

HISTORY and CURRENT SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TURKEY

M. Fatih GENÇ¹

ABSTRACT

In this article, the history and current situation of religious education is examined in four chapters. These chapters are Exploration Era, Strict Secularization period, Re-establish Period and the last Compulsory Era. At last, current situation of Religious Education and the curriculum of Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge are explained.

Key Words: Turkey, religious education, history.

TÜRKİYE'DEKİ DİN EĞİTİMİ TARİHİ VE BUGÜNKÜ DURUMU ÖZET

Bu makale 1923'den günümüze Türkiye'de okullardaki din eğitiminin geçirmiş olduğu tarihi süreci incelemektedir. Makalede din eğitiminin tarihi, arayış dönemi, katı laik dönem, Yeniden kurulma ve Zorunlu dönem olmak üzere dört kısımda

¹ Assistant Prof.Dr; Cumhuriyet University Faculty of Divinity, Religious Education Department.

incelenmiştir. Son olarak Türkiye'deki din eğitiminin mevcut durumu ve din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi derslerinin programları hakkında bilgiler verilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, din eğitimi, tarih.

Introduction

After the collapsed of Ottoman Empire; perhaps the most spectacular development in Islamic education in contemporary Islam has occurred in Turkey. As a successor of the Ottoman Empire, the nation-state of Turkey came into existence in 1923. This was more than a political event; it was also a social, cultural, and economic revolution. In this context, secularism² emerged as a vital, and key, concept. The boundary

² During the establishment of Republic, there were two sections of the elite group at the helm of the discussions for the future; which they had the firsthand experience of Ottoman Reforms which were implemented beginning from the last quarter of the 19th century. These were the Islamist reformists and Westerners. They shared a similar goal, the modernization of the new state. There were many basic goals which were common to both the groups. The founder of the modern Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's achievement was to amplify this common ground and put the country on a fast track of reforms which is now known as Atatürk's Reforms. The first act was to give by will to the Turkish nation the right to exercise popular sovereignty via representative democracy. Prior to declaring the new Republic, the Turkish Grand National Assembly abolished the constitutional monarchy on November 1, 1922. The Turkish Grand National Assembly then moved to replace the extant Islamic law structure with the laws it had passed during the Turkish War of Independence, beginning in 1919. The modernization of the Law had already begun at the point that the project was undertaken in earnest. A milestone in this process was the passage of the Turkish Constitution of 1921. Upon the establishment of the Republic on October 29, 1923, the institution of the Caliphate remained, but the passage of a new constitution in 1924 effectively abolished this title held by the Ottoman Sultanate since 1517. With the negation of the Caliphate the final vestiges of Islamic Law are regarded as having disappeared from the Turkish landscape. The Caliphate's powers within Turkey were transferred to the National Assembly and the title has since been inactive. While very unlikely, the Turkish Republic does in theory still retain the right to reinstate the Caliphate, should it ever elect to do so. Following quickly upon these developments, many social reforms were undertaken. Many of these reforms affected every aspect

between religion and politics in Turkey was drawn in terms of secular principles³; the major reforms were closely connected with secularism. Within religious education itself in modern Turkey many fluctuations can be observed. For a quarter of a century, in the republican era, the Turkish educational system worked on a strictly secular basis: all levels of religious education were officially banned in schools.

When the new republic was founded, it had a big amount of experiences of Ottomans which their sovereignty carried out more than 600 years. Thus, the founder of the new republic knew what main reasons which cause to collapse a state are. And also they grew up in Ottoman education system. In this era, Turkey rotated its face to Western completely. When Turkey organized their institutions, legislations, it took Western countries as an example.⁴

of Turkish life, moving to erase the legacy of dominance long held by religion and tradition. The Unification of education, installation of a secular education system, and the closure of many religious orders was happened on March 3, 1924. this extended to closure of religious convents and dervish lodges on November 30, 1925. These reforms included the extension to women of voting rights in 1931 and the right to elected office in December 5, 1934. The inclusion of reference to *laïcité* into the constitution was achieved by an amendment on February 5, 1937, is seen as the final act in the project of instituting complete separation between governmental and religious affairs in Turkey.

³- Deep respect for individuals and the small groups of which they are a part.

-Equality of all people.

-Each person should be helped to realize their particular excellence.

