Universal Journal of History and Culture
E-ISSN: 2667-8179
Vol. 7, No. 1, 1-29, 2025
https://doi.org/10.52613/ujhc.1617181
Research Article

The in-betweens: Contesting the Secular and the Religious Hegemonies

Büşra Kırkpınar* [1], **Nalan Turna**[2]

Abstract: This article explores the interplay of religious and secular hegemonies experienced by young secular individuals in contemporary Türkiye. We elucidate this condition as in-betweenness through the resistance to conforming to exclusive or extreme discursive arrangements imposed by religious and secular people. Focusing on the online youth group Gray Zone on X, we draw on Habermas's postsecularity and adopt Constructivist Grounded Theory to show how this hegemonic dynamic manifests through participants' reflexive thinking and the reduction of rigid ideologies. Our findings, based on semi-structured interviews, demonstrate that the shift from hegemonic to "in-between" interactions emerges through the everyday articulations of lived social practices that reproduce religious-secular engagements. These articulations show that different hegemonies challenge each other daily, which we call the multiple hegemonies effect. Despite the contradictory practices within secularity itself that create a sense of being in-between, secular participants reinforce their commitment to secularity by continuously redefining its meaning to explain "true" secularity.

Keywords: Hegemony, In-betweenness, Habermas, Postsecularity, Religion, Secularism

1. Introduction

Secularity[1] in Türkiye has long been associated with the narratives of modernity and progress, particularly within the Kemalist framework. However, religiosity—at times drawing on Ottoman heritage—has also been mobilized as a sociocultural counterforce, challenging secular dominance in various historical periods. Religiosity, as represented by the mainstream religious culture today and the AKP's long-term experience in Türkiye, is perceived as a hegemonic force too. Simultaneously, the Kemalist influences and their manifestations[2] in the social sphere are acknowledged too, by participants, and followers of *Gray Zone* on X interviewed for this study. However, religiosity and secularity extend beyond political dimensions; they embody distinct socio-cultural frameworks. Even as political regimes have shifted, entrenched norms remain intact, for instance, religious prohibitions such as adultery or drinking alcohol,

[1]Yıldız Technical University, Institute of Social Sciences, Cultural Studies, Istanbul, Türkiye, busra40pinar@gmail.com

[2]Yıldız Technical University, Department of Sociology, Istanbul, Türkiye, nturna@yildiz.edu.tr

**Corresponding Author*

Received: 10 January 2025, **Accepted:** 01 April 2025, **Online:** 28 April 2025

Cite as: Kırkpınar, B., & Turna, N. (2025). The in-betweens: Contesting the secular and the religious hegemonies. *Universal Journal of History and Culture*, *7*(1), 1-29. https://doi.org/10.52613/ujhc.1617181

[1] We define the distinction between secularism and secularity as lying in their conceptual focus: secularism refers to a political project rooted in the principles of laicism, while secularity, as elaborated above, encompasses practices and experiences that extend beyond the realm of politics (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt, 2012).

[2]For further discussion, See, Kirdiş, "Education"; Kandiyoti, "The Travails".

rooted in Islamic tradition, and mandates like prayer and fasting continue to persist as prevalent religious practices. Yet, greater flexibility has been afforded to individuals who choose not to adhere strictly to these rules. Today, a Muslim's or nonreligious person's freedom "to sin" is more widely accepted compared to the past, reflecting a public sphere that has become significantly more flexible. Nonetheless, a persistent struggle endures between religious and secular communities over the definition of societal and individual values. This ongoing negotiation has given rise to more dynamic forms of religiosities and secularities marked by ambiguity and constant reinterpretation. For example, the difficulty that secularity faces in encompassing all segments of Turkish society and the uncertainties and transformations religiosity undergoes in its engagement with secularity shape the religious-secular interplay in significant ways. This study elaborates on this process from the perspective of young people who identify as secular.

We employ the term religiosity rather than conservatism due to our use of Habermasian post-secularity as a theoretical framework, distinguishing between religious and secular categories rather than conservative. This distinction is crucial to the analysis. We define religiosity and secularity as concepts shaped by everyday experiences and perceptions, meaning they are not solely influenced by politics but continue to evolve within socio-cultural contexts, governed by fluid frameworks rather than simply fixed rules. Our framework also highlights a perspective that does not equate secularity with Kemalism and religiosity with the Ottoman past or conservative governments during the Republican period.

2. Habermasian Postsecularity

Postsecularity, a contested concept in the study of religion and secularism, does not imply a departure from secularism (Gorski, 2012), but rather refers to the "reflexive" transformation of mentalities aimed at fostering mutual understanding between religious and secular individuals, ultimately achieving an ideal form of secularism (Habermas, 2008). It provides an analytical framework (Molendijk, 2015) for examining the interaction between religious and secular spheres. In the Turkish context, post-secularity has been applied in different ways: one approach addresses societal prejudices, such as "frequent association of nonbelief with immorality" (Altınordu, 2021), while another criticizes the marginalization of religion (Ağcan, 2020). These various post-secular approaches allow us to examine how religious and secular expectations foster mutual understanding between these worldviews. Such understanding can emerge through individuals who demonstrate reflexive thinking and ideological openness within the public sphere. For Habermas, reflexivity—central to the postsecular—entails an awareness of one's judgments and experiences, which participants exhibit by criticizing both sides. Ideological decline, another criterion, involves

the rejection of extreme or exclusive discourses and practices on either side. We extend Habermas's framework of the public sphere to analyze individual worldviews.

Recent scholarship frames the postsecular as a methodological lens (Hodkinson & Horstkotte, 2020) for exploring intersections of religiosity and secularity, transcending binary oppositions by revealing how these categories are constructed across contexts. The postsecular reflects a condition of "conscious co-existence" and ongoing tension between religious and secular worldviews (Stoeckl, 2011), representing a form of "reflexive secularity" that fosters mutual engagement (Mendieta & Beaumont, 2018). Individuals who embody reflexive religiosity and secularity offer a crucial heuristic for understanding these dynamics. Comparative research in this area, we argue, adds new depth to the study of religious-secular relations by addressing an overlooked area: micro-level, non-institutional forms of religiosity and secularity.

Like much of the religion-secularism literature, studies on Turkish post-secularity have primarily focused on politics and institutions or theory (Altınordu, 2021; Konuralp 2020; Parmaksız 2016; Göle, 2012; Rosati, 2012). One study empirically examines postsecular interactions but its emphasis remains on religious individuals' confrontation with secularity, reflecting a dominant perspective in this field (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015). To address this gap, our article provides a state of interactions shaped by resistance to hegemony — grounded in lived experiences rather than institutional or one-sided analyses.

