He identifies the basis of the erroneous understanding of religion in the project of Enlightenment: rationalism, essentialism, and universalism.

However, the Enlightenment preoccupation with defining the 'essence' of phenomena such as 'religion' or 'mysticism' serves precisely to exclude such phenomena from the realms of politics, law and science, etc. – that is, from the spheres of power and authority in modern Western societies. Privatized religion becomes both clearly defined and securely contained by excluding it from the public realm of politics. In other words attempts to preserve the autonomy of religion can also lead to the marginalization of religion since it becomes separated from these other realms. In fact, if we look more closely at the concept of 'religion' itself, we see that like the 'mystical' the term is an explanatory construct, which, while useful for focusing upon certain aspects of cultural activity, tends to marginalize that which it purports to explain if

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[3] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

the term is reified and segregated from the wider cultural dynamic in which it occurs.[4]

Some of the dangers and fallacies here described are also very much applicable to the question of Alevi identity, subjected as it is primarily to the traditional manners and methodologies of social sciences and humanities from the West, which in describing phenomena outside their domains of knowledge might do more harm than good. Before furthering this argument, what follows is a short and general, far from exhaustive, description of the Alevis' tradition and the lives of their community members.

Who are the Alevis?

It is crucial to understand that any generalized description of the Alevis is and will be quite problematic, because information about them differs from source to source. This is due to the fact that their religious and cultural tradition is non-scriptural, and also because of actual differences among the beliefs and religious practices of Alevi communities, which allows for a plurality of interpretations. Alevi wisdom, faith, and culture have been transmitted orally, as well as through ritual, mainly musical practices. A variety of sources present the Alevis as a Muslim heterodox Shi'a religious community in Turkey, which is the biggest, though unofficial, religious minority in the country, mainly inhabiting the central and eastern part of Anatolia. As a result of urbanization, however, they are also nowadays very much present in Turkish cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Their communities are often called different names, for example *Kızılbaş*, *Bektaşi*, *Tahtacı*, *Çepni*, which are attributed to them depending on their specific historical and geographical origins. Ethnically they identify as Turkish or Kurdish, the latter differing among themselves due to the language they use, namely *Kurmanji* and *Zaza* speaking Kurds. They worship Ali (Ali Ibn Abi Talib); Mohammed's family, which is called *Ehlibeyt* and whose members are Mohammed, Ali, Fatıma (the Prophet Mohammed's daughter and

[4] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and "the mystic East",* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 11.

Ali's wife), and Hasan and Husain (Ali and Fatıma's sons); they also worship the trinity of Allah, Mohammed, and Ali, as well as the Twelve Imams. They are accordingly categorized as a Shi'a branch of Islam, but due to their diverse religious practice, which is not based on the Koran, there are many sources that connect them with shamanism, religious cults of central Asia, and other pre-Islamic beliefs, resulting in attributions of syncretism. Not following the Sunni tradition was the main reason they were regularly persecuted and purged by the orthodox mainstream, and therefore they were forced to keep their belief secret and perform their rituals in seclusion. They emerged as a specific religious community only after the formation of the Republic in the first half of the 20th century. Nowadays, the Alevis are still stigmatized – but they constitute a powerful alternative to the supremacy of Sunnism and one of the strongest political oppositions in secular Turkey.

Extant literature mainly provides contemporary accounts on Aleviness and its religion and tradition in relation to the political and social situation in Turkey – namely regarding the fact that even in present times the Alevi are not acknowledged as a distinct religious group in their homeland, but mainly as a specific part of "Turkish national heritage". The Turkish government claims that the great majority (more than 90%) of the 70 million Turkish population are Sunni Muslims, and this does not coincide with the belief of some Alevis, who themselves claim that their number might amount even up to 25 million people.[5] This would be around a third of Turkish population, but the generally accepted view is that there are around 15 million Alevis.[6] The Alevi "maintain that belief in the Sunni God is based on fear, but that the Alevi base their faith in love, a love which is within all people and that can be found within them."[7] Despite the process of the so called "Alevi revival" (the massive appearance of the Alevi in the public and

[5] This opinion was the most widespread among the Alevi people the author talked to during her fieldwork in Istanbul, March 2015; this number also takes into account those living in diasporas, as well as the assimilated Alevi population.

[6] Bedriye Poyraz, "The Turkish State and Alevis: Changing Parameters of an Uneasy Relationship," *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 4 (2005): 503.

