

ONLINE RELIGION IN TURKEY: MORAL PHENOMENONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA YOUTUBE PREACHERS

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TÜRKİYE'DE ONLINE DİN: SOSYAL MEDYANIN AHLAKİ FENOMENLERİ YOUTUBE VAİZLERİ

Abstract

In today's context, YouTube has become one of the religious education centers that people follow on social media. Indeed, people can learn about religious teachings not only from books or traditional oral preachers but also from social media. The number of devout individuals actively using this platform and publishing video content is steadily increasing. Those who convey the ethical teachings of Islam to people on YouTube are modern phenomena in terms of discourse. Social media users do not get bored listening to them. These individuals utilize technological opportunities to the fullest extent. Their sound quality is flawless, and their visual effects are excellent. Their presentations are neither long nor complex. The videos they prepare consist of short, memorable, and concise content. This study problematizes the use of social media for religious purposes, investigating how these phenomena, referred to as social media preachers, utilize the YouTube application and the image they portray. This issue has become even more important during a period when Islam is portrayed negatively in Western social media. How religious teachings are transferred to the YouTube application; In the study, which sought answers to how the preachers' discourses on this point were created, the channels of the preachers with the highest number of followers on social media were examined. In the research conducted from the perspective of digital religion, the number of followers, program content, messages conveyed, target audience, discourse style, the common characteristics and the background of preachers like Serdar Tuncer, Bekir Develi, Hayati İnanç, and Saliha Erdim are examined. Discourse analysis technique is employed in the study. The results indicate that YouTube has given rise to new preachers who convey religious and ethical values in a media-oriented manner. The presence and impact of religious programs continue to attract attention not only on radio and television but also on social media platforms.

Keywords: Media and religion, Social media preacher, YouTube, Phenomenon.

Özet

Günümüzde YouTube özelinde sosyal medya insanların takip ettikleri dini öğrenim merkezlerinden biri haline gelmiştir. Nitekim insanlar sadece kitaplardan veya klasik sözlü anlatım yapan vaizlerden değil sosyal medyadan da dini bilgilerini öğrenebilmektedirler. Bu platformu aktif olarak kullanan ve video içerikler yayımlayan dindar kişilerin sayısı da giderek artmaktadır. YouTube'da insanlara İslam dininin ahlaki öğretilerini vaaz ederek anlatan bu kişiler söylem bağlamında metodolojileri modern olan fenomenlerdir. Sosyal medya kullanıcıları onları dinlerken sıkılmazlar. Bu kişiler teknolojik olanakları sonuna kadar kullanırlar. Ses kaliteleri kusursuzdur, görsel efektleri mükemmeldir. Sunumları uzun ve karmaşık değildir. Hazırladıkları videolar kısa, akılda kalıcı ve öz içeriklerden oluşmaktadır. İşte sosyal medyanın dini amaçlarla kullanılmasını sorunsallaştıran çalışma sosyal medya vaizi olarak nitelendirilen bu fenomenlerin YouTube uygulamasını nasıl kullandıklarını ve nasıl bir imaj çizdiklerini araştırmaktadır. Batı sosyal medyasında İslam dininin negatif gösterildiği bir dönemde bu husus daha da önemli hâle gelmiştir. YouTube uygulamasına dini öğretilerin nasıl aktarıldığına; vaizlerin bu noktadaki söylemlerinin nasıl oluşturulduğuna cevap arayan çalışmada sosyal medyada takipçi sayısı en çok olan vaizlerin kanalları incelenmiştir. Dijital din perspektifinden yürütülen çalışmada Serdar Tuncer, Bekir Develi, Hayati İnanç ve Saliha Erdim gibi vaizlerin takipçi sayısı, program içerikleri, verdikleri mesajlar, hedef kitle, söylem dili ve vaizliğin ardalanı incelenmektedir. Araştırmada söylem analizi tekniği kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar YouTube'un medyatik bir dille dini ve ahlaki değerleri aktaran yeni vaizler oluşturduğunu göstermiştir. Dini programların varlığı ve etkisi radyoda, televizyonda olduğu kadar sosyal medyada da ilgi görmeye devam etmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Medya ve din, Sosyal medya vaizi, YouTube, Fenomen.

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Introduction

Television, the internet, phones, radio, cinema, music, magazines, and newspapers—these represent merely the visible surface of the iceberg. Unless we live on a deserted island, we cannot escape the various forms of media communication technology. So, where do we begin to understand the pervasive media culture of our time? (Laughey, 2010). With the advent of interactive digital media, the world is increasingly evolving towards a more digital, interactive, and online direction (Griffey, 2022). Technology-based broadcasting has enveloped human life in the realms of television, cinema, economy, and art (Waldfoegel, 2022). Technological advancements have reshaped every concept, object, process, and structure in work, family, and personal life, necessitating their reconsideration (Swartz, 2021). There are two characteristics of individuals who cannot meet the average: hostility towards anything new and addiction after becoming acquainted with the new. Social media, the communication and socialization tool of our time, can lead users to develop addiction (Arutay, 2018). Furthermore, social media has the potential to create giants capable of directing and controlling society (Arthur, 2023).

In a globalizing world, media continues to increase in importance, and programs and broadcasters find audiences in every corner of the globe. The dissemination of knowledge and reaching all segments of society are crucial objectives for all types of information, including religious knowledge. Communication tools are crucial today for the dissemination of religious knowledge and the effective conduct of preaching and proselytizing activities in the name of religion (Karataş, 2013: 299). The development of mass communication tools has facilitated the broader dissemination of messages to larger audiences. Thus, the use of technology by religion to deliver divine commandments to societies has emerged. This trend continues with the development and diversification of mass communication media. During this process, it is observed that religion is represented in the media in forms suitable for its characteristics and culture (Düzcan, 2020: 43). Social media has created a virtual communication

space, altering the direction of communication between individuals and their surroundings. The inevitable effects of religion and media on each other are apparent. The digitalization of data generated by modern life has also changed religious life and religious communication on social media. The ability for individuals with religious sensitivities who identify themselves as devout to spread their religious thoughts on social media, considered as popular culture, has paved the way for popular religiosity or social media religiosity (Oyman, 2016: 125).