Studies have examined the hegemonic struggles between secularity and Islamism in Türkiye (Göle, 1997; Gözaydın, 2008; Çinar, 2005), how Islamist movements seek to construct an alternative hegemony against secular dominance, and how the cultural performances of Islamist parties facilitate hegemonic construction in the public sphere (Yavuz, 2003; White, 2012; Altınordu, 2016). Our analysis, however, focuses on how individual worldviews perceive and respond to various pressures within the social sphere. Drawing on Stuart Hall's conceptualization, we define hegemony as the belief in the supremacy of one's worldview and the demonstration of this belief through various discursive arrangements.[3] We examine participants' critique of this dogmatic assertion of one-truthness. Accordingly, hegemony is not understood as a fixed dominance or a mere tool of oppression but as a process of constant negotiation and reproduction (Hall, 2021). The concept of hegemony is employed to represent the exclusive or extreme socio-cultural norms upheld by various power structures. Everyday life emerges as a pivotal battleground where competing hegemonic projects contend for dominance (Tuğal, 2009). The competition among different hegemonies and their influence on shaping societal values in a globalized world has been extensively discussed by scholars (Hall, 2021; Žižek, 2019; Bhabha, 2012; Pettigrew, 1998). This idea of

[3]We use the term "discursive arrangements" to highlight how discourse becomes institutionalized within specific practices, in the Foucauldian sense.

competition among different hegemonic collectivities directly resonates with the findings reflected in our data.

Inspired by this perspective, we apply it to the Turkish context of religious-secular interaction, which compares the perceived religious and secular hegemonies, offering a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted struggles that characterize the postsecular interactions between religious and secular individuals. We examine how individuals, caught between competing hegemonies, navigate the dynamics of socio-cultural power and determine their orientations by conceptualizing this phenomenon as the "multiple hegemonies effect." Thus, it shows us how this dynamic shapes the formation of in-betweenness within everyday life. Further, this perspective of multiple hegemonies effect is used to support our analysis based on Jürgen Habermas's post-secular framework; We analyze how participants engage in (1) the ability of reflexive thinking and experience, and (2) ideological decline, rejecting exclusive discourses on both sides. Their critical reflexivity differentiates them from the broader culture, creating a state of in-betweenness.

3. Data and Method

We conducted field research on the followers of the online youth group *Gray Zone*[4] between 2022 and 2024, not the group itself, based on 30 semi-structured interviews with participants aged between 20 and 34, including 12 women. The group, with 8,500 followers on X,[5] defines itself as an independent youth initiative to mitigate the effects of polarization. In the 2020s, the group's manifesto gained attention on X, feeling "without a neighborhood" (Gri Bölge, 2020; Sivil Sayfalar, 2020).

Until the 2023 parliamentary elections, members organized online events to discuss socio-economic issues with academics, ambassadors, activists, etc. Half of the participants are students or graduates of top universities or departments (Boğaziçi, Galatasaray, Türk-Alman, İstanbul, etc.) or possess skills in volunteer work and activism. Two key criteria for selecting this group as the research sample were its members' critiques of polarization and their high levels of education, which we observe enhance the quality of their reflexive thinking. However, these characteristics do not cancel out their attachment to religiosity or secularity.

The group's name, *Gray Zone*, further reflects their educational background, as it refers to the fluid

[4]For further information about the group page, See, Gri Bölge. (n.d.). Gri Bölge [Social media profile]. X. https://x.com/gribolgeorg Medyascope. (2020, July 17). "Gri Bölge" kuruldu: 'Birbirimizi dinleyelim gibi basit bir çağrının bile bu kadar sert bir şekilde karşılanması doğru bir yolda olduğumuzu gösterdi' [News article]. Medyascope.

[5] The number of followers of the online group declined following the 2023 parliamentary elections. This reduction aligns with statements made by some participants who expressed intentions to emigrate if there were no changes in the political system.

navigation between conflicting values or social positions, rooted in both anthropology and sociology, to challenge established boundaries (Smart, 2012; Becci, 2018). The participants come from diverse backgrounds and include atheists, deists, agnostics, or practicing Muslims with varying degrees of religious observance. According to the participants' self-reports, 18 identified as religious or inclined toward religiosity, while 12 identified as secular, though many expressed ambivalence on issues complicating their worldviews. The interview questions focused on how participants define religiosity and secularity, how these definitions have evolved, and how they distinguish themselves from the mainstream religious or secular cultures, as well as their perceptions of differences between religious and secular individuals.

Constructivist Grounded Theory has been applied to analyze the data. Unlike research methods that propose to test predetermined hypotheses, CGT aims to develop a hypothesis, an explanation, or a theory through the "constant comparison" of individual cases. It allowed us to identify themes and refine them through a two-stage coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Laumann & Pappi, 1976).

4. Hegemony in the Eyes of Secular Individuals

Secular participants perceive religious hegemony as more dominant. They attribute this dominance to two main factors. First, religious individuals outnumber secular ones. Second, religious groups not only seek to impose their dominance over secular people but also compete for hegemony within their ranks. Our analysis shows that secular participants view secular "rationality" as essential for political and social organization, particularly for ensuring extensive freedoms in increasingly diverse societies. This rationale forms the foundation of their commitment to secularity, which we coded as "*the inevitability of secularity*".

This concept reflects their belief that secular governance is necessary to counter religious hegemony while remaining liberal and inclusive of both religious and nonreligious actors. They are acutely aware that exclusive secularity produces religious exclusion, contradicting the principles of secularity itself. This awareness has been coded as the *contradictory practice of secularity*. We named the focused code of these two codes "*anxiety of hegemony*." This focused code represents the participants' perceptions of the interventionist and exclusionary discursive arrangements they observe on both sides.

4.1 Anxiety of Hegemony

The concepts of *the inevitability of secularity and contradictory practice of secularity*, both reflect participants' efforts to define the "true" essence of secularity. In the view of the secular participants,

secularity is expected to extend beyond a mere political system, functioning instead as a framework that promotes freedom and rational decision-making in the most micro aspects of everyday life. Any religiously motivated social condemnation is defined as a form of intervention, viewing it as an impediment to the development of Muslim societies. However, they also recognize that secular individuals often fail to fully embody the principles of equality and freedom inherent in secularity. This tension pushes them into an in-between space.

Religious hegemony can be defined as a mode of cultural and social dominance where religious norms and ideologies infiltrate everyday practices, and institutional structures, asserting moral and behavioral authority over individuals regardless of their personal beliefs (Gramsci, 2020; Asad, 2003). In this context, the public sphere becomes an extension of religious doctrine, where dissenting views or alternative lifestyles can be delegitimized, creating a homogenizing pressure to conform. This hegemony operates not only through explicit rules but also through subtler mechanisms, such as psychological coercion, moral surveillance, and the internalization of religious values as societal norms (Foucault, 1991; Mahmood, 2005). It can perpetuate power hierarchies, particularly along gender and sectarian lines. Consequently, resistance to religious hegemony emerges as a struggle for individual autonomy, pluralism, and the recognition of diverse identities, challenging the monopolization of morality and societal organization by religious authorities within modern societies.

In response to religious hegemony, the concept of secular hegemony dynamic reflects a parallelism; the violation of secular norms can marginalize religious individuals. It underscores the tensions within the practice of secularity when it veers toward exclusivity, ideological rigidity, and a lack of empathy for religious perspectives. While secularity is ideally associated with reason and freedom, in the Turkish context, it often manifests as a dismissive attitude toward religious individuals, evidenced by behaviors such as trivializing religious practices and belittling religious symbols, constructing these as markers of inferiority. This phenomenon reveals that some secular individuals perceive their norms as universal truths, reinforcing a sense of superiority. The association of religious imagery with lower socioeconomic status further strengthens the claims of secular dominance. Participants' secular habitus reveal a persistent sense of alienation, given that secular actors frequently fail to empathize with or respect the agency of religious individuals.