[7] David Shankland, "Anthropology and Ethnicity: The Place of Ethnography in the New Alevi Movement," in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives, Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, November 25–27, 1996*, ed. Tord

the media, especially from the 1990s forward) and the acknowledgement of their existence and way of life, the Turkish government does not regard them as a distinct religious community, but merely as an integrated part of the "Turkish nationality", namely, a part of Turkish cultural heritage.[8]

Alevi Identity: A Western Account

The Alevis and their tradition and religion were a topic of widespread, interdisciplinary interest throughout the entire 20th century. The long tradition of research is evident from the informative bibliography list on the website of the *Alevi-Bektaşi* Research Centre. The first foreign, that is non-Turkish, written source about these communities with the word "Alevi" in its title is listed as an article from the publication *Harvard Theological Review*, published in the year 1909 and written by Stephen von Rensselaer Trowbridge under the title "The Alevis of Defiers of Ali".[9] The reason for such an early and strong interest in the religious community might be very different: researchers could be intrigued by several Alevi characteristics, be it their religious practice, rituals, and musical performance, or maybe their religious and political alternative to the orthodox hegemony of Sunni Islam. Surely it could be acknowledged that the interest is derived from Alevi idiosyncrasy, their otherness. Their fresh discovery and their peculiarity attracted Western researchers of the Middle East with their Sufi doctrines, affection towards the other as one of their main life philosophies, and esoteric rituals based on musical performance. Due to the Western hegemony in the tradition of ethnographic, religious, historical, and cultural rese-

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Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 2003), 20.

8 Cf. Fahriye Dinçer, "Alevi Semahs in Historical Perspective," in *Dans Müzik Kültür – Folklora Doğru*, *ICTM 20th Ethnochoreology Symposium Proceedings 1998*, ed. Frank Hall and Irene Loutsaki (Istanbul: Boğazıcı University Folklore Club, 2000), 32–42; Poyraz, "The Turkish State and Alevis"; Kabir Tambar, "The Aesthetics of Public Visibility: Alevi Semah and Paradoxes of Pluralism in Turkey," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 3 (2010): 663–673.

9 Ali Yaman, Aykan Erdemir and Müslüm Güler, eds., "AleviBektaşi araştırma merkezi," accessed 15 July 2015, http://www.alevibektasi.org/.

arch they were often presented with connotations of Eurocentrism; for example some researchers connected them with Christianity just because of their custom of food distribution (with the analogy to sacramental bread) and wine drinking during their rituals. The similarity might be recognized, but it is not enough to connect their religious traditions, since the Alevis use food distribution to express their care for the less fortunate and provide them a warm community meal. From another point of view the Alevi are an excellent example of the possibility of many interpretations and experiences of Islam; they confirm this with their saying "*Yol bir, sürek binbir!*", which means "The Way is one, the roads one thousand and one!"[10]

Another indicator of the interests described is found in the edited volumes of articles and chapters about the Alevis that have begun to emerge since the end of the 20th century. One of them was published in 1998, entitled *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, presenting articles that were introduced at a conference on this topic in Istanbul.[11] The contributions are very diverse and specific, while Turkish authors are in the minority (only 6 out of 17). Another notable volume is *Turkey's Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview*,[12] which collects contributions on Alevis from the points of view of sociological research, history, and the country, and talks about the so called "Alevi revival", the "Kurdish question", and political opposition. The volume was published with the intent to uncover biases in Alevi research. "Altogether, the collected papers try to shed light on the ambiguous and contradictory images of the Alevi communities, as well as elaborating on the development of social identities in Turkey."[13] One of the contributing authors, Isabella Rigoni, states that the "Alevi renaissance" was made possible because of Europe's recognition of the Alevis that emi-

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[10] Marcus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18.

[11] Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere, eds., *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives, Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, November 25–27, 1996*, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 2003).

[12] Paul J. White and Joost Jongerde, eds., *Turkey's Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

[13] Alice Assadoorian, "Review: Turkey's Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview," *Iran & the Caucasus* 9, no. 1 (2005): 190.

grated into Western countries. This is a heavily ambiguous statement: it acknowledges the importance of work on the Alevis, but from another perspective this fact is accompanied by a hint of elitism and orientalism. However, the peculiarity of the volume lies in the fact that it gathers various ethnical, cultural, and political perspectives of the Alevi question, which was previously considered only in separate ways. Another important contribution is the new volume *Alevis in Europe: voices of migration, culture and identity*,[14] which collects writings from Turkish authors, including some Alevis, which is a step forward for scientific research into their own tradition. However, the structure and topics of this book resemble the ambitions of Western science with its effort to present Alevi identity through political, sociological, and psychological perspectives, mainly neglecting their religious and philosophical points of view. It seems that the Turkish authors followed the principle of Western science such as rationalism, logocentrism, and deductionism in order for their knowledge on Alevi identity to be acknowledged by the international academic community. In doing so, however, it seems that the researchers have on many occasions omitted a specific and very important part of their tradition, namely their instability, variability, and fluidity.