In contemporary times, in addition to scholars, a popular preacher without official religious duties can deliver sermons without leading prayers or issuing fatwas. The roles of religious authority have become even more complex with the rise of television and the internet, further complicated by social media tools (Kayseri, 2019: 77). Digital communication networks are used particularly by social media producers for preaching purposes (Nisa, 2018: 24). Conversely, the majority of Muslims accessing content on social media also use the internet as a source of religious knowledge (Solahudin & Fakhuroji, 2019: 11). Tools, evolving parallel to technology, have changed day by day, transitioning first to the internet and then to social media networks in a more specialized form. In our country, expressions of religion through electronic means began with the television culture, which was not easily embraced by religious communities and groups at first but was quickly adapted, then continued with internet pages, and now have reached a different level with social media networks (Dereli, 2018: 264-265).

At the present day, the features of social media, such as interactivity and hyper-textuality, enable us to reach unlimited information and interpretation. The world is witnessing the new stages of this adventure, which is growing according to the technical and technological possibilities of the current period. With the evolution of technology (Umunç, 2020: 1264; Çelik, 2023: 74; Koçyiğit, 2022; Namaz, 2022; Kutlu, 2022: 137), significant changes have been observed in contemporary religious experiences and preaching methods, which have taken on a digital na-

ture. With the opportunities offered by social media, preaching has gained an international identity, transcending national boundaries. At a time when discussions about new virtual worlds surpassing social media are underway, those actively involved in digital platforms are of great importance in terms of life and language, religious preaching, and invitation (Gündoğdu, 2023). Media positions religion within a media narrative. The truth of the media is its own truth; it is merely to touch and murmur it (Çamdereli, 2018a). Screens have numerous effects on human existence—physical, emotional, cognitive, and educational (Desmurget, 2022). Users of social media are not indifferent to religious-related shares and discourses, bringing religious beliefs and values into the social media environment. Perhaps the next stage of religious values and experiences in real life is taking place in the social media environment (Oyman, 2016: 162).

In the twentieth century, globalization, the rise of education (Koçyiğit & Koçyiğit, 2018: 19; Söğüt & Öngel, 2022: 667), and the accessibility of books and the internet have changed the effective role of religious scholars in transmitting knowledge. This has opened up new avenues for religious knowledge and reshaped the number and types of religious authorities in modern society (Floden, 2016: 144). Terms like television preaching or media preaching, resulting from the collaboration between religion and media, have gained popularity in recent years as a universal phenomenon seen by social scientists as a “return to the sacred.” A new era began with the use of media to fulfill the preaching mission of religion. The pursuit of technological developments, which have become imperative for the age, has led to a transformation in the traditional perception of preaching (Şimşek, 2019: 123). A specific popular preacher group characterized by the widespread use of modern media tools has emerged (Floden, 2016: iii). These preachers have increased their presence on social media to counter the widespread influence of rigid teachings (Dwicaş, 2017).

Today, as digital technology appears with its digital communication dimension, preaching has also become digital. Whoever speaks or

listens in the context of spirituality is now inevitably considered in terms of digital preaching and its recipients. Media preachers, whether they like it or not, have begun to see themselves in the digital realm and, like all their audiences, have deeply felt the siege of digitization. Whatever is encompassed by spirituality on earth now appears minimized on digital platforms. Media preaching continues to evolve and shape itself according to the medium (Çamdereli, 2018b: 775). Based on this premise, this study examines social media preachers with high follower rates, nationally recognized prominence, and a commitment to conveying religious and ethical values to various societal segments. Discourse analysis technique is employed in the research, focusing on the latest technological developments in Islam. The study investigates how religion is taught through preachers in the virtual world.

Social Media Preachers

In today's world, the media functions as a marketplace. It operates under a free-market economy where programs are a kind of commodity sold in this market. The customers in this market are the viewers, while the sellers are the programmers or speakers. There is every kind of product available in this market, and naturally, every product has its buyers. If you have a product in this market, it will find its buyers. Rather than struggling against the market, it is necessary to bring good and alternative products to the media market, market and present the product well (Karataş, 2013: 312). While there are many typologies and dimensions of religiosity, the prevalence of digitization in every aspect of our lives in recent times has intertwined individuals with the virtual. Social media and its arguments are the leading platforms of the virtual world. For this reason, individuals now conduct their friendships, advertisements, arts, and even their religiosity through virtual platforms (Özyiğit, 2023: 35).

When communication technologies come together with motivations such as spreading religion, reaching more people, accessing religious knowledge and resources, and reflecting religious identity, interactions between religiosity and communication technologies become inevitable. Accordingly, it is possi-

le to say that there is a tendency towards the concepts of communication disciplines, especially in defining religiosity: 'Media religiosity', 'prime-time religiosity', 'virtual religiosity', 'social media religiosity', 'selfie-religiosity', 'techno-religiosity', 'digitized religiosity', 'digital religiosity', 'online religiosity'. These concepts imply that religiosity is shaped and transformed according to communication technologies and address the reflections of the digitization process in the context of religiosity (Çuhadar, 2021: 67).

The efforts of people who have come to the fore in almost every religious circle or who are directly accepted as the leaders of that religious group to convey their views on religious issues to others, that is, to "preach the religion", through both individual and corporate social media accounts are remarkable. This rainbow-like diversity in religious/Islamic understandings and approaches is much more clearly visible on social media networks, and individuals can access all these different perspectives within seconds on fluid platforms. As a result, users either find support for their adopted religious views there or shape their own religious identities based on what they hear and see there (Dereli, 2018: 265).