Secular hegemony, like religious hegemony, is a form of cultural dominance that upholds secularity not merely as a framework for neutrality but as an ideological stance that can marginalize religious discursive arrangements (Casanova, 1994; Mahmood, 2015; Zuckerman & Shook, 2017). It manifests through

the stigmatization of religious symbols, beliefs, and lifestyles, portraying them as incompatible with modernity and rationality (Taylor, 2007). It often operates through materialist and elitist assumptions, treating religion as a barrier to progress and dismissing its emotional or moral dimensions (Habermas, 2006). While it claims to champion freedom and equality, this secular dominance paradoxically mirrors the rigidity in religious hegemonies, limiting pluralism and failing to empathize with or accommodate differing worldviews. Criticizing secular hegemony, therefore, highlights the need for a genuinely inclusive public sphere that respects both secular and religious perspectives (Habermas, 2008).

While participants acknowledge secular hegemony, they continue to idealize secularity, partially because they view religious hegemony as a greater threat. Their critiques of secular superiority indicate that they find hegemonic attitudes to be senseless, though, at the same time, they perceive secularity as superior—but in a form that does not exclude differences, since secular participants perceive religion as the primary cause of these dynamics.

Efe's (29), experiences within his secular family, and religious relatives, and his observations in professional and social settings reveal a shared desire for dominance in both religious and secular groups. As a political science PhD candidate from Kadir Has University, raised in a secular, close-to-upper-middle-class family in Kadıköy, he observes common patterns shared with other participants, narrating how he experienced strict religiosity within the extended family:

> In my life, religion had no place at all, but my uncle and grandmother were the complete opposite. I can say that I tried to escape from religion. Because my uncle was more radical and strict in his religiosity, and my grandmother was somewhat the same. Seeing these, I reacted negatively. The more I reacted, the more I removed religion from my life as much as possible, choosing to understand it in a minimal way that suited my identity as a social scientist, and I kept it limited to that. The thing that bothers me the most is the perception of fatalism. Especially in the Sunni Muslim understanding as adopted, it was like "Just always rely on God. Always stay faithful. Pray from Candlelight to the Eid. Try to fast, etc." It was like this kind of indoctrination (*telkin*)...I also see what I described in my uncle and grandmother in some of my friends. I have a close (religious) friend, and sometimes he even goes as far as defining other beliefs as heretical. He views all beliefs outside of Sunni Islam as heretical. One aspect of this, of course, is his approach to LGBTQ+ rights. Since he has completely rejected them, when I see this, my understanding becomes clearer (*Efe*).

Efe criticizes fatalism (*kadercilik*), particularly within Sunni Muslim traditions because he sees this as a factor that hinders personal and societal progress. He describes religious teaching in his close circles as an indoctrination, where individuals are expected to rely on God instead of taking control of their lives. This view reflects a critique of passivity in some of the religious teachings, where devotion is prioritized over critical thinking and individual agency. The rejection of fatalism aligns with modernist critiques of religion, which emphasize rationality and human autonomy over divine predestination. Although Efe has distanced himself from the religious understanding of his relatives, he observes similar mindsets in his religious friends, particularly regarding exclusivism and intolerance toward other beliefs. His religious friend labels non-Sunni beliefs as heretical, reflecting an exclusive interpretation of Islam. His mention of the rejection of LGBTQ+ identities by his friend reinforces Efe's disillusionment with religion since he perceives it as discriminatory. It also highlights how conservatism extends to social and political issues, and this extension reinforces secular participants' secularity.

Efe's perception of religion is shaped by negative personal experiences, particularly authoritarian religiosity and exclusionary views. His scientific worldview is positioned as an alternative to a religious worldview, indicating a rationalist framework that contrasts with religious indoctrination. Therefore, his reaction against religion is not simply ideological but emerges from lived experiences. This suggests reflecting on the broader critiques of institutionalized Sunni Islam in Türkiye. Efe's experience demonstrates that strict religiosity can push people away from religion rather than bringing them closer. Simultaneously, he observes strictness in his secular environment:

> The philosophy of founding power in the early Republican period sometimes seemed a bit harsh to me...When I saw how both the AKP and the founding power pushed the country into severe polarization, I honestly tried to distance myself from that as well. It felt excessive... Later, there was a bit of a softening in our family, honestly, they realized that there were extreme aspects to the early Republican period. I even saw that people who had fully supported the founding ideology within the Republican People's Party(CHP), who were deeply committed to its philosophy, began to distance themselves a bit from it... When I see secular people who are very rigid, I also ask, "Where's the freedom in this?" I mean, they completely speak in rejection of religious people, especially in the headscarf debate. They say, "These groups are sick and should not exist. Because they are taking Türkiye backward"...I see some of my professors, who define themselves as Kemalists, posting on Twitter and Instagram, saying things like "I wish the other side didn't exist." There are more moderate

> ones too, at least in my circle. I see a view in them like, ”Both sides have made huge mistakes in getting us to this point” (*Efe*).

Efe reflects a critical perspective on both the founding ideology of the early Republic and the AKP-era polarization, demonstrating a changing stance toward secularity and Kemalism. His secular family's shift toward a more moderate stance suggests that previous extreme secularity softened over time due to changing political and social contexts; since Republican policies couldn't secularize all parts of the society, and the increasing religious population, their demand for rights and their reactions to negative definitions of religiosity seem to have played a role in this change.

He observes that even committed supporters of Kemalist ideology within the CHP have distanced themselves from its more rigid elements, suggesting a broader trend of ideological reevaluation and decline, reminding the Habermasian postsecular criteria. His mention of professors who wish the ”other side” (religious people) didn't exist still highlights an anti-pluralistic worldview within parts of the secular elite, which contradicts the principles of freedom and inclusion that secularism claims to uphold.

Secular participants noted that they still witness a negative view of headscarves within their social circles. It is interesting that secular participants also observe that the headscarf is still seen as an issue. This observation contrasts with a key criticism recently directed at religious circles, which is the emphasis to stop using the headscarf as a tool for agitation. Efe's reaction -“Where's the freedom in this?”- suggests that he sees such exclusionary secularity as contradicting democratic and liberal values. His criticism refers to the post-Kemalist critiques that argue for a more pluralistic understanding of secularity, rather than one that enforces a singular vision of modernity.

While Efe criticizes rigid secularity, he also acknowledges that the AKP has played a role in deepening polarization. His statement that “both sides have made huge mistakes in getting us to this point” suggests an attempt to move beyond a binary framework of “secularists vs. Islamists.” This reflects a growing discourse in Türkiye that criticizes both past authoritarian secularity and contemporary religious conservatism, favoring a middle-ground position. His mention of some professors posting exclusionary content on social media highlights how platforms like Twitter and Instagram increase the political and ideological divides. The digital visibility of extreme opinions seems to contribute to Efe's perception that secular rigidity remains a problem, even though he acknowledges more moderate secular voices within his social circle. However, despite observing rigid secularity, he believes that rigid religiosity is stronger.