Combining Identification: Ethnographic Studies and Religiology

Among the first to explicitly acknowledge and specifically warn about the difficulties of defining Alevi identity and the dangers of the unsuitable nature of the definite knowledge and rationalistic identification of Western science were the two researchers David Shankland and Marcus Dressler, who, each from his own view, i.e. ethnography and religiology, respectively, researched Alevi communities for decades. David Shankland wrote his book *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition*[15] based on his intensive fieldwork conducted

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[14] Tözün Issa, *Alevis in Europe: voices of migration, culture and identity*, Routledge Advances in Sociology (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

[15] David Shankland, *Alevis in Turkey: the emergence of a secular Islamic tradition*, (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

in the villages of rural Anatolia in the years 1980–1990. This book definitively places him among the most relevant ethnographic scholars researching the lives and traditions of the Alevis. Marcus Dressler, on the other hand, investigated the question of Alevi identity from a sociological and historical point of view, shedding some light onto the politics of their identification.

In his fieldwork-based research Shankland compared the lives of various rural communities in Turkey and concluded that the most substantial differences are present between Sunni and Alevi communities. The most crucial difference was about the conflict management situation: the Sunnis use the state institutions and juridical system to resolve their issues, while the Alevis have a self-sustaining social system that allows them to resolve conflict within their communities, with the help of mediators, or better the *dedes*.[16] Thus not only are conflicts resolved within the community, making it stronger as a result, but also this method allows these communities to stay independent from the state; this autonomy, however, only persisted until they inhabited the rural parts of Anatolia. After the mass migrations due to their desire for modernization towards and into urban areas, the communities scattered and lost their connectedness and autonomy, especially because their communities had to change in order to integrate into the state's system:

> (...) the Alevis cannot integrate into the modern Turkish state without conflict between this integration and belief in their myths, rituals and ideals because, taken literally, these undermine the legitimacy of the central government. Their mechanisms of social control must change far more radically than those of the Sunni villages (...)[17]

Thus the Alevis, in order to follow the process of modernization, had to reformulate their cosmology, by which they had to adjust their religious and life practices. His fieldwork in specific rural villages led Shankland to some findings, not all of which he says are necessarily valid for all Alevi or Sunni communities. They are nonetheless worth taking

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[16] The turkish word *dede* in general means grandfather, old father, but among the Alevis it signifies an elderly man of the Alevi community, who gained his authority and responsibilities due to his origin and kin.

[17] Shankland, *Alevis in Turkey*, 5.

into account, as further research could confirm or reject them. Besides a radical difference between the Alevi and Sunni communities regarding their social order and traditional arrangement, the author established that the Sunni's traditional hamlets are usually bigger than the Alevi villages, that migration into urban areas is much more prevalent among the Alevis than among the Sunnis, that the Alevis are politically oriented mainly towards the left, that, in contrast to the Sunnis, who usually believe in religious prescriptions literally, the Alevis are more inclined toward religious skepticism, and that the securing of goods and assets is much more difficult for the Alevis than for the Sunnis.[18]

The author compared these observations and deductions from his ethnographic work to the controversial model of Muslim societies established by Ernest Gellner, which was subjected to criticisms of generalization, ambiguity, and simplification.[19] However, Shankland does not look for (in)congruency, but rather offers some parallels to the infamous model that might lead to new questions and points of view that would additionally clarify the complex position of the Alevis in Turkey.[20] The Alevi communities could fit well the "tribal pole" of Gellner's model of Muslim societies, since they have a tendency to keep themselves out of the state system as much as they can. Further, their religious practices are much less codified, and at the same time they are extroverted and centered on the person. Moreover, the process of modernization has a negative impact upon these communities, since the orthodox mainstream tries to marginalize them. However, there are some deviations from the model, since these communities are not nomadic, nor excessively rebellious, because traditionally they embraced a peaceful and reserved way of life in order to maintain their own autonomy. Also, their religion was not "purified" while going through the process of modernization, as Gellner predicted, quite the opposite – with modernization came the Alevis' demand for the freedom to practice their own religious customs and the possibility to abandon the orthodox Sunni ones. On the other hand the process of modernization can be observed from the point of

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18 *Ibid.*, 9–12.