Although not scientific, in terms of providing information about how it is perceived by the public, one of the definitions of the term "media preacher" in the internet media is as follows: "Religious figures who engage in discussions, host programs, and present various religious topics to their audience on television." This term has emerged as a new concept due to the media's allocation of time to religious programs in recent years, specifically referring to those who professionally produce religious programs by collaborating with television networks. We can say that the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı's approach and handling of the issue means that the term "media preaching" refers to all teachers who speak in the media, with both their positive and negative aspects, or at least that it has made an effort to understand how and why this term should be used. Considering the existence of numerous religious leaders and preachers worldwide who primarily preach their religions to their own people through the press and broadcast and tell others about

it in an orderly manner on television, it becomes clear that the term "media preacher" should be considered much more broadly. In light of these observations, the term "media preacher" can be defined as "a term used for religious people who talk about and present religious topics through media channels." Consequently, it is more appropriate to use the term media preacher in this sense (Karataş, 2013: 298-299). Since media preachers are examined as an example on social media in the study, these preachers are referred to as social media preachers.

Media preaching emerged within the period it began and rose to meet the need for religious knowledge, to keep people's beliefs alive, and to support the fulfillment of religious duties. It seeks to take up more space on religious platforms, particularly in terms of concepts that ensure the integrity of societies, such as worship, faith, belief, and creating a moral and exemplary individual (Şimşek, 2019: 125). Popular media preachers actively support other forms of religious authority, accepting their secondary roles within the existing authority structure. They state that they are not religious scholars and do not have the ability to issue fatwas or legal judgments. Therefore, these popular preachers see themselves not as direct religious authorities but rather as moral guides or counselors (Floden, 2016: 145). While not covering all media preachers, media preachers, due to their discussions on fundamental beliefs and morals encountered in daily life, state that the information they produce is useful. They address topics such as educational reform instead of jurisprudential rules, the role of women in society, and emphasize how Islam is a key concept for an activist lifestyle. They believe that if individuals change, Muslim communities will change, and ultimately, the world will change (Kayseri, 2019: 80).

According to Kara (2016), scholars and teachers have made significant contributions to the modernization process in all regions of the Islamic world. The contributions of scholars to contemporary Islamic thought, the Islamic movement, new (modernist) thought and institutions have been much greater than expected or anticipated. There are also madrasah scholars, some of whom are mem-

bers of Sufism, who voice the traditional understanding of religion, which also has media-oriented features, against the majority of new theologians. Lastly, from the perspective of researcher Tuve Buchmann Floden, Muslim media preachers targeting a young audience have two important purposes. The first is to revive interest in religion and thus alleviate the stricter methods of traditional scholars. The second is to achieve faith-based development both individually and at the community level. Thus, they make a call to restore the Muslim world to its former glory (2016: 65).

Methodology

The diversification of media tools and their increasing accessibility have led to the gradual integration of media into our daily lives. All our activities, such as learning, entertainment, and socializing, are now intertwined with the media. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find an area where the media is not active. Moreover, thanks to smartphones, we all carry our own media tools in our pockets, produce our own media content through social media platforms, and can decide with a touch what we want to see or not. While social media has become so decisive in our lives, it is not difficult to predict that it also has various effects on our beliefs (Kaplan, 2024). The number of accounts, pages, and blogs sharing religious content on social networking sites is increasing day by day. When these pages and blogs are examined, it is seen that there are numerous accounts covering various topics from verses to hadiths. These blogs have quite a large number of followers, with some having more than a million members (Oyman, 2016: 144-145). Because in today's digital age, many Muslims use social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to express their religiosity (Husein & Slama, 2018: 80).

In this study, which investigates media preachers using social media as a tool to teach individuals moral values through videos, discourse analysis technique was preferred as the method. Michel Foucault (2001), who problematizes the living and speaking subject and emphasizes the necessity of understanding discourse and the units that constitute discourse with this analysis, has

emphasized that discourse, although discontinuous, should be understood through techniques such as rationality-madness, true-false oppositions, which are perceived as a continuous process. At this point, the role of an intellectual should not be to offer prescriptions for discourse units but to reinterpret and problematize habitual thinking styles and evaluate common assumptions (Foucault, 1987). Discourse establishes practice and produces 'useful' systems that generate meaning (Mills, 2023). From here, the discourse language of preachers on the examined YouTube channels was researched. In order to analyze the building blocks of the discourse created during the research process, the following units were used as references: Channel name, number of subscribers, name of the video program, content of the program, theme, target audience, preacher's style, diction and oratory, preacher's storytelling, use of poetry, warnings and admonitions, video and color quality, sound quality, setting and decor, amateur or professionalism of the accounts, sustainability of the channel, viewing rates, and the background of preaching.

The universe of the study consists of media preachers, and the sample consists of YouTube preachers. How religious teachings are transferred to the YouTube application; In the study, which sought answers to how the preachers' discourses on this point were created and the common characteristics, the channels of the preachers with the highest number of followers on social media were examined. The videos of Serdar Tuncer, Bekir Develi, Hayati İnanç, and Saliha Erdim, who were examined as YouTube preachers, between May 2023 and May 2024, were examined using random sampling technique. When a literature review is conducted, it is seen that there are very few studies focusing directly on social media preachers in Turkey. In the international context, it is observed that most studies on this topic have been conducted in Indonesia. Most of the studies in our country are shaped around television preaching. Therefore, this study is important in focusing on social media differently from others. Some national studies briefly mentioned here, investigating the relationship between social media and religion, are: Nurrullah Bora (2023) "Din Eğitiminin Referans

Noktası Olarak Sosyal Medya Vaizliği İstanbul Örneği", İsmail Kaplan (2023) "Sosyal Medya-da Dini İletişimin Medyatikleşmesi", Zeynep Kayseri (2019) "Sosyal Medya Vaizliği: Amerika ve Türkiye Örneği".