Melisa (24, lawyer), who identifies as "extremely secular," similarly views religious intervention as more pervasive. In contrast to her secular parents, who raised her in a more liberal environment, she has witnessed interventionist practices within religious families and circles that further consolidated her secular views:

> I'm walking with my four boyfriends, and we're going from Üsküdar to Beşiktaş. A headscarf-wearing aunt stopped me in the middle of Marmaray and started shouting: 'Isn't it shameful, how many men are you walking with? What will they say about you, blah blah.' I shouted back at her. I was still in high school at the time; it was really disturbing... Another example: During Ramadan, a friend of mine told me she was upset because I drank water in front of her. It seemed so ridiculous to me, her being upset just because I drank water. I said, 'You don't fast for me,' but I was upset about it too. I still do not pay attention during Ramadan, and I do it from a protest place. Maybe I wouldn't do it if I weren't pressured so much about it. But being 'questioned' on this really pisses me off, and I do things in response to that. Aside from these, religious practices such as forcing children to wear headscarves in elementary school, restricting boys and girls from playing together, and relegating religious women to subordinate roles, etc., reinforced my secular beliefs...My religious female friends were hesitant to talk to male students in the freshman year of high school (Istanbul Erkek Lisesi), and most religious male students also avoided interacting with female classmates. These male students later became secularized... (*Melisa*).

The headscarf-wearing woman's criticism of Melisa walking with multiple boyfriends reflects the policing of female behavior in Turkish society, particularly regarding religious norms and gendered expectations. The woman's judgment implies a connection between sexuality, morality, and religious identity in the public sphere, positioning Melisa's behavior as socially deviant. Melisa's response -shouting back- highlights her assertion of autonomy and rejection of societal judgment based on religious norms. She describes a friend's upset reaction to her drinking water in front of her during Ramadan as ridiculous. The tension stemming from such encounters illustrates the sensitivity involved in practicing religion in a socially diverse environment. Melisa's counter-reaction to her friend -"You don't fast for me"- reflects emphasizing her desire for personal freedom and choice, especially in public spaces. Her act of defiance seems to reinforce her secular identity, as she challenges her friends' expectations.

She also criticizes religious practices such as forcing children to wear headscarves, restricting boys and girls from playing together, and relegating religious women to subordinate roles. These examples

reflect her rejection of gendered limitations that she associates with religious norms. Religious students' reluctance to interact with the opposite sex in high school provides insight into the social dynamics in educational settings, and the later secularization of these students might suggest that such religious practices and boundaries may have triggered a reevaluation of religious culture, but it is not clear in our view, secular educational content might have also led these students to get secularize. I observe that all such practices strengthen Melisa's secular beliefs. Moreover, Melisa's struggle has not only been with religious practices but also extended to secular practices, managing to reduce the secular rigidity of her family:

> . . . So, the actions of my family are disturbing to me. In their interventions with people, I constantly have to say 'What's it to you, it's none of your business.' And let me open a parenthesis here. For example, during this process, they became more moderate. There's no longer the perception that 'A woman in a headscarf is bad,' they're okay with living with and sharing common spaces with people who wear headscarves... They previously used to say things like 'Would that really happen? Can a headscarf-wearing woman be a judge? What will we do? How will I tell my problem to a headscarf-wearing judge?'...Of course, those concerns have been broken now. Later, I saw in high school that there are many different lifestyles. My closest friends started coming from conservative backgrounds. When I began to make contact with them, I saw that there was nothing that needed to be criticized. But there are still a few reasons why I firmly maintain my secular stance. One of them is seeing how my female friends, especially, have suffered from the social pressure created by religion. This makes me incredibly repelled (*Melisa*).

Melisa works to alter the discourses of her "Kemalist" parents, who live in the Thracian city, have no big city experience, and always live with people like them, in a close to middle-class neighborhood. Her family's views of religious people were initially dismissive, she has gradually softened these attitudes, and her negative perceptions of religion have evolved as well, particularly during her later university years. She "never knew that religion had an impact on people's daily practices" until she attended high school (*Istanbul Erkek Lisesi*) when she saw her religious friends and their practices in the school dormitory. After high school, in university, meeting liberal religious friends with similar educational backgrounds helped her recognize that religion might fulfill a societal and existential need, leading her to inhabit the in-between space.

This transformation suggests that exposure to diverse lifestyles and social norms has challenged her and her family's earlier assumptions, opening them up to a more pluralistic understanding of society. However, Melisa adds that while she communicates with religious individuals at her educational level, she finds it difficult to relate to those with rigid interpretations within the broader religious spectrum in public. The reason for her commitment to secularity lies in the social pressures faced by her religious female friends and their moms, particularly how religious culture is imposed on women. This illustrates how gender dynamics shape participants' perceptions of religiosity. However, Melisa's secularity is not just a reaction against religious culture but also an affirmation of individual autonomy, her demand to live and express herself freely without pressure or judgment.

Likewise, Edip's (21) experiences growing up in a secular family, along with his observations in professional and social environments with religious individuals, highlight a common aspiration for dominance from both groups. Raised in a secular close to a middle-class family in Thrace, and a student in Public Relations and Advertising at a private university in Istanbul, he observes that religious groups communicate in an imposing manner, while secular groups form their identities through exclusionary or altruistic discourses on religious practices:

> ..the religious part has a desire for growth. You know, even if I live a very secular life, (religious people say that), "Come, brother, let's have a chat, we'll change your mind, etc". The other part (secular) is a bit more like "do whatever you want..Even if you are secular... we already exist, we are already in our struggle, whether you agree or not". There is such a vision in religion, there is also an ideal like trying to make everyone a Muslim...Seculars, on the other hand, when you say that "some children can be Muslims, can cover their heads, and other children can learn French, learn ballet, etc.", they say "then the society remains like that, ..let's change them too, that child has a right too" (*Edip*).

In Edip's viewpoint, religious groups actively engage in efforts to proselytize, influence, or persuade others to adopt their worldview. He first describes secular individuals as more passive and detached, adopting a "do whatever you want" attitude, implying a tolerance for diversity and individual autonomy. However, he later adds that secular individuals also proselytize by using altruistic ideas for religious individuals who are deemed as oppressed by the religious culture. This suggests that the secular view also has its limits of tolerance, as seen in their reaction to allowing some children to follow religious practices (e.g., wearing headscarves), while others engage in different activities (e.g., ballet or learning

French). Therefore, it is not very feasible to explain the religious vision through universalism -the idea is that "everyone should become Muslim,"- and the secular vision through pluralism. Both sides can exhibit universalist tendencies.

The secular perspective here is concerned with equal rights—the idea that children should have the freedom to express their identities, whether religious or cultural and should not be excluded from certain activities (such as learning ballet or French) because of their religion. This reflects a concern for equal opportunities within a pluralistic society that is perceived as hindered by religious rules according to secular participants. However, in the view of most religious people, not sending one's child to ballet or a child wearing a headscarf is not perceived as a restriction or an issue. Thus, these kinds of tensions underlie the power struggle over cultural and moral dominance in society. While religious individuals seek to expand their influence, secular individuals are also advocating for a unified and cohesive society that does not create divisions along religious lines.