19 Cf. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

20 Shankland, *Alevis in Turkey*, 174–181.

view of the bureaucratization and universalization of Alevi practices, which are being simplified, adapted and fixed, with the wish of public recognition in mind. This is happening also with the appearance of the defining literature that codifies their religion, which is in opposition to the Alevi esoteric tradition that was mainly preserved orally.

Shankland writes explicitly about the scripturalization and codification of Alevi identity in his account on the role of ethnography for the Alevi movement.[21] He states that this process takes places mainly based on the mass emergence of new literature about the Alevis that cannot be called scientific; but this does not diminish the importance of such literature for the Alevis that are continuing to strive for the public recognition of their religion. Publications and media appearances contribute to the more and more evident polarization among the Alevis and Sunnis, which lead to bigger conflicts – this danger must also be acknowledged regarding the scientific publications. "What we publish will also be taken up by the people for whom the revitalization and recreation of their culture is a vital issue."[22] However, this cannot impede scientific work and research, but it should open questions about the role of science in this process.

At the same time as different perspectives to describe Aleviness are established, different interpretations of their tradition might appear, along with various speculation about which of them is the correct one. "In practice, however, any claim to be a true form of Aleviness will be empirically incorrect, simply because Aleviness has over the centuries arrived at such complex forms of accommodation."[23] Living in the shadow of the hegemony of orthodox Sunnism, the Alevis developed mystic philosophy, a doctrine of peace and gender equality. "If, as researchers, we permit this flexibility, inherent within Alevi communities, to be written out of the process of cultural revival, we are failing in the one area where we may be of use."[24]

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21 Shankland, "Anthropology and Ethnicity," 15–22.
22 *Ibid.*, 16.
23 *Ibid.*, 22.
24 *Ibid.*

Shankland, in one of his recent critical accounts about the ethnography of heterodox Muslim groups,[25] shows the fallacies inherent in the perception of cultures as coherent wholes. This view on cultures should be substituted by seeing cultures as ever-changing contradictory processes. In his opinion Western experts on Islam were not able to follow the challenge of understanding the perpetual shifts in determining cultures. The author shows that ethnographic studies are far too often based on previously conducted research, instead of being grounded on actual fieldwork and developing sensitivity for the variety of organizations in Muslim societies.

The question of defining communities as heterodox is a regular feature in Islam, claims Shankland, while differentiating among orthodox and heterodox communities is widespread also in theology. The author is aware that this dichotomy is usually based on prejudices and that using the term "heterodox" can a priori negatively label minorities. However, Shankland does not defend the abandonment of the term, since the unorthodox communities are omnipresent as opposition to the core ideas of specific societies, and therefore as very important alternatives to the mainstream system.

The tendency of the West towards defining Islam through the division of religious groups into Sunni and Shi'a branches can lead to the danger that heterodox communities might disappear from scientific literature, since they are not part of either of the two dominant orthodox parts of Islamic religion. These heterodox religious groups are not important as a form of resistance to and differentiation from the "right" beliefs, moreover, they are not to be perceived as "extremist". Rather, they have an important role as alternatives, which are shown by contrasting some aspects of a specific religion. For these heterodox groups the author recognizes a certain specific pattern, though roughly:[26] inhabiting rural areas, affirming leaders on the basis of their patrilineal descent, performing collective rituals to (re)affirm the *status quo*, calling

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[25] David Shankland, "Maps and the Alevis: On the Ethnography of Heterodox Islamic Groups," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 227–239, doi: 10.1080/13530194.2010.543307.

[26] Shankland, *Alevis in Turkey*, 530.

for gender equality or at least for less gender discrimination, and also an emphasis on the esoteric aspect of their approach to religion.

Shankland claims that the Turkish heterodox communities are often called "extremist Shi'a", which is a social framework that was established by the scientific works of social anthropologists in the 1940s, typically describing the communities that were/are outside the lines of or in contrast to the country's government. This kind of ideological stigmatization, formed with changes in the social order, makes the actual communities unrecognizable – therefore, there is a crucial need for intensive fieldwork and long-term observation in order to present these communities in their own reality, especially due to the fact that their tradition was mainly preserved orally.

Shankland claims that Western scholars had a great and direct impact on the history of Alevi communities and the definition of their identity, especially in the period when Turkish Alevis migrated into European countries, mainly to Germany. With simplification and codification in the new emerging texts about their faith and cultural tradition from the middle of the 20th century onwards, a sense of uniformity took shape that had never existed beforehand. This uniformness must be labeled as inappropriate for Alevi communities, which differ among themselves greatly. Shankland claims that the authors of these texts are "both actors and play wrights"[27] of the process of transforming the cultural tradition, and therefore the accuracy of their information and interpretation is extremely important.