Analysis

The media has invaded many aspects of daily life, including influencing religious attitudes and behaviors. In this context, there are many "Islamic influencers" in the media, individuals who attract attention with their Islamic-themed posts, have a large number of followers, and are perceived as opinion leaders on social media. These individuals are known as social media influencers who have a high number of followers and content that is constantly shared by their followers, and they can influence their followers in consumption, social responsibility, or other initiatives. In this sense, many social media influencers and blog owners who have visibility are considered opinion leaders for their followers. Islamic social media influencers are seen as social media users who attract attention with their Islamic-themed posts, have a large number of followers, and are perceived as opinion leaders (Özyiğit, 2023: 39). In this section, the YouTube videos of Serdar Tuncer, Bekir Develi, Hayati İnanç, and Saliha Erdim are analyzed in order.

Serdar Tuncer is a Turkish television programmer, writer, and poet born in Ankara in 1978. His background in media and religion is rich, as evidenced by his various television programs related to media and religion. For example, his program "Gecede Bir Gün" aired on Kanal A television was selected as the best TV cultural arts program of 2005. He also hosted the program "Yıldızdan Mahyalar" on Kanal A. In 2007, he hosted the program "Türkiye'de ve Avrupa'da Ramazan" on Kanal 1. During the Ramadan months of 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011, he hosted live iftar programs from the Topkapı Palace, which aired on TRT 1. He also prepared and hosted the program "Yitik Hazine" aired on Semerkand Radio every weekday. On TRT Haber, he co-hosted the program "Yeni Şeyler Söylemek La-

zım" with Uğur Işılak. In 2012, he hosted the program "Kalbe Düşünce" on Semerkand TV. In the Ramadan month of 2013, he hosted the program "Sahurdan Kalplere" on Kanal D. Later, he hosted the program "Başka Şeyler" on CNN Türk every Sunday from 10:00 PM to 11:00 PM. He resigned from CNN Türk on April 3, 2015, and has been writing columns for Yeni Şafak newspaper since October 8, 2015.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in religion worldwide. Due to this interest, there has been a significant increase in the number of religious programs in the media. Many local and national media outlets in our country broadcast numerous religious programs. Some of these programs have the potential to be watched everywhere and by everyone. Therefore, media preachers speaking on behalf of religion need to be more careful in terms of their stance and what they say to avoid misunderstanding and tarnishing their image. Especially in a period where Islam and Muslims are systematically associated with terrorism and violence in the Western world, this issue has become even more important (Karataş, 2013: 300). As social media allows for more moderate and critical discussions about religion, it has a greater capacity for spreading it. Sometimes, the expression of religion or religiosity on social media is equivalent to real-life religious practices and beliefs. Social media creates an unlimited space for communication. It enables greeting hundreds of people simultaneously, sharing joys, being aware of people's needs, providing help, and spreading knowledge and morality. Additionally, social media plays an important role in disseminating religious understanding, conception, and activities in the modern world (Oyman, 2016: 140). In Serdar Tuncer's examined account, he often begins his programs with greetings. The phrase "Selamün aleyküm, erenler ve dahi erenlere gönül verenler, onları sevenler, laf ettirmeyenler" has become an integral part of his videos. The addressing style of this preacher, who mostly addresses a young audience, establishes a connection with the past. In a way, it is in the form of updating past sermon

¹ <https://www.haber7.com/biyografi/haber/3215973-serdar-tuncer>

jargons. Tuncer (Haber7, 2023),¹ who graduated from Imam-Hatip high school and enrolled in three different universities after high school, attributes knowledge charisma to the subjects he describes by establishing a referential relationship with his previously published books and poems in his videos. Some of his books include "Sen İstanbul Kokardın" (1997), "Aynalar" (2003), "Satır Arası Hikâyeler" (2005), "Delilim Yok Kalbimden Başka" (2018), "Sermayem Yok Derdimden Başka" (2018), and "Hiçbir Zaman Hiçbir Şey" (2019). His poetry albums include "Sen İstanbul Kokardın" (2009), "Bir Hilal Uğruna" (2011), and "Şiirin Sultanları" (2013).

The YouTube account named "Serdar Tuncer" has 204 thousand subscribers and contains 295 videos. As of the date of the research, the videos have received a total of 20,220,155 views. The profile picture of the channel shows a jacket and tie, adding credibility to the delivered preachings. As indicators of mediatized religion, videos such as "Abdurrahim Karakoç'tan Mihriban Şiirinin Bestelenme Hikayesi" have garnered 553 thousand views, "Aşk Dediğin Böyle Olmalı (Çobanın Aşkı)" have reached 447 thousand views, and "Kahve İçerken Azrail ile Karşılaşan Hocanın Hikayesi" has received 351 thousand views.

According to Mete Çamdereli (2018b: 776-777), who has conducted significant studies on topics such as what mediatized religion is, what functions it fulfills, and how religion is digitized in the cyber space (Okutan, 2019: 157), language and discourse are important issues. Language is a passive transformer in itself, while discourse is an active transformer. Language accumulates culture passively, but feels the need for discourse in the process of transmission. Discourse reveals the way language is used. When religion expresses itself through mediatized discourse, it generally stays within the framework of mediatized discourse, thus shaping itself according to the discursive requirements of media language. Religious discourse does not disappear; it just becomes mediatized (Çamdereli, 2018b: 776-777). Digitization moves religious life towards virtual space. People perform their religious beliefs and rituals in the virtual environment. In this age of technology where virtual reality multiplies within itself, it is un-

thinkable for religious life not to be affected by this development. Although initially, devout people may not have been enthusiastic about technological religious programs, over time they have been unable to resist digitization and have decided to use it to their advantage. They have transformed their religious discourse and attitudes into the digital realm (Özyiğit, 2023: 28). Today, the quality of being a Muslim is closely related to worships such as prayer, fasting and pilgrimage, as well as the attitude shown when alone with the internet. Behaviors, likes, shares and friendships displayed on the internet and social media platforms are a part of Islamic life (Kıraşal, 2020).