Edip elaborates on how secular individuals reinforce their identities based on his close social circle:

> Unless there is a religious person among us, I usually see religious people being insulted... Because someone is fasting, sometimes looked down upon, or because someone prays, they may be referred to as lower class. It has changed recently, but there is a view that those who wear headscarves are a bit lower class. . . My girlfriend, for instance, says, 'Well, they are so helpless, they cover their heads, so she thinks that they don't cover with their own will, but because of pressure. Even if those who cover with their own will, they(seculars) see this as absurd. In a sense, excessive secularism also declares war on religious people and their ideas. And therefore it is a more incompatible structure. . . They take a magazinish approach and have no desire to empathize, they don't think about what a religious person thinks, etc., and their anger increases because they never try to understand (*Edip*).

Edip discerns that religious individuals are sometimes insulted in secular spaces, particularly when there is no religious person present. Religious practices like fasting and prayer are sometimes viewed with condescension, and headscarf-wearing women are perceived as lower class or victims of coercion rather than independent agents. This shows the implicit class dimension to the discrimination, reflecting a historical association between secular modernity and elite status in Türkiye. Rigid secularity does not simply advocate for secular values but actively seeks to erase religious perspectives or oppose them. Thus, Edip criticizes secular individuals for their failure to empathize with religious people, holding a shallow

attitude by media-driven narratives. This lack of understanding in both groups fuels resentment, making secular-religious relations more polarized. This also suggests that while Türkiye has seen shifts in power dynamics, particularly with the rise of religious political influence, secular groups aim to reinforce their discourse.

The first three cases involved participants who grew up in secular families and identified as secular. Additionally, we will present two cases of individuals who were raised in religious families but later secularized and now identify as secular. Through these cases, we will illustrate how they have experienced dominance in different contexts. Hakan (23), a law student in Istanbul and graduate of a science high school, grew up in Amasya in a religious family exhibiting middle-class characteristics. Although his parents, both teachers, were relatively liberal in their religious views, his exposure to ”partisan” religious individuals who disregarded merit led him to question his own religious identity. He observed that, in practice, religious individuals were not necessarily liberal. During high school, he was elected as the student council president, and while working with political figures in that role, he witnessed “partisan” behavior from some religious political representatives. He was particularly disturbed by how students from imam-hatip schools were constantly prioritized in student council activities, given their stronger institutional backing through religious foundations; their proposals were consistently accepted, reinforcing a system that lacked meritocracy, in his observation. Reflecting on this experience, Hakan remarked, “They weren’t looking for rational ideas; they were just engaging in factionalism. At that point, I thought, ‘This is such a ridiculous environment’ ”. Hakan shows this experience as the triggering reason for his secularization, precisely during his high school years when he was exploring beliefs. Observing how religious partisanship creates divisions in social settings, the participant has come to see secularity not only as a political principle but also as a social necessity:

> In Türkiye, religionism(*dincilik*) rather than religiosity(*dindarlık*) tends to dominate, so I believe that secular voices should be more prominent in society to counterbalance religious dominance...I think that the secular way of life in the West, the tolerance people have towards others -actually benefits societies more. There’s a slogan, “Islam is a religion of tolerance”, but when we look at its implementation, it doesn’t work that way. Religion organizes social life… I don’t find it reasonable for the progress and development of the world, for people to research more. To tie everything to religion and view every aspect of life through religion etc.. I mean, you shouldn’t turn this world into a prison for yourself or others because of your religious teachings, and people shouldn’t be forced to live the way you want them to (*Hakan*).

Hakan distinguishes between religionism (*dincilik*)—which implies a more political, ideological, or institutionalized form of religion—and religiosity (*dindarlık*), which suggests a more personal, spiritual, or ethical engagement with faith. His critique is directed at dincilik, which he perceives as dominant in Türkiye. Hakan argues that secular voices should be more prominent in Turkish society to mitigate the overpowering influence of religion. This reflects a concern with hegemonic religious discourses and the limitations they might impose on pluralism. His stance resonates with discussions in Turkish secularism studies, especially in the context of post-2010 debates on the decline of Kemalist secularity and the rise of a more visible and assertive religious-political sphere.

Hakan expresses admiration for the Western secular model, associating it with tolerance and societal benefits. His perspective implies that secularity fosters open-mindedness and coexistence, contrasting it with what he perceives as Islam's claimed but unrealized tolerance. This critique can be interpreted through a Habermasian lens, particularly in how postsecular societies negotiate religious and secular norms. It also reflects a normative evaluation of secularity as an enabler of progress, a view often found among Türkiye's secular intellectuals.

The metaphor of "turning the world into a prison" highlights the tension between personal autonomy and religiously defined social constraints. However, while Hakan constructs secularity as a pragmatically superior framework for societal progress, he questions the secular "arrogance":

> But there is also arrogance among secularists, who say things like, "We have done everything, religion is just a stumbling block, etc." There is such an incredibly arrogant perspective. That's not a good thing at all. Also, not everything in life is materialistic or concrete. There are emotions too. Humans have a sense of conscience... In secularity too, I don't know, the way things are going doesn't seem great to me. Radical secularity is not possible. Secularism itself should be something that is far from radicalism... Secularity provides social development to some extent but not one hundred percent development (*Hakan*).

His critique of secular individuals is rooted in the arrogance he perceives in their discourse. The phrase "We have done everything" reflects a dismissal of religious perspectives and a self-assuredness that undermines constructive dialogue between religious and secular worldviews. This critique is emblematic of a broader criticism of secular elitism in Türkiye and beyond, where secular individuals or groups position themselves as morally superior or as the only rational actors in society. Arrogance here is not merely about confidence in one's views but about an inability to acknowledge the legitimacy of differing

worldviews. Hakan implies that this attitude is counterproductive for creating a harmonious, pluralistic society.

Hakan also points out that not everything in life is materialistic or concrete, drawing attention to the emotional and moral dimensions of human existence. He argues that secularity's focus on rationality, science, and material progress often neglects the human need for conscience, emotion, and spirituality. This critique positions him within the postsecular debate, where secularity is often criticized for being overly rationalistic and reductionist, disregarding the complexity of human experience, including its emotional and ethical dimensions. Therefore, he suggests that a more moderate, pragmatic approach to secularity is necessary for social development. Rigid secularity, in his view, risks alienating religious individuals and exacerbating divisions rather than fostering harmony.

Despite his secularization, Hakan describes his position as "wavering" between religiosity and secularity, stating, "Sometimes I believe in and sometimes I don't." His critique of the "one-truth" mentality in both groups contributes to the creation of this situation. His ambivalence, coupled with a disdain for religious and secular partisanship, leaves him feeling "neighborhoodless," underlining his position in the in-between space.

Unlike Hakan, Emre (32, lawyer) praises secular thought as an absolute framework for inquiry, despite his critique of both religious and secular groups. Raised in a conservative family in Sultanbeyli, he describes how he 'liberated' himself from what he sees as the 'ignorant' religiosity of his low socio-economic neighborhood by attending a high-ranking Anatolian teacher high school and later enrolling in law college:

> We look at the relations between men and women; there is a marvelous distortion and distress. In Sultanbeyli, there are no such things as women's rights or LGBT individuals; it is considered normal for men to have second and third wives. I look at my own family; for example, my sister wore a headscarf when she was in her hijab period (reaching puberty). When my mother said that she never forced her, they actually put psychological pressure on my sister, and maybe she had a desire to cover up, but that pressure was put on her. . . For example, I am a lawyer; I have hundreds of clients. When a client comes to my office, explains their problem, and says "We are Muslims too, we pray", I feel like kicking them out. I want to say, "We didn't ask about your religion!" I want to say, "Get up and go, I won't take your case".. I can't say words that will satisfy your lowly ego, that will emphasize that you live your religion very

well, but you don't refuse to pay interest at all' (*Emre*).