Markus Dressler researches the Alevis and the Alevi religion from the perspective of the sociology of religion and from the question of their identity. In his works[28] he explicitly warns about the unsuitability of the traditional Western dichotomies upon which various religions are explained and understood. All religions in this process are subjected to determination by patterns, defined by the so-called "world religions". The paradigm that understands religion in connection to dichotomous

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[27] Shankland, "Maps and the Alevis," 239.

[28] See for example Markus Dressler, "Turkish Alevi Poetry in the Twentieth Century: The Fusion of Political and Religious Identities," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 23 (2003): 109–154; Markus Dressler, "Religio-Secular Metamorphoses: The Re-Making of Turkish Alevism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2008): 280–311.

concepts, such as religious/secular, religious/political, or sacral/profane, is neither known to nor suitable for Aleviness. In this faith religious and political themes are often fused, but that does not necessarily put them in the realm of the paradoxical.[29] Furthermore, Dressler claims that the borders between the political and the religious are dynamic and variable: "[W]e need a discursive, non-essentialist conception of the dimensions of the religious and the political in order to understand what happens when these dimensions fuse."[30] The overlapping of both themes in the Alevi discourse is presented by the author with an analysis of some works from Alevi poetry, which has been the main carrier and transmitter of the Alevi heritage through the centuries.

Dressler presents some specific poems that include political events or symbols in Alevi beliefs or their religious realm. To depict his deduction one of many representative examples of secularization of the religious can be used, or better of the sacralization of the profane: namely the Alevis tend to connect the events from the battle at Kerbela in 680, which comprise an important part of Alevi mythology, with the socio-political incident in the Turkish town Sivas in the year 1993, which resulted in the death of 35 people, all members of the Alevi community.[31] In connecting these two events a continuity of martyrdom and suffering of the Alevis is established; moreover these events adopt transhistorical significance: the martyrs from Kerbela become political victims. Furthermore "the secular ideologies are in turn sanctified by their

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29 Dressler, "Turkish Alevi Poetry," 110.

30 *Ibid.*, 119–120.

31 The so called "massacre at Kerbela" in the year 680 is understood by the Alevis as the martyrdom of Huseyin (Ali's second son and the third Shi'a imam) and his family. Before slaughtering them, the followers of the Ummayad (Sunni) calif Yezid left them without food and water for twelve days. To honour their pain the Alevis even nowadays hold a twelve-day fast at the beginning of the month Muharrem, when the massacre originally occured. (Dressler, "Turkish Alevi Poetry," 121; see also Shankland, "Anthropology and Ethnicity," 19–21.) Dressler in his account on Alevi poetry recognized that this event is often paralleled to the attack on the Alevi members gathering at a festival dedicated to an important figure if their legacy, that is the poet Pir Sultan Abdal. The attack happened on 2 June 1993, when militant Sunni fanatics started a fire at a hotel, where the participants in the festival were lodging, the consequences of which included the loss of 35 lives. The local authorities observed the event without intervening.

inclusion into the religious narrative."[32] This contributes substantially to their "political legitimacy and a political identity."[33]

Despite the tendencies of connecting and integrating the political and the religious shown above, it is fairly important to state that the Alevis strongly support laicism, which is supposed to keep apart religion and politics in the public realm, and to presuppose the control of the state on religion and not the other way around, faith being moved from the public into the private domain. Laicism is crucial to the Alevis, especially because it is a precondition for their religious freedom, which they were not able to obtain before the emergence of kemalism and the secularization of the state in the 1920s.[34] According to Dressler this is another sign that affirms the compatibility of Islam with secularity – a possibility that is rather rejected than affirmed.[35]

In the Alevi worldview the division between religious and political is possible only in the institutional structure of society, otherwise both are inherently connected. This is recognizable in some of the crucial concepts of Aleviness that significantly affect their belief system, such as the immanence of God and the differentiation between batın in zahir, which could be understood as differing between "the inner" or "the hidden" and "the outer" or "visible". From these the Alevis stress the importance of the inner side of faith; however, these two sides are not mutually exclusive, but they are rather mutually complementary.[36] Dressler therefore describes Aleviness in the following way:

> This worldview, with its batinism and its conception of the divine as immanent, has no equivalent with the common western perspective on religion that structures religion along the lines of a clear-cut distinction between a transcendent God and man, between *sacred* and *profane*, between *religion* and *politics*.[37]

Furthermore, the author warns about the dangers of oversimplification in postorientalistic debates, which, in oversimplifying, reaffirm the