Serdar Tuncer sometimes uses tespih as an accessory in his videos. Displaying the tasbeih, which is a part of Turkish-Islamic culture, on screen evokes past religious experiences in the eyes of his followers. His content is not limited to specific times such as Ramadan or sacred days and nights but is spread throughout the year. Furthermore, instead of adhering to a strict teaching model, he touches on many current and entertaining topics. Therefore, despite having 204 thousand subscribers, there are videos on his channel that have received 851 thousand views. Tuncer, who employs storytelling in his messages, receives positive feedback from his followers for his ability to interpret real-life events and draw lessons from them. Thus, positioning himself as a religious figure who combines tradition and modernity on social media.

Social media preachers encourage their viewers to seek religious knowledge while also motivating them to take action and improve themselves and their communities through storytelling (Floden, 2016). They ensure that the uploaded content is presented in a clear and concise manner that appeals to Muslim viewers (Dwicaahyo, 2017). These preachers regularly respond to the needs of their online followers (Slama, 2017). For example, the video titled "Kelami Efendinin İbretlik Hikayesi" is a continuation of the video "Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Hızır'ı (a.s.) Görmek İsterse", providing religious narratives that utilize various verbal, textual, and visual expression forms, including poetic language (Hew, 2018: 61). Tuncer, who carries out his

preaching through the media, has a website named www.serdartuncer.com.tr¹ as well as his YouTube channel.

Preachers who prioritize invitation and preaching to Islam as their primary duty (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018) often have technical teams that work together with them during both the preparation and broadcasting stages of video production (Hew, 2018): 61). In this context, the combination of two developments seems important: the main actor and the technical team. Serdar Tuncer, considered a social media preacher, sometimes converses with his technical team during broadcasts, making jokes with them. At times, he hums folk songs, adding both naturalness and color to his videos. The YouTube channel "MyMecra," which has 907 thousand subscribers, is associated with Tuncer. Tuncer's videos are filmed in a studio-like, specially designed space. The fact that they are broadcast in 4K resolution contributes to their watchability. His poetic persona and the poetry videos he creates showcase the emotional state of this social media phenomenon to his viewers. Moreover, these preachers often recommend their followers to listen to and follow another preacher. Establishing credibility, reliability, and truthfulness in the virtual realm by demonstrating their Muslim identity, Tuncer recommends listening to another preacher's poetry in the content titled "Ya Ebu Leheb iman etseydi".

Bekir Develi, a Turkish television presenter and writer, was born in 1975 in Germany. He hails from Bielefeld, Germany, born to a housewife mother and a tailor father. He completed his primary education in Germany but returned to Turkey with his family due to personal reasons. He finished his secondary and high school education in Adana. Later, he completed his university education by studying German Language Teaching at Samsun 19 Mayıs University. In addition to being a TV presenter and writer, an examination of his background reveals that Develi has also worked as a radio announcer and theater actor.

With acting and stage training, he has hosted nearly 600 episodes of travel, documentary, and game shows on various channels. Develi hosted the Ramadan Sevinci program broadcast on TRT 1 for many years. In November 2018, he penned his first book, "Allah Cümle'mizi Korusun". In February 2020, he published another book titled "Fabrika Ayarları" with another social media preacher, Hayati İnanç. In 2021, he signed books such as "Herkes için Siyer" in two volumes with Muhammed Emin Yıldırım and "Aile içinde" with Hayati İnanç.

Currently, Bekir Develi hosts programs titled "Peynir Gemisi" and "Gönle Düşen" on his YouTube channel, where he invites guests and shares videos consisting of conversations and short stories. In 2021, Develi's channel ranked second in the "Shorts Content Creators" category on YouTube's top 10 list for 17 countries, including Turkey (Yenişafak, 2021)³. Develi laid the groundwork for social media preaching through his television presentations, adopting a professional presentation style. He presents himself on YouTube with a well-equipped background filled with experiences. Some of the programs he hosted on television include "Annemin Yemeği", "Keşif Zamanı", "Kim Bilecek?", "Ramazan Sevinci", "Dünyada Ramazan", "İstanbul'da Ramazan", "Gez Göz Arpacık", "Bayram Şekeri", "Sütlü Kahve", "Arife Tarif", "Anadolu Gezginini", "Seçmen Ne Der?", "El Alem Ne Der?", "Kardeşlik Sofrası".

In Turkey today, there are many social media preachers who engage in preaching and guidance activities on religious matters. Although the educational backgrounds and organizational cultures of Islamic preachers may vary (Rosidi, 2021: 42), they all aim to correctly convey the Islamic religion (Bora, 2023: 49). Develi, who delivers religious teachings in a conversational style on YouTube, emphasizes the power and blessings of conversation. He believes that conversation is the expression of the heart's desires. Conversation is the heart expressing itself with all its simplicity.

² <http://www.serdartuncer.com.tr/> (Date of access: 12.05.2024).

³ <https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/youtube-2021nin-en-populerlerini-acikladi-zirvenin-ortagi-bekir-develi-oldu-3724107>

Conversation brings words to life, gives life, and nurtures life. The whole point is to touch someone's heart (İnanç & Develi, 2020), to beautify our lives with what we learn from the Islamic religion and to transfer good qualities to our lives (Yıldırım & Develi, 2021).

It is known that Develi organized a channel called "Dombak TV" specially prepared for children, similar to Tuncer's "MyMecra" connection. It can be said that Develi has created a corporate social media preaching environment at this point. Besides being an Islamic preacher representing a Muslim on social media and explaining the Islamic religion, he also appears as a producer (AA, 2020)⁴. His career as a media producer makes Turkish and Islamic preachers visible on the international stage and increases their number of followers. Bekir Develi, who manages to create a spiritual atmosphere for viewers with both his smiling face and sincere attitude, has also performed stand-up shows he has written and staged. One of the secrets of Bekir Develi's success, who is active in all areas of communication (Karar, 2020)⁵, is related to his production in many areas related to communication in his past. Develi has a style that entertains viewers on his YouTube channel. He delivers his message by adding joy to the topics he discusses. His followers love Develi for his entertaining and humorous personality. Invited to the 'Söyleşi Günleri' Program at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University as an author (NEVÜ, 2021)⁶, Develi also participated in the 'Conversation Days' program organized by Nevşehir Municipality Culture and Social Affairs Directorate (Sabah, 2022)⁷, making social media preaching more permanent with physical programs.