He associates religiosity with "ignorance, economic hardship, and conservatism", arguing that these conditions are not merely shaped by a particular socio-economic context (Sultanbeyli) but are, in his view, products of Islam itself. Emre perceives a "distortion" and "distress" in the relationships between men and women, portraying a picture of gender inequality, where there is a lack of rights for women and the normalization of patriarchal practices. He also describes how, despite his mother's claims that she did not force his sister to wear the headscarf, his sister was subjected to psychological pressure by the family, in his observation. This suggests a form of indirect coercion and social conformity within the family dynamic. In other words, social expectations around religious observance can override individual agency. Emre's frustration with the situation indicates a tension between religious duty and personal freedom, ultimately, situations like this led to his reaction against religion and his distance from it.

He also discusses his experience as a lawyer and the contradictions in the practice of religion. He refers to his frustration when clients, who claim to be Muslim and regularly practice their faith (such as praying), also engage in actions like paying interest (*faiz*), which is considered haram (forbidden) in Islam. Moreover, Emre's sentiment "I want to say, 'We didn't ask about your religion!'" indicates a desire for separation between personal beliefs and social or professional interactions. It seems likely that the clients mentioning during the work process that they are Muslim and pray five times a day, thinking it would bring pragmatic benefits, makes him think about religious hypocrisy. The use of religion in this way leads to Emre's reaction against Islam.

Although Emre sees no positive aspects in religion or religious culture, yet he holds strong critiques of the way secularity is practiced in Türkiye:

> The rise of secularism should correlate with an increased reliance on reason. However, specific to our country, the growth of secularism is often accompanied by extremism, ideological rigidity, and a shift toward radical nationalism, all of which hinder the exercise of reason. I still get the impression that the mentality that brought the headscarf bans in the postmodern coup of 1997 remains somewhere inside them..For example, my sister couldn't enter university with a headscarf. For instance, there is a tennis club in Bursa. When you go to the tennis club and an Arab who doesn't look like them (as secular) or a woman with a headscarf comes to play tennis, their faces turn sour. And all these people define themselves as secular. My face doesn't sour, maybe because my family is conservative. Or I witnessed secular landowners

> not giving construction work to a religious contractor; they said, ”We don’t make money for the religious.” They were very surprised when I asked them why I was defending a religious contractor. I told them, ”You’re wrong to look at it this way. Look at whether the work is done well or not,” but they still didn’t give him the job (*Emre*).

He criticizes secular individuals for not being sufficiently liberal, and this dissatisfaction pushes him into the in-between space, like other secular participants. Emre suggests that secularity should ideally be linked to an increased reliance on reason. This reflects the classic Enlightenment understanding of secularity as a rational, progressive, and open-ended approach to social organization. However, he criticizes the way secularity has evolved in Türkiye, arguing that instead of fostering reason, it has often led to ideological rigidity and radical nationalism. This perspective reminds the criticisms that some forms of Turkish secularity have historically been exclusionary and authoritarian, particularly in enforcing a strict public-private divide regarding religious expression. The argument that secularity has been accompanied by radical nationalism also refers that secularity has not just been about religious neutrality but has also been intertwined with nation-building and identity politics. This reminds the historical patterns where Kemalist secularity in Türkiye has sometimes been enforced in a top-down, leading to counter-reactions from religious communities.

Emre refers to the 1997 postmodern coup and the headscarf ban, suggesting that the mentality behind such policies still exists today among secular circles, even though it has decreased. The February 28 military intervention led to restrictions on religious expression in public institutions, particularly targeting headscarf-wearing women in universities and government jobs. His example—his sister being denied access to university because of her headscarf—functions as a lived experience of exclusion, reinforcing the idea that secularity in Türkiye has often been enforced in ways that contradict its supposed principles of freedom and rationality. The fact that the February 28 headscarf bans continued until 2013—spanning over a decade—and that the bans were still enforced even during the first ten years of the AKP government is an interesting case. Some have attributed this to the strength of secular hegemony—pointing to events like the Republic Rallies (Cumhuriyet Mitingleri)—while others have argued that the AKP strategically benefited from the situation to maintain its power. However, the issue remains unresolved.

Emre, by stating that this mentality persists, observes that secular dominance sometimes continues to exclude religious individuals from certain spaces, even through more subtle, informal, and social forms of discrimination rather than explicit legal bans. He provides two contemporary examples of secular exclusionary practices, the negative reaction of secular individuals to an Arab or a headscarf-wearing

woman playing tennis suggests a cultural bias within secular spaces. The implication is that certain "secular" spaces in Türkiye have sometimes function as an identity marker, where religious or foreign-looking individuals –particularly if they are from Middle Eastern countries- are viewed as outsiders, even when their presence is unrelated to religious practice. This secular social discomfort reveals the persistence of cultural boundaries, where secularity is not only about a political ideology but also a social identity that might reinforce exclusion.

His second example is the secular landowners' refusal to hire religious contractors. This illustrates how secular groups can adopt a discriminatory attitude toward religious individuals in business life. Political corruption, reports of embezzlement, and the association of religious individuals with these issues may have contributed to secular exclusion. This example suggests that religious affiliation still plays a role as a point of distinction within secular capital circles. In other words, secular hegemony can be a determining factor not only in cultural spaces but also in economic relations. Emre's reaction to this situation suggests that he maintains a critical distance from ideological polarization and supports merit-based principles in economic interactions.

Emre's experiences challenge binary narratives that put secular and religious people against one another in a clear-cut struggle. Instead, he experiences how both sides engage in exclusionary practices, this refers to the postsecular lens of how individuals navigate the contradictions and ambivalences within Türkiye's religious-secular spectrum. Turkish secularity as religiosity is not monolithic but exists on a spectrum, ranging from liberal interpretations to exclusionary forms. Emre positions himself outside rigid ideological camps, criticizing secular elitism but also religious discrimination. However, while observing religious people misusing religious discourse for personal gain, which strengthens Emre's commitment to secularity and turning into atheism, the contradictory practices of secularity do not drive him away from secularity, as other secular participants.

Overall, in secular participants, experiencing religious dominance reinforces their secularity, while for the participants who transitioned from religiosity to secularity, religious dominance acts as an accelerating factor in that process. Participants' critique of expressions such as "Islam is a religion of tolerance" fails to manifest in practice, suggesting contradictions within religious hegemony as it shapes societal norms. They appear to perceive exclusionary religiosity as contradicting religion's claim to universal truth. As a result, they regard inquiry and reliance on science as more rational approaches. The promotion of religion as a universal framework to "correct" or "convert" others leads secular people to question the religious culture, and the exclusionary discursive arrangements towards non-Muslim or non-Sunni beliefs, the

labeling of other belief systems or forms of non-belief as "deviance" by some religious individuals disturbs secular participants. They observe that those who refuse to conform to religiously normative culture face exclusion.