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32 Dressler, "Turkish Alevi Poetry," 126.
33 *Ibid.*, 136.
34 *Ibid.*, 132.
35 *Ibid.*, 135.
36 *Ibid.*, 112.
37 *Ibid.*, 137.

hegemony of traditional dichotomies.[38] Besides, he emphasizes: "The case of the Alevis serves as an example for the limits of a dichotomous concept of religion and asks for a pluralist re-definition of the concept *religion*."[39] Similarly, he continues this debate in one of his later works,[40] where he offers an account of the self-identification of the members of the Alevi communities in two different environments, namely in Turkey and in Germany. This time he shows the fallacies of postcolonial studies in understanding the politico-religious dynamic as one-sided:

> While postcolonial studies has discussed the role of religion as a tool to legitimize and administer the hegemony of the nation-state, less attention has been directed to cases in which marginalized sociocultural communities have adopted the language of religion as a means of empowerment vis-à-vis assimilationist politics directed against them.[41]

Again, Dressler recognizes in defining the Alevi identity a proper example of neglecting "the other side" of the relation between politics and religion, especially because Alevis clearly adopt the tendency to religionize Aleviness without leaving the frame of the state. The author goes even further in claiming, that the secular and the religious are not mutually excluding, but he rather sees the processes of religionization and secularization as mutually constitutive.

Simultaneously, Dressler highlights another problematic aspect of perceiving the Alevi identity that emerged as a response to the ideological project of "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis", namely, a "re-Sunnization" of the state, from the end of the 20th century onwards. Contrary to this project, the Alevis adopted, in determining their religion, a universalistic discourse framed by human rights, secularistic rhetoric, and self-determination. This attitude was also an answer to the need to redetermine Aleviness in urban environments that emerged after the rural exodus in the 1970s. The Alevis thus always had to seek balance between the tensions of their local environment and the ever more universalistic

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38 *Cf.* previously cited authors for the criticism of orientalism and conceptualization of religion: Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Grosrichard, *Sultan's Court*; King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Said, *Orientalism*.

39 Dressler, "Turkish Alevi Poetry," 139.

40 Markus Dressler, "Religio-Secular Metamorphoses."

41 *Ibid.*, 281.

conceptions of Aleviness. Put another way – in order to fulfill their wish to be publicly recognized as a legitimate religious group the members of Alevi communities used the universalistic religious discourse offered by the West, and therefore Aleviness went through its own reformulation and is now understood as a worldview, a way of life, a cultural praxis, and religion.[42]

The fact of not being publicly recognized as a religion by the state leaves the Alevis with two options, "either to oppose the hegemonic discourse, or to play by its rules and appropriate them as well as possible for their own purposes."[43] Following the latter, a number of various Alevi organizations emerged, each of them defending their own proper view on Alevi identity, whether that be integrated into Islam, even Sunnism, or as an independent religion. Another element of their universalization is the development of curricula for religious education in elementary schools, which appeared as a response to the introduction of classes of Sunnism as compulsory to elementary education. Urbanization led to the emergence of a specific setting of the Alevi elite, formed by educated representatives who were strongly skilled in rhetoric and socialization, making up the "brain and motor" of the Alevi revival and public recognition movement. Moreover, during this process, a number of publications sprung up, among them manuals and textbooks about various aspects of Aleviness, which on one hand strongly contributed to the need for knowledge and education, and on the other hand reinforced even further the standardization of Aleviness as a religion.

To assure their own independence, Dressler claims, the Alevis are obliged to objectify their religious practice especially with its fixation on scripturalization. This brings about the metamorphosis of an otherwise very esoteric doctrine into a public religion, to which the Alevi elite contribute as much as the scientific researchers.[44]

But now Alevis are for the very first time engaging in a systemic reconstruction of their tradition along the lines of an implicit *world religion* model, and define belief, practice, philosophy, ethics, and culture of Alevism within

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42 *Ibid.*, 283–288.
43 *Ibid.*, 297.
44 *Ibid.*, 301–302.

the grammar of the secular-religious – an approach alien to traditional Alevi practice and worldview and in line with the politics of the modern nation-state. Such new formations of Alevism are in line with a religion discourse that gives preference to objectified universality as opposed to a plurality of valid local interpretations as characteristic of traditional Alevism. Most significantly, the objectification process has consequences for the character of Alevism as a communal culture.[45]

In establishing a "theology of Aleviness" the very core of Aleviness is being transformed. The Alevi religionization is an illustrative example of the further blooming of modernistic semantics in the public discourse about religion, even if said discourse has gone through the necessary process of emancipation from the modernistic paradigm.