Develi, whose audience is generally young people, was invited to the Youth Meeting program organized by Marmara University Yenilikçi Genç Öncü Club and Bursa Uludağ University Yeni Bir Hayat Community. Stu-

dents from both universities showed great interest in the program (Marmara University, 2017)⁸. Social media preachers establish high-speed communication with users. Intimacy and sincerity bonds are formed between the preacher and the followers (Slama, 2017: 101). In their videos, online and visual preaching complements offline and textual preaching rather than replacing them (Hew, 2018: 61). They narrate examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as agenda setters and motivators. They encourage actions based on religion. In this context, they direct public attention to education, child rearing, and social issues (Floden, 2016: 145). In the examined "Bekir Develi" YouTube account, there are podcasts named "Herkes için Siyer Programı", "Çocuklar için Siyer", "Bekir Develi ile Peynir Gemisi", "Dijital İntifada", "Merve Gülcemal ile Ortak Akıl", "Benim Ramazanım", "Çocuklar için Kudüs", "Bekir Develi ile Gönle Düşen (Kısa Hikayeler)", "Sözü Yormadan", "Hitabet ve Diksiyon Eğitimi".

Bekir Develi, who can be cited as an example of charismatic religious preachers in terms of his impact on individuals and his number of followers (Gendron, 2016: 44), has 1.33 million followers on YouTube. The image and style of these preachers are based on the idea of ordinariness. Criticisms directed towards them claim that they are far from being ordinary and have a kind of authority. The size of their audience indicates their authority. While their interactive and daily conversational styles attract the attention of followers, their ideas also resonate with people (Floden, 2016: 143). This strategy, which includes speaking style, viewing rates, and everyday life stories embellished with funny elements, is proven in the number of viewers on YouTube, attracting millions of viewers (Wibowo, 2019: 339).

There have been 962 videos published on the "Bekir Develi" YouTube channel. From its

⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/yapimci-ve-sunucu-bekir-develiden-evde-kal-cagrisi/1787>

⁵ <https://www.karar.com/bekir-develi-kimdir-kac-yasinda-ve-nereli-trt1-iftar-programi-sunucu>

⁶ <https://nevsehir.edu.tr/tr/30985>

⁷ <https://www.sabah.com.tr/nevsehir/2022/03/08/fabrika-ayari-programi-nevsehirde>

⁸ <https://www.marmara.edu.tr/news/bekir-develi-ile-genclik-bulusmasi>

establishment in 2013 to 2024, the channel has garnered a total of 200,116,955 million views. As an example, the video "İslamla Tanıştı Hayatı Değişti | Bekir Develi ile Peynir Gemisi | Julia Sena Ymanoğlu" has received 4 million views. Another video in which they presented with another social media preacher, Saliha Erdim, titled "Kışının Kalitesi Ailedeki Halinden Belli Olur! | Bekir Develi ile Peynir Gemisi | Saliha Erdim" has reached 2.3 million viewers.

It is observed that religion has found a wide place for itself in social media. Despite the different developments in the post-modern world, the coexistence of secular life and religion in the same environment demonstrates that religion continues to exist in all aspects of society (Oyman, 2016: 164). Religious content sharing is easy and common on the internet, allowing discussions and teachings of religion to take place easily (Özyiğit, 2023: 39). When evaluated considering its relationship with religion, the use of religion by various individuals, groups, etc., in the media is extremely useful, economic, effective, and positive for the users. Because with a radio or television broadcast, a preacher, leader, or religious group can reach more people than they could throughout their entire existence. In this context, it is observed that many religious groups or preachers have started to make full use of these opportunities today (Akkaya, 2018: 601-602).

Digital media, which has been examined as platforms that enable new forms of religiosity with recent developments (Slama, 2018), popularizes religious concepts, beliefs and values on a mass level. It even grants them widespread visibility by making them popular (Aydın, 2024). Mediated processes present the religious in certain popular forms through cultural codes and the technical possibilities of communication. Media, with its technical qualities and the cultural processes it encompasses, serves as an important criterion in evaluating social events and phenomena. Indeed, numerous examples, ranging from politics to economics, literature to art, and other everyday practices, illustrate how these qualities and potential can be adapted to individuals and organizations according

to media logic. In this regard, mediatization emerges as a concept referring to how anything can adapt to media logic (Eken, 2020).

Hayati İnanç, examined as the third social media preacher, has 562 thousand subscribers. His YouTube channel contains 347 videos. His video titled "Başarının Sırrı | Hayati İnanç ile Söz Arasında - Bölüm 69 #Hayatiinanç" has garnered 2 million views. Saliha Erdim, examined as the last social media preacher, addresses her target audience through the "Saliha Erdim – Hanımefendi" YouTube channel. Saliha Erdim, a specialist family counselor, compiles videos on education, family, etc., published on her official YouTube channel. The content consists of television and radio programs, seminars, trainings, and live broadcasts. The channel has 332 thousand subscribers and 311 videos. Her video titled "Bir İnsan Hayatını Nasıl Güzelleştirebilir? | Saliha Erdim ile Aile Okulu" has obtained 868 thousand views.

It is necessary to see how mediated discourse constructs and shapes a religious figure. Today, there are as many people on earth with religious affiliations, and some of these individuals stand out in the digital world. Generations are now learning their religious teachings from a digital educator who stands closer than a mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather (Çamdereli, 2018b: 777). Here, we are talking about a digital mentor. These popular preachers, who attract the attention of Muslim youth, suggest topics that need to be paid attention to in society. Subsequently, they can encourage their listeners to take action for social change (Floden, 2016: 145).