- Breaking down of the barriers of class and caste

⁴ In the first half of 1926 the Swiss civil code and the penal code from Mussolini's Italy and a commercial code based largely on the German and Italian codes were adopted. With the promulgation of the new civil code, religious marriages and polygamy were abolished. The adoption of European time and the calendar in 1925, of Western numerals in 1928 and of Western weights and measures (the metric system) in 1931 gave the society a more Westernised image. A number of laws restructuring the banking sector were passed and on 2 July 1934, the Surname Law came into effect. On 29 October 1934, except in the army, all courtesy titles (like *Bey*, *Efendi* or *Paşa*) were abolished. In June 1935 Sunday was made

In this review history religious education in Turkey are examined in four chapters.

1- First Period (Exploration Era) (1923-1930)

Until 1924; educational system had triad characteristics, which includes former schools -Madrasahs, schools of Tanzimat era – and schools for foreigners who live in Turkey in the last era for Ottoman State before Law of the Unification of Instructions. The other scholars outline the main elements of dual system before this Law as religious (Madrasah) and laic (schools)

This educational system was changed with the Law of Unification of Instructions (Tevhid-i Tedrisat-Öğretimin Birliği Kanunu) in March 3, 1924. This law was proclaiming that all kind of schools had to unify, which were applying different curricula and methods. And also, Madrasahs were closed through this amendment.⁵

In this era; there were RE in primary schools⁶ which name of lesson was Holy Quran and Religious Education and curriculum of secondary schools which name of lesson was Religious Education⁷ in 1924. Religious Education was both compulsory and had doctrine characteristics among 1923-1930. Although its aim and context were restricted; it had Islamic based. It was mentioned about its aims that to endear Allah and Islam; teaching the benefit of unity of faith in Islam.

the weekly holiday instead of Friday. Finally, in November 1928, the Arabic script was replaced by Latinletters and the new Turkish alphabet was adopted by Parliament.

⁵ Osman Ergin, *Türk Maarif Tarihi*, c.1-2, s.129.

⁶ Lesson was compulsory for class of 2,3,4,5 and 2 hours per a week. The lesson based Islamic Law as its aim and content. The learning of Holy Quran was contented. (see. *İlk Mekteplerin Müfredat Programı*, 1924).

⁷ 1 hour a week for class 1,2

Before mentioned that amendment of 1924 changed pillar education system to unity education system. For that reason there is not any school which is opened by Religious groups in Turkey. Only minorities (Greek, Armenian and Jewish) which accepted from treaty of Lausanne can open own schools.

2- Second Period (Strict Secularization) (1930-1949)

Although these developments the period between 1930 and 1949 was politically and constitutionally quite turbulent related to the religious affairs. Imam-Hatip high schools were closed in 1930. In 1933, theology Faculty was closed when Dar'ulfunun was converted into the Istanbul University. In 1930's religious education courses were taken out from the school program up to 1949.⁸

This term, there was not any religious education in primary and secondary school and also there were not any theology faculty in universities.

3- Third Period (Re-establish Period) (1949-1982)

In Turkey, the negative consequences of this educational policy began to catch the attention of statesmen and politicians by the time World War II. For the first time, in 1949, and after nearly a quarter of a century, the Ministry of Education allowed a course on religion in 4th and 5th grades of primary school. The course was optional, depending upon a written request from parents, and it was taught outside the regular

⁸ Ergin, a.g.e., III-IV, p. 1243; Ergin a.g.e, V, p. 1961-1963

hours. The public response in favor of this initiative was overwhelming.⁹ Less than 1 % of the students opted out of the course. And also, the first Divinity Faculty in Turkey was established within Ankara University in 1949. In 1951, İmam-Hatip Schools were also established within the system of the secondary schools.¹⁰

Until 1956, as a result of multi-party democracy, a new government was established. Being more sympathetic towards the religious sentiments of society, this new government introduced a religion course into secondary schools. This time, if the parents wanted to exempt their children from the course, they had to apply to the school with a written request. In 1956, RE took place in curriculum.¹¹

In 1967, the religion course was introduced to the 1st and 2nd grades of high schools. Students, however, were enrolled for the course with the written request of their parents.¹² In 1975, the course was extended to the third (last) grade of the high schools. This optional religious education in schools continued up to 1982.¹³ If we sum up this period, Until 1980s RE was optional and ethic lesson was compulsory in schools.¹⁴

⁹ Recai Doğan, "1980'e Kadar Türkiye'de Din Öğretimi Programı Anlayışları 1924-1980", *Din Öğretiminde Yeni Yöntem Arayışları*, (Uluslar arası Sempozyum-Bildiri ve Tartışmalar, 28-30 Mart 2001-İstanbul), p. 618

¹⁰ See, Mustafa Öcal, "Kuruluşundan Günümüze İmam-Hatip Liseleri" *Din Eğitimi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Yıl 1999, Sayı 6, p.229.