Religious intervention refers to the strong influence of religionism (*dincilik*) in shaping societal norms and behaviors, often at the expense of individual freedoms. It manifests in various forms, such as psychological pressure to adhere to religious practices, the marginalization of non-religious practices, and the imposition of moral standards. Examples include the stigmatization of women for their interactions with men and expectations around fasting during Ramadan. Such practices lead to resistance and alienation among secular individuals, reinforcing secular rejection of religiosity. These dynamics illustrate the detrimental effect of religious dominance on pluralism and fuel secular counter-hegemony. Some participants find not only religious interventions but also well-meaning religious advice from those around them to be unreasonable, as they perceive such exhortations to be meaningless. They express particular resistance to fatalistic notions such as "place your trust in God" (*tevekkül*), viewing these religious practices as contributing to a perception of religiosity as irrational. In turn, I observe that participants often construct their secular identities in reaction to such practices.

The condescending attitude that diminishes religion under the name of modernization and development is a characteristic feature of secular hegemony. This, in turn, reminds us of neo-Ottomanist discourses, which frame the Ottoman Empire's long reign as an achievement of Islam, thereby undermining secularity. Such attitudes denigrating secularity are similar to the dismissive attitudes denigrating religiosity, as both sides neglect the historical context in their narratives. Specifically, religious discourses that attribute imperial political power to religious success and secular discourses that associate modern political power with secular hegemony employ similar tactics to assert dominance. In our view, this shared approach is one of the underlying causes of the disrupted religious-secular interaction.

Not only do participants' experiences with both hegemonies contribute to their openness to compromise, but their shared educational backgrounds and liberal orientations further facilitate their in-between disposition. Their reflections reveal that, while their idea of the "inevitability of secularity" serves as a foundation for justifying their secular worldview, the contradictory practices within secularity itself acts as mechanisms for self-criticism and refinement. This process, in turn, reinforces their commitment to secularity by continuously redefining its meaning to explain "true" secularity. In contrast, when assessing religiosity, secular participants tend to employ the practice of religion as evidence to characterize Islam as "inauthentic" or "ambiguous," thereby rejecting the notion that religion possesses a "true" or inherent

meaning.

4.2 Feeling Neighborhoodlessness

Participants experience dual hegemony from both groups, which in turn often renders partisanship meaningless for many of them. This dynamic leads them to feel a sense of lack of belonging. They observe heterogeneity in both religious and secular contexts and notice the existing forms of religious and secular culture deviate from their ideal promises etc. I have coded their observations as "seeing diversity" and "seeing problems," with the focused code being "feeling neighborhoodlessness." Under this code, I analyze how their experiences have prevented them from feeling a sense of belonging to either side.

Hakan's narrative highlights his exposure to a pluralistic social environment that shaped his worldview. Growing up in a district with diverse cultural and religious identities, including Armenian, Alevi, Sunni, Islamist, and Kemalist influences, made him aware of societal heterogeneity. His statement that Amasya's cultural diversity affected him suggests that early exposure to different groups fosters an openness to multiple perspectives:

> Since my district, as I mentioned, is home to diverse identities, one of my friends, for example, was Armenian. His father's family had migrated from our town. Their numbers had already decreased when we were children, and now there are only a handful of people left, but such families still exist. Since Amasya has many different cultures, that also influenced me to some extent. I had the chance to see different people there as well…I constantly found myself caught in conflicts—Alevi-Sunni, Islamist-Kemalist, religious-secular. Then I thought, this has no end. And everything was about identity, not perspectives or ideas that offer real arguments. That's why my surroundings and what I witnessed had a significant impact on me. On a subconscious level, I kept reminding myself: Look, there are different kinds of people. That changed me a lot on a personal level (*Hakan*).

Hakan expresses frustration with identity-based conflicts, stating that debates were often about belonging rather than substantive arguments. This observation reflects a broader critique of how identity politics can overshadow rational discussion. His repeated subconscious reminders ("Look, there are different kinds of people") indicate an active internalization of pluralism. This suggests a process of critical self-reflection, leading him to move beyond rigid identity categories. Emre's narrative exemplifies a similar pattern and rejection of rigid identity categories:

> Like an undecided voter in politics, who cannot place himself neither to the right nor the left, I am actually an undecided citizen who is neither religious nor secular. I don't want to define myself as a secular, because those who define themselves as seculars, don't fit my identity very well. The lifestyle of seculars today doesn't sometimes suit me very well... In other words, I think they still cannot embrace and accept freedom. That's why I am not secular if they are secular. I am not religious if they are religious... I am an undecided citizen in-between, I am agnostic in that sense. I'm a deist and I'm running towards atheism. I've completely removed religion from my life, I'm minding my business (*Emre*).

Emre positions himself outside the dominant religious-secular binary, suggesting that both sides impose limiting frameworks. His statement, "I am not secular if they are secular. I am not religious if they are religious," reflects a desire to escape predefined ideological boundaries. While one might assume that distancing from religion equates to adopting secularity, Emre challenges this assumption. His critique of secularity ("they still cannot embrace and accept freedoms") implies that secular identity, as it is practiced, does not align with his values. This highlights how secularity itself can be perceived as rigid or exclusionary, complicating the conventional opposition between religious and secular worldviews. He describes a fluid, evolving stance on belief, moving from deism toward atheism. His statement, "I've completely removed religion from my life, I'm minding my business," signals an individualist approach to faith and identity, rejecting communal or institutional religious structures.

Likewise, Edip's reflection highlights a transformation in perspective through political engagement, leading to a more critical and relativized understanding of the religious-secular divide:

> I never knew the opposite neighborhood. After I got into politics, I saw what it is. Until this time, "We are always on the right side, the other side is always producing lies, evil, blah, blah", I thought we were innocent, but when the truth came out, I saw that both sides could do the same thing…I lost my perception of (religious-secular) parts a little more, to be reasonable rather than being a supporter, there are aspects where both parts are very right (*Edip*).

Initially, Edip perceives his side as inherently righteous and the opposing side as deceitful ("We are always on the right side, the other side is always producing lies, evil"). This reflects the deeply entrenched polarization in Türkiye's political and social landscape, where both religious and secular groups often frame themselves as morally superior. By acknowledging that "both sides could do the

same thing", Edip reveals a moment of disenchantment with binary thinking. This realization disrupts the myth of moral purity within his in-group, leading to a more nuanced and critical approach to political and ideological identities. His statement that he has "lost his perception of (religious-secular) parts" and now prioritizes being reasonable over being a supporter signals a shift from ideological allegiance to a more analytical stance. This mirrors the postsecular condition, where individuals no longer see religious and secular worldviews as strictly oppositional but instead recognize the validity and contradictions of both. His trajectory from ideological certainty to skepticism suggests a growing discomfort with hegemonic discourses on both sides and a search for more flexible, non-binary positions.