When the background of his preaching is examined, Hayati İnanç was born in Denizli in 1961. He graduated from Istanbul University Faculty of Law. In addition to being a lawyer, he has worked as a publisher, manager, teacher, and presenter. He prepared and presented the program "Can Veren Pervaneler" on TRT channel. In addition to the books he published with Develi, he has also published the following books: "Can Veren Pervaneler", "Can Veren Pervaneler 2", "Can Veren Pervaneler 3", "İşte Geldik Gidiyoruz" (hayatiinanc.com, 2017)⁹. İnanç's successful preaching

⁹ <https://www.hayatiinanc.com/>

and YouTube fame have been built on his sympathetic demeanor and ever-smiling face, as well as his recitation of classical Ottoman poetry.

Saliha Erdim, born in 1956 in Samsun, continues to work as a family educator and counselor today. She gives conferences and seminars related to her field both domestically and internationally. She continues her "Aile Okulu" programs on Moral FM with her husband (Hayatyayinlari.com, 2019)¹⁰. Erdim, a cognitive and behavioral therapist, graduated from the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Newport University and completed her master's degree in the same department. Her published books include: "Ailemde Huzur İstiyorum", "Eşimi Anlamak İstiyorum", "Kardeş Kiskançlığı", "Kendime Yardım Etmek İstiyorum". Her conversations on child, spouse, and family themes are among the fundamental reasons for her becoming a social media preacher. Additionally, Erdim's warm approach to her followers, her efforts to solve marital problems, and her efforts to create a healthy society are considered among the reasons for her success as a social media preacher. As a family counselor, Erdim has written articles on children and family issues in "Mektup", "Ferzan", "Beyan", "Yenidünya", "Hanımefendi", and other magazines. She has served as the chief editor and editor of the "Hanımefendi" magazine (Vavtv, 2023)¹¹.

Religion has been a longstanding phenomenon in human history. Religion, which is in a desired or undesirable part of life, is like flesh and nail with the technological elements created by human beings. Indeed, religious texts have been present in the earliest forms of media such as radio and books. Media and religion nourish each other. While religious content disseminates through media to reach the public, those who follow religious texts support the media in return (Özyiğit, 2023: 30). Social media platforms provide an opportunity for social media preachers to understand the interests and needs of young people and to establish direct contact with them. Social media preachers are knowled-

geable about the worldviews of young people and influence them by addressing these views. The interests and needs of the target audience affect the topic choices of media preachers. By explaining contemporary issues with religious examples, preachers contribute to the rejuvenation of Islam's aims. Consequently, they revitalize interest in Islam within society (Floden, 2016: 83).

With the capabilities of social media (Söğüt, 2022: 668), it is possible to encounter many individuals who have gained fame worldwide with their invitation and preaching videos and are almost welcomed as stars in the countries they visit (Eken, 2020). These individuals, who can also be called YouTubers, are social media users who shoot videos with a phone or camera, edit their clips, add effects, and share online videos, thus gaining a fan base. In some cases, they also engage in directing, beautifying their videos with editing software, creating YouTube channels, adjusting access settings, and ultimately gaining followers (Willoughby, 2023). Additionally, these phenomena users continuously utilize social media platforms to keep their communication channel open with their followers (Gulmammadzada, 2020).

As for the common characteristics of social media preachers, it can be said based on research findings that: The preachers present their content within the framework of religion in the social media atmosphere. They undertake the role of a preacher in terms of explaining and disseminating religion. Their presentations are fluent and understandable. They demonstrate similar sincere reflexes in their topic presentations. Their vocal tones are at levels that psychologically comfort the target audience. There are no pushy, high, or harsh vocal tones. The topics they touch upon are illuminating rather than confusing. They possess sufficient knowledge on the religious subjects they discuss. The verses or sayings they read on screen are in accordance with their original form. While addressing social issues, they also touch upon current topics. For example, if the content is publis-

¹⁰ <https://www.hayatyayinlari.com/yazar/salihaerdem.html#:~:text=H%C3%A2len%2C%20>

¹¹ <https://www.vavtv.com.tr/programlar/yuzler-ve-izler/saliha-erdem-i-yuzler-ve-izler>

hed during days considered sacred in terms of religion, the hosts shape their topics accordingly.

Conclusion

According to the research focusing on the use of social media for religious purposes, social media preachers have created a digital religious discourse in the virtual realm. This discourse is not perceived as harmful in the technological age and does not contradict the core tenets of religion. Religious understanding has not evolved in the construction of discourse. The examined accounts are structured around a theme that combines tradition and modernity. While preserving the core values of the Islamic faith, the narrative style used reflects the contemporary language of youth.

These accounts are managed by professional teams, ensuring high-quality camera shots, sound, and successful angles. Although they may differ in some aspects, the fundamental topics addressed by active social media preachers primarily revolve around the ethical teachings of Islam. Messages promoting social improvement and well-being are among the common objectives of these accounts. These preachers, who encourage their followers to practice, play an active role in social development and progress. Topics such as respecting trust, building lasting friendships not based on personal gain, societal solidarity and cooperation, respecting parents, showing love to children, forgiveness, and maintaining love and respect between spouses are among the fundamental themes of the YouTube content they produce.

For example, Serdar Tuncer, considered a popular social media preacher, focuses mainly on narrating religious stories. He frequently mentions the words of past religious figures in his broadcasts, offering simple and concise solutions to social issues such as community consciousness, gender relations, child rearing, and societal degeneration from a faith perspective. Thus, he utilizes social media as a means of preaching, delivering warnings to his followers through lived real-life examples while maintaining a serious yet warm and intimate approach in front of the camera, guiding them positively.