In his book *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevism*, Dressler argues for another example of the modernistic character of the project of establishing a theology of Aleviness and its rootedness in orientalism – that is, the name Alevi itself. The author states that this denomination appeared only in the late 19th century in order to substitute the pejorative term kızılbaş, which was used for naming specific Anatolian religious communities that were known to be connected with the Shi'a Safavidic empire. Over time, mainly thanks to authors with nationalistic tendencies since the 1920s, the name Alevi has become an umbrella term for Anatolian communities sharing various features, such as unorthodoxy, syncretism, and specific forms of ritual practice. In the second half of the 20th century the term substituted all the previous denominations, and thus despite their heterodoxy the Alevis were integrated into the nationality and faith of the young Turkish state.[46] This kind of reconceptualization of the notion of Aleviness was a political gesture, Dressler explicitly affirms. The hypothesis of the homogeneity of Aleviness met the standards of the nationalistic project that was founded on the belief on the continuity of Turkish culture and its integration. The reduction of "otherness", namely the plural aspect of Aleviness, allowed for a more substantial assimilation.[47] The Alevis were accordingly seen as a much more homogeneous community than they really were. The new

45 *Ibid.*, 303.
46 Marcus Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 1–4.
47 *Ibid.*, 5.

terminology brought about stabilization, and with it also a generalized view on their tradition. Alevi religiography is mainly modernist and secular and this has strongly affected research on Aleviness, especially the type conducted by Turkish authors, which, supported by nationalistic characteristic, was found to be essentialistic and functionalistic. Functionalism was a specific characteristic of the French structuralism and sociology, hence it is a clear evidence of the strong influence of Western scientific theories on Turkish (self)determination.[48]

> The diverse connotations that have been attributed to Alevi/Alevism during the last century (e.g., Alevis as preservers of pre-Islamic Turkish traditions and culture, Alevism as pre-Marxist class-fight ideology, as Turkish philosophy, as secular Turkish Islam, or as post-Zoroastrian Kurdish religion) are part and parcel of the complicated dynamics of Turkish identity politics in which religious, ethnic, nationalist, and class-based concerns relate and clash.[49]

In this way the author specifically exposes the methodological problem of the historical account on "the Alevis," since their name and the concept of Aleviness did not exist until the end of the 19th century, which explicitly shows that these accounts are mainly a projection of modernistic concepts onto the past.[50] It is surprising that this kind of writing still goes unquestioned by scientists and that experts have not yet made warnings about the conceptual transition from different names to a unified umbrella term. This fact shows a lack of criticism towards the modernistic obsession with origin and essence.[51] Dressler emphasizes that the modern conceptualization of Aleviness is ambiguous: it allows for the Alevis to have a legitimate place in the Turkish society, but only by limiting their identification to the confines of Turkishness and being Muslim. In this ambiguity Dressler recognizes the fact that integration and assimilation are two sides of the same coin. The Alevis still remain "heterodox," since the norm for the Turkish state is Sunni Islam.[52]

On the role of heterodoxy especially as an opposition to orthodoxy Dressler writes in one of his newer works, which is meaningful eno-

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48 *Ibid.*, 8–10.
49 *Ibid.*, 11.
50 *Ibid.*, 12, 14.
51 *Ibid.*, 15.
52 *Ibid.*, 277.

ugh already by its subtitle, "Otherizing the Alevis as heterodox".[53] In Dressler's opinion because of the label of heterodoxy the Alevis keep being and integral part of Islam, but at the same time they are being positioned on its margins, especially by those who hold the position of the "centrality" of Islam, "*orta*".[54] These believers, being nationalistically inclined, as orthodox, always have their others. Dressler points out how to solve, or better how to expose this "otherizing", in a critical deconstruction of the symbiosis among the hegemonic political and academic discourse, especially "by analysis of the dynamics through which orthodoxies are formulated, and heterodoxies ascribed to, in the context of specific theologico-political power relations."[55]

Aleviness: A Fluid Identity

The aspects of writing and explaining Alevi identity presented in this paper show that the identity of these communities is not easily unambiguously determined. Especially the studies of David Shankland and Markus Dressler lead towards the uncovering of some fallible ways of identifying the Alevis. Their points of view and interest are based on separate areas of study, that is anthropology and religiology, but they appear mutually compatible and supporting, even complementary. This points towards the realization of Richard King's[56] suggestion about the possibility of religious studies imitating or even unifying with cultural studies, which could prevent the foundation of the concept of religion in the Christian and Enlightenment terms that are typical of theology.