Participants overall describe themselves as neither fully aligning with dominant religious nor secular identities, moving beyond rigid ideological frameworks. It offers critical insight into the lived experiences of individuals negotiating religiosities and secularities in a polarized environment. Their exposure to diverse identities reduced their biases and encouraged them to have a more inclusive outlook (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). They cannot make sense of identity-based conflicts since they seem to want to argue the underlying problems behind identity conflicts, such as economic injustices or social discrimination. They express disillusionment with secular and religious labels, criticizing their contemporary associations with ethics and morality. This reflects a broader critique of essentialism in identity politics, where labels fail to encompass individual experiences or values (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

Participants' self-characterization as "an undecided citizen" or "feeling lost" resonates with studies on hybrid identities, where individuals refuse dichotomous categorizations and instead embrace ambivalence (Bhabha, 2012). Their rejection of labels indicates a desire for moral autonomy, suggesting a shift from collective identity norms. This can be defined as the moment the "good-evil" dichotomy collapses, often perpetuated by their recognizing propaganda from both sides. This points to findings from polarization studies that highlight the role of echo chambers in reinforcing biases (Sunstein, 2001).

These perspectives reveal that following a community uncritically –either religious or secular- is associated with moral and cultural decay. Participants are unwilling to be linked to this low social quality and therefore maintain a critical distance from collective structures and cultures. While the literature often associates religious contexts with corruption, participants' observations suggest that similar issues also exist within secular contexts. What distinguishes the participants is their ability to critically examine the environment they inhabit, although some of their reflexivity is high or low. Their recognition of valid perspectives from both sides points to a postsecular ethos, which advocates for reason and dialogue over partisanship. This aligns with Habermasian concepts of deliberative democracy, emphasizing the

importance of communicative rationality in overcoming societal divides (Habermas, 2015).

5. Conclusion

This analysis of multiple hegemonies may contribute to the study of counterhegemonic projects, shedding light on the transformation of secularity. This transformation reflects the concept of social nonmovements, wherein individuals collectively bring about change through unorganized and spontaneous actions (Bayat, 2013). The article has detailed in-betweenness as a form of resistance to both religious and secular hegemonic discursive arrangements. Their reflexive tactic places them in a space where they belong neither entirely to one side nor the other, a condition marked by ideological decline, which underpins what we term a Turkish form of post-secularity. According to our findings, the collision of previous hegemonies (such as Ottoman or Kemalist hegemony) and their reproduction in alternative forms today is a process in which individual and social experiences are both produced and shaped. This process, in turn, influences the formation of religious and secular cultures in Türkiye.

Two key focused codes, *the anxiety of hegemony* and *feeling neighborhoodless*, converge in the axial coding, revealing the dynamic interaction between these experiences. The axial relationship between the codes of "anxiety of hegemony" and "feeling neighborhoodlessness" can be understood as a direct proportion. We term this process *collective reproduction*, which refers to the cyclical relationship between hegemonic religiosity and hegemonic secularity, each reinforcing the other –multiple hegemonies effect.

In this context, *in-betweenness* emerges as a tactic for escaping this vicious cycle. In-betweenness, without being entirely disoriented, involves an acknowledgment of the shortcomings of both Turkish religiosity and secularity as experienced in everyday life. Despite this, most participants still maintain a strong affinity toward one side in terms of lifestyle. Therefore, the fundamental contradiction among the participants lies in their recognition of hegemony on both sides, despite adopting the perceived practices and worldviews of secularity. However, this process of adoption does not hinder their ability to perceive the problems, exclusion, and oppression present on both sides. This situation leads us to define their claims of being in a "Gray Zone" as follows: they occupy it only in certain matters while maintaining considerable clarity in areas that fall outside this zone. In these non-gray areas, their perspectives are notably clear and decisive.

The prevalence of "one-truthness" (*tekdoğruculuk*) in both circles, serves to sustain hegemonies by stifling critical thought about the possibilities of a better life. Participants report that people outside

their experience often fail to understand this state of in-betweenness, and the ongoing negotiation of boundaries leaves them feeling "exhausted." This reminds us how individuals struggle with the experience of a "cross-pressure" between religious and secular hegemonies in modern times (Taylor, 2007).

Individuals are exposed to hegemonic behaviors that seek to shape societal norms and values, promoting their values, accusing others of immorality, belittling alternative lifestyles, and establishing a form of superiority through claims of rationality. According to Habermas's concept of postsecular society, such hegemonies disrupt the rational communicative space of society and hinder the fair representation of different segments.

These young participants find it futile to over-idealize either practical religiosity or secularity. Therefore, their experiences of hegemony blur the boundaries between religious and secular categories. When Habermas defines post-secular society, he distinguishes between two main social groups: religious and secular. However, digital platforms reveal an in-between positionality as a social phenomenon. Individuals in the Gray Zone, typically with higher education, offer a more sophisticated articulation of this middle way, while less sophisticated versions exist as digital platforms display it, which we can describe as moderate public religiosities and secularities along a spectrum.

References

Ağcan, M. A. (2020). The postsecular and rethinking the political. *Journal of Economy Culture and Society*, *62*, 381 - 395

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading/Addison-Wesley.

Altınordu, A. (2016). The political incorporation of anti-system religious parties: The case of Turkish political Islam (1994–2011). *Qualitative Sociology, 39*(2), 147–171.

Altınordu, A. (2021). Is Türkiye a postsecular society? In K. Barkey, S. Kaviraj, & V. Naresh (Eds.), *Negotiating democracy and religious pluralism* (pp. 157–177). Oxford University Press.

Bayat, A. (2013). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East*. Stanford University Press.

Becci, I. (2018). Religious super-diversity and gray zones in public total institutions. *Journal of Religion in Europe, 11*(2–3), 123–137.

Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond "identity". *Theory and Society, 29*(1), 1–47.

Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Çınar, A. (2005). *Modernity, Islam, and secularism in Türkiye: Bodies, places, and time* (Vol. 14). University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. (1991). *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. University of Chicago Press.

Gri Bölge. (2020, July 9). Gri Bölge'nin amacı ve yaklaşımı hakkında kısa bir açıklama [Tweet]. X. https://x.com/gribolgeorg/status/1281269133032804352

Gorski, P. S., Kim, D. K., Torpey, J., & VanAntwerpen, J. (Eds.). (2012). *The post-secular in question: Religion in contemporary society*. NYU Press.

Gökarıksel, B., & Secor, A. (2015). Post-secular geographies and the problem of pluralism: Religion and everyday life in Istanbul. *Political Geography, 46*, 21–30.

Göle, N. (1997). Secularism and Islamism in Türkiye: The making of elites and counter-elites. *The Middle East Journal*, 46–58.

Göle, N. (2012). Postsecular Türkiye. *New Perspectives Quarterly, 29*(1), 7–11.

Gözaydın, İ. B. (2008). Diyanet and politics. *The Muslim World, 98*(2–3), 216–227.

Gramsci, A. (2020). Selections from the prison notebooks. In T. Prentki & S. Preston (Eds.), *The applied theatre reader* (pp. 141–142). Routledge.

Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the public sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy, 14*(1), 1–25.

Habermas, J. (2008). Notes on post-secular society. *New Perspectives Quarterly, 25*, 17–29.

Habermas, J. (2015). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Hall, S. (2021). *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*. Verso Books.

Hodkinson, J., & Horstkotte, S. (2020). Introducing the postsecular: From conceptual beginnings to cultural theory. *Poetics Today, 41*(3), 317–326.

Kandiyoti, D. (2012