Similarly, Bekir Develi captivates his audience just like Serdar Tuncer with his sympathetic demeanor and humorous style, often incorporating personal anecdotes into his content. The core topics of his videos include an individual's position in the Islamic community, religious identity formation, family, ethics, faith, and marriage. His portrayal on social media, like other examined preachers, is modern yet uncompromising in terms of morality and the lifestyle required by his faith. He embodies a Muslim identity integrated with the requirements of the era while adhering to Islamic directives, conveying important messages. Hayati İnanç presents his content in a cheerful manner, often laughing or smiling, thereby influencing his followers through his amiable demeanor. Saliha Erdim, on the other hand, adopts a warm and genuine approach, creating an impression among viewers that she is one of them.

These preachers sometimes collaborate, as seen in the "Medeniyet şehri" channel, where Hayati İnanç and Bekir Develi meet in the video titled "Hata Bazen İnsanı Cennete Götürür". These preachers get along well, complimenting each other and avoiding contradiction, gossip, or disrespect towards one another's narratives. They avoid competition among themselves, convincing their audience that they engage in this work solely for the sake of divine approval. Their visuals inspire trust, and their speeches are memorable. The examples they provide while explaining a topic are designed to facilitate understanding. They avoid using slang or speaking in a manner inconsistent with social norms. Their choice of words fosters a sense of warm communication with their followers, enabling them to identify with their audience and fostering a bond of affection. This established bond turns viewers into followers on social media. The basis of the effect and reaction phenomenon lies in the credibility of the social media preachers examined.

They do not evade questions, structuring their responses within the technological atmosphere of social media while maintaining an intellectual stance. They provide information from books but prefer simple and straightforward language that people can understand. For example, Serdar Tuncer's

stories are both memorable and educational for viewers. Relating a previously experienced historical event when discussing a topic helps viewers grasp the subject. Merely reciting book sentences can eventually bore social media users and even lead them to abandon watching the video or stop following the channel altogether. Therefore, social media preachers are required to present their topics in an engaging, fluid, and understandable manner. Since social media prioritizes visual appeal, these preachers incorporate special effects and texts with unique colors into their video titles. There are no breaks in their topic presentations because these YouTube phenomena have a wide range of religious knowledge content. They rarely issue fatwas on matters of faith or worship. However, they are knowledgeable about almost every religious topic due to their personal histories filled with religious experiences.

They have a sympathetic and charismatic appearance. For instance, although Serdar Tuncer and Hayati İnançoğlu appear on broadcasts in casual attire, they maintain a well-groomed and clean appearance. They avoid excess in their clothing. Natural mistakes, such as slips of the tongue during broadcasts, are not edited out. They strive to maintain naturalness to highlight professionalism without compromising authenticity. Although minor glitches may occasionally occur in videos, they do not detract from the content; instead, they make the videos appear more natural. Their choice of settings is modest, preferring simplicity. They do not make special efforts to endear themselves, as their personalities already endear them to their audience. They project a warm and familial character. For example, Hayati İnançoğlu appears as a compassionate father, Serdar Tuncer and Bekir Develi as the elder brothers of the house, and Saliha Erdim as the compassionate mother of the social media family.

The efforts of these preachers to influence people are not apparent; their moderate approach naturally impacts viewers. They do not engage in extremes, have no personal obsessions, and refrain from criticizing others. Even if they do criticize, they do not engage in polemics by revealing names and identities. Additionally, they avoid discussing

boring topics and serve as a source of motivation for people. In terms of the relationship between social life and religion, they adopt a middle-ground approach. They do not appear overly religious or exhibit the profile of a lazy individual who does not engage in worship. Instead, they foster an appreciation for religious topics. They warn against societal decline and individuals straying from faith in a polite manner without causing offense. There is always a hidden message in their videos that resonates with each viewer, both socially and individually. The examined social media phenomenon preachers have shattered the image of a rigid and stern knowledge, unlike certain negative preacher profiles on television. Instead, they present a warmer, down-to-earth, knowledgeable approach, avoiding a cold demeanor. This approach prevents their broadcasts from becoming dull and gloomy from the viewers' perspective. This somewhat unconventional approach to classical religious discourse is seen to yield positive results in the context of digitization, media, and religion. In today's digital world, where most things have become virtual, it does not seem possible to convey religious teachings through social media.

Serdar Tuncer and Hayati İnançoğlu are particularly popular among young people, while Saliha Erdim is favored by female followers. However, not only young people listen to Hayati İnançoğlu, nor are only women among Saliha Erdim's followers. One of the underlying factors behind their fame is the acceptance and affection of the audience, leading them to follow and admire these preachers. These preachers are not imitated like pop stars. People do not aspire to dress or act like them. Instead, they draw life lessons from their moral teachings. Because the examined preachers do not put themselves at the forefront, they focus on religious topics in their videos. They do not advertise any products or services and do not deviate from religious topics in their content. With these characteristics, they have evoked a sense of sincerity among social media users. Followers do not try to emulate them but rather strive to resemble the religious characters they depict. Thus, these preachers have assumed the role of a mediator between religion and the individual, serving as a bridge for the transmis-

sion of religious teachings to society. While making religious concepts appealing, they do not intervene in the religious content but add their own touch to the presentation and discourse. This is one of the crucial points in effectively conveying moral teachings to people through social media. Rituals remain unchanged in YouTube channels; only the presentation style varies. They offer advice to people in a manner that does not impose or force compliance but encourages voluntary and sincere action.

In conclusion, social media has become a tool for spreading and conveying religion. YouTube, in particular, has become one of the educational centers for religious teachings for people. Individuals referred to as social media preachers have a sufficient level of religious education. They are individuals with credibility and persuasive ability, representing religion in its true sense. These preacher identities can shape public opinion and play a role as opinion leaders. What makes their religious discourse successful on YouTube is their religious and modern personality, media-friendly discourse, style, and tonality. They are influencers whose methodologies are modern when preaching on YouTube. They use technology to the fullest, their videos are not long and complicated. They consist of short and concise contents. It is seen that these preachers form communities in the virtual environment. People who do not come together in daily life and do not know each other can gather around preachers they find close to and emotionally approve of on social media. Followers make current comments and likes. As a suggestion, national and international preachers can be examined by comparing them in future studies.

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