¹¹ Halis Ayhan, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi*, M.Ü.İ.V. yay., İstanbul 1992, p.128.

¹² MEB Tebliğler Dergisi, Cilt 30, Sayı 1475.

¹³ Bilgin, op. Cit, p.75-77

¹⁴ Nurullah Altaş, "Ortaöğretimde Din Eğitimi", *Din Eğitimi* (Ed. N. Altaş, M. Köylü), Gündüz Eğitim ve Yay.; Ankara 2012, p.151-153.

4- Fourth Period (Compulsory Era) (1982-2012)

After the 1980 military take-over, the issue of the introduction of compulsory religious education was hotly discussed by a range of different people and groups. At the end of the these discussion; Religious education was become compulsory for elementary and intermediate schools.

This decision was included in the 1982 Constitution as the 24th article. The new regulation changed the official name of religious education to 'Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge'. The 24th clause of the constitution states that "Education and instruction about religion and ethics is provided un the supervision of public agencies. The related course is one of the mandatory courses delivered at the basic education level and secondary education level. The other related educational and instructional activities are provided only upon request of people, and for young people, of legal guardians." Courses were to be taught from fourth grade primary to the end of middle school for two hours per week; and, in high school, for one hour.

In March of 2012 Turkish education system was changed. The primary education stages, which includes the first two stages of four years' education each, will entail four years of mandatory elementary education, followed by an additional mandatory four years of middle school education, in which students will be able to choose whether they want to study at a general education middle school or a religious vocational middle school, which are referred to as Imam Hatip schools. After being shut down as part of the strict regulations enforced during the February 28th

'postmodern coup'¹⁵, the new legislation includes the reopening of Imam Hatip middle schools. Primary education establishments will be set up separately as independent elementary schools and middle schools.

Courses on the Koran and the life of the Prophet will be offered as electives for middle school and high school students. The Ministry of Education may also prepare elective courses on Christianity and Judaism. Middle school education will be made mandatory beginning in the 2012-2013 school years.

Curriculum of Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge Courses

Current course on religious culture and ethics is not exclusively about Islam. Instead, it provides general religious knowledge without any orientation to a specific religion. Bilgin argues that "the reason for this course a mandatory course with the title of Religious culture and

¹⁵ The 1997 military memorandum refers to the decisions issued by the Turkish Military leadership on a National Security Council meeting at 28 February 1997 which initiated the 28 February process that precipitated the resignation of prime minister Necmettin Erbakan of the Welfare Party and the end of his coalition government. As the Erbakan government was forced out without dissolving the parliament or suspending the constitution. At the National Security Council (MGK) meeting on 28 February 1997, the generals submitted their views on issues regarding secularism and political Islam on Turkey to the government. The MGK made several decisions during this meeting and the Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan from the Welfare Party was forced to sign the decisions. The decisions were intended to protect the secularist ideology in Turkey. Some of the decisions that Erbakan was forced to sign are:

- Forcing people to donate skins of sacrificed animals to the Turkish Aviation Board (THK)
- Strict headscarf ban in universities
- Eight year primary school education
- Shutting down Koran schools and Imam-Hatip middle schools
- Abolition of Tarikats (sufi orders)
- Control of media groups which object to the decisions of Yüksek Askerî Şûra (Supreme Military Council) to fire religious soldiers on claims of "irtica" ("reaction"/"reactionaryism")

ethics beginning from 1982 is an indication of being neutral to all religious branches and thus, provision of a general information about Islamic religious and ethics culture in the course.”¹⁶ Turkey, as a result of the experience of religious education and instruction, adopted mandatory course of Religious culture and ethics. Course adopted should not lead to separation and social unity and integrity in terms of being supportive of and proper completely with the realities of the community. In this respect the differences in society to get in, there is a need for integrated models of religious education. Turkey have attempted to meet this need to perform with this model.