Dressler's belief about the impropriety of grounding religion in the model of dichotomy, which opposes it to secularity, and his call towards a pluralistic understanding of religion fit well with Shankland's comprehension of culture as a perpetually transformable entity of which religion is a part. When he states the danger of losing the variety and difference because of the regular separation of Muslim communities be-

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53 Markus Dressler, "Turkish politics of doxa: otherizing the Alevis as heterodox," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41, no. 4–5 (2015): 445–451.

54 Interestingly enough, the Turkish word "*orta*" means center, middle, in between.

55 Dressler, "Turkish politics of doxa," 450.

56 King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 2.

tween the two branches, that is Sunnism and Shi'ism, he warns, just as Dressler, that the reasoning behind this differentiation "otherizes" some groups of Turkish society. In Shankland's terms heterodoxy should not designate separation, but rather an alternative to the hegemonic ways of life and religious practices. Both authors warn about the codification of the Alevi practices as being unsuitable or poorly adapted to Alevi knowledge, which was transmitted mainly orally. They thus express concern about the possibility of losing fluidity, which is elementary to the Alevis, and they call for awareness about the role and impact of scientific researchers in defining and reconstructing Alevi identity. Shankland claims that the hypothesis about Alevi uniformity is wrong and similarly Dressler defends the view that the illusion of their homogeneity is politically grounded, since it always put the Alevis in ambiguous positions, identifying them as "the others" of Turkish society.

Different approaches towards defining, even constructing, the Alevi identity, such as universalization, homogeneization, codification with scripturality, otherizing, objectification, etc., all show the clear influence of Western scientific and political discourse. This discourse was uncritically applied to the situation of the Turkish Alevis, preserving the modernistic tendencies of rationalization and essentialism, as well as, surely, also Eurocentrism. The fact that this modernistic scientific style is also used by the Alevis themselves is quite concerning. Even if this approach is the only way in which the Alevis gained some degree of public recognition in terms of Turkish cultural heritage and legitimacy in the political sphere, the adopted rationalistic determination leads to the loss of their proper variability and the local characteristics of Alevi communities. Objectivity and rationality originate from the project of enlightenment, the modernistically grounded sciences, and the egocentrism of the Western view of "others".[57] The westernization of the Alevi studies affects greatly the changes in the Alevi religious and other traditional practices that are adapting to the need of identification with fixed determinations, whether that is as a Muslim heterodox group or as a

[57] This drawbacks of spreading the Western scientific models can be followed from different points of view in theoretical works listed before from authors such as Asad, King Grosrichard, and Said.

political opposition to the Sunni hegemony. Moreover, with the objectification and scripturalization of their tradition there comes the danger that the sacred rituals might become thoroughly fixed and consequently lose the vividness, aliveness, and fluidity that are crucial to said tradition. This reminds us of Grosrichard's discovery of the Sultan's Court and the realization that the accuracy of reports about it did not make a difference, since what was most important was the belief in them: significance is gained only with the translation to discourse and concepts of analytic theory, its articulation and synthesis into a system.[58] Similarly it could be stated for the objectification and codification of Alevi praxis that, subjected to simplification, it is reducible to a few ground rules and concepts that make it accessible for Western discourse and the modernized Turkish public. This kind of "Alevi system" is far from suitable for representing in its full extent the complexity of the esoteric experience and mystical philosophy that were primarily preserved in Alevi poetry and music.

The issue of Alevi identity proves that the West has not yet released its master grasp over all of its others. Maybe this hegemony is often not self-evident, but it seems important for scientists to continue researching it and thus contribute to the credibility, truthfulness, and relevance of science. It is encouraging to meet in the extant literature some authors that are constantly aware of the dangers of simplification and application of their own beliefs on other individuals, cultures, faiths. Among them there is the Slovenian author Marijan Molè, who in researching Islamic mysticism realized its uncanniness, as well as researchers' responsibility towards their subjects of research, which could be a model for every discipline.

Islamic mysticism puts the European researcher in front of various difficulties. The first one being that the grounding of religion is problematic by itself. To what extent is it even possible to comprehend a religious experience – individual by definition – that besides not being ours, it unfolds inside a system that is unknown to us? This task demands a substantial effort: researchers have

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[58] See Alain Grosrichard, *Struktura seraja*, trans. Eva Bahovec and Mladen Dolar (Ljubljana: Škuc, Filozofska fakulteta, 1985), 200.

to get accustomed to those that they research and follow their experience from inside, without ceasing being themselves.[59]

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[59] Marjan Molè, *Muslimanski mistiki*, trans. Vesna Velkovrh Bukilica (Ljubljana: KUD Logos, 2003), 9.

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