In order to better analyze the model of religious education practice in Turkey, the following statement should be taken into consideration: “In the determination of the content of the course of religious culture and ethics, an approach that is beyond any religious movements (neutral to all religious movements and without any discussion of them) around basic religious assumptions has been adopted.¹⁷ The purpose of this program is to make informed the students about religion and ethic as well as to improve their related skills and therefore, to contribute to the achievement of general aims of National Education in Turkey.” The ap-

¹⁶ Beyza Bilgin, *Eğitim Bilimi ve Din Eğitimi*, Gün Yay., Ankara 2007, s.66-81.

¹⁷ See. T.C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu Başkanlığının 31.03.2005 Tarih ve 16 Sayılı kararı ile 2005-2006 öğretim yılında yürürlüğe girmek üzere kabul edilmiştir. T. C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Din eğitimi Genel Müdürlüğü, *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı (9, 10,11 ve 12. Sınıflar)*, Devlet Kitapları Müdürlüğü, İstanbul 2005, p.13, T.C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu Başkanlığının 28.12.2006 Tarih ve 410 Sayılı kararı ile 2007-2008 öğretim yılında yürürlüğe girmek üzere kabul edilmiştir. T. C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Din eğitimi Genel Müdürlüğü, *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi (4, 5, 6, 7 ve 8. Sınıflar) Öğretim Programı ve Kılavuzu*, Devlet Kitapları Müdürlüğü, Ankara 2007, p.10.

proach adopted for religion education is described as follows: “When developing the curriculum of Basic Education religious culture and ethics, knowledge based on science and research about Islam and other religions is prioritized and knowledge that is not contained in real religious sources is avoided. In regard to knowledge about Islam, an approach that is centered on Quran and sayings of Prophet Mohammed as well as uniting and without any reference to a specific religious movement is adopted and root values that embrace basic religious assumptions on Islam are emphasized. These values about faith, worship and ethics are selected on the fact that they all share common points related to Quran and the sayings of Prophet Mohammed. The ultimate aim is to make the learners correctly informed about religious, cultural and ethical values. All religious and ethical values consistent with this approach included into the curriculum. However, a special attention is paid to avoid to have a doctrine-based instruction.”¹⁸

It should be noted that the program defines itself as one that is beyond a specific religious movement and is extended to religions. It means that as mentioned above, it does not regard any religious movement as its sing orientation. Instead, it reflects all of them. This model can be understood in two ways. One of them is “uniting model” and the other one “plural model”. According to the first model, namely uniting model, “in such a course, the essence of the religion should be thought and details about various religious trends should not be given. In other words, children with distinct religious orientations will take the course but such

¹⁸ Ortaöğretim, s. 19

differences should not be neglected. Instead, such orientations should be introduced and it should be emphasized that these orientations are distinct understandings about the same religion. The second model, namely plural model, states that the course should be the mirror of the society. In other words, it should deal with not only various orientations within the same religion but also several religions with their world views and ethical understandings as a topic of study.¹⁹

“According to the interpretation adopted in Turkey, such an approach indicates that while delivering education on religion, common points and contents shared by the believers are taught based on major resources of the religion. Such a course does not aim at making popular the religion but at informing about it. In the course, different understandings and practices of the religion that are taught are not trained. Although different understandings and practices of the religion are taught due to several reasons, differences among religious movements within the same religion are not taught.”

Criticisms against education on religion in Turkey can be discussed in the context of the criticisms against the approach adopted for this education. Seemingly major criticism against the approach is that it only deals with common points as the topics of study but it ignores some clear distinctions. Because ignoring these differences is not consistent with the fact that there can be distinct interpretations of the religion.

¹⁹ Yıldız Kızılabdullah& Tuğrul Yürük, “Din Eğitimi Modelleri Çerçevesinde Türkiye’deki Din Eğitimi Üzerine Genel Bir Değerlendirme” *Dini Araştırmalar Dergisi*, Eylül-Aralık 2008, C.11, p. 32-40..

The other criticism is that in this model, learners are taught the common points but after the course, they may come across religious differences in their daily life. This situation does not encourage mutual respect and tolerance values and therefore, the course provides a pattern that is not consistent with real life experiences.

Bilgin provides the following statement in regard to these criticisms against the approach adopted for education on religion: “.... Is it more appropriate for children to acquire experiences being aware of the differences in their classroom given that they live in a country with people having different religious orientations and cultures instead of having educated in separate classrooms where students with the same religious orientation and cultures attend the same class?” After asking this question, Bilgin explains how it should be achieved: “Programs of primary classes can be organized focusing on common beliefs and behavior rules of all religions without dealing with details of religions and various religious orientations. Programs of older students, on the other hand, again includes those with different religious beliefs , but in this case religions and religious movements are introduced as topic of study and differences resulting from these distinct religious orientations are emphasized. Thus, it is further emphasized that believers attempt to achieve the same goal using different ways and that being respectful is needed for such differences.”²⁰

It should be noted that the model of education on religion in Turkey is regarded as inefficient and should be supported through a

²⁰ Beyza Bilgin, *Mezheper ve Dinlerarası Eđitim ve İşbirliđi*, AÜİFD, C. 39. Pp.1-25.

model of cross religious orientations. In our culture, such religious orientations are not perceived as distinct religions but as different interpretations of the same religion. Therefore, there is no sharp borders among these religious orientations. Thus, the reason for the selection of such an approach in the program that is currently implemented is based on this fact. However, although religious movements within the same religion are ways of interpreting the religion, ignoring the differences in them reminds us the criticisms mentioned above. The program currently implemented has another characteristic that is closely related to changing global conditions. It is that this program is also extended to religions. This condition is a prerequisite for being tolerant for different religions, having tendency to be informed about other religions, being respectful for other religions and for being universal.

Specifically, the program states that “the objectives are to provide the students with scientific knowledge about religion and ethics, to provide them with related knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, awareness and concepts following student-centered techniques”,²¹

The other objectives mentioned in the program are as follows: “to inform and make conscious the young generations about religion.” In other words, the course aims at providing the students with knowledge base and skills that they will employ throughout their life span.

These objectives adopted are being attempted to achieve through the use of constructivist approach and student-centered approach. According to these approaches, students should achieve these objectives

²¹ Ortaöğretim, 6-8.

themselves. Therefore, both similarities and differences among religious movements are emphasized. In this regard, program is consistent in terms of its religious and educational premises.

When education and instruction on religion in Turkey is analyzed based on the approach developed recently by Grimmitt and Hull that can be described as learning the religion, learning about religion and from religion, it can be argued as current education and instruction on religion in Turkey is close to one that is learning from religion. Given historical background of education and instruction on education in Turkey, all three approaches mentioned above can be seen in the educational system. The first period of the learning religion approach can be exemplified through activities towards teaching Islam. Islam from its inception has been developed in a pattern in which general educational-instructional activities are in the center of religious education. Particularly, during the periods of no boundary between the state and the religion (for instance, Ottoman period) education had completely religious character. Madrasahs (universities in current terms) that were responsible for education and included all disciplines had a religious character. This situation began to be modified through Tanzimat declaration and a series of new programs was introduced. Naturally, these new programs were delivered through newly established schools. Courses on religion was included in the programs in addition to other courses. However, religious character of education continued until recent times. Nevertheless, in current period of time, the learning from religion approach has been

adopted as a result of negative consequences of the former approach, namely learning religion approach.²²

Although there are indications that the learning from religion approach is adopted as a basic educational philosophy, the other two approaches also seem to have effects on the implementation of the program. The reasons for thinking that the learning from religion approach is more dominant in the educational practices in Turkey are briefly given as follows:

1. Consistent with the major characteristics of the learning from religion approach, courses on religion are regarded as a part of other, general education courses instead of having a separate position in the program.

2. The other characteristic of the learning from religion approach is that courses on religion contribute to the development of students. Therefore, courses on religion in Turkey have the objective of contributing to the students' personal, social, cultural developments.

3. The other major feature of the learning from religion approach is that students should establish their own ideas through interpreting and making sense of knowledge they acquire. Therefore, courses on religion in Turkey aim at training students who are questioning, have critical attitude and produce information.

Despite these statements, there are criticisms about courses on religion in Turkey in that these courses are based on only one religion and

²² See. M. Fatih Genç, İna Ter Avest See, Siebren Miedema, Wim Westerman, A conversational analysis of developments in religious education in Europe and Turkey, *British Journal of Religious Education*, CBRE 649346, Volume 34/2, pp.1-17, 2012.

even on a single religious orientation as argued in the decisions of European Human Rights Court and State Council. However, if the related programs are closely analyzed, these are not based on one religion. Although the knowledge about Islam is regarded as an objective for the courses on religion, the reasons for it are explicitly explained. More specifically, it is stated that Islam has deeper effects on language, culture, arts, traditions of the country. While achieving this objective, the students are given knowledge about these effects. Thus, these features of the program about courses on religion in Turkey indicate that the program includes some basic assumptions of the learning about religion approach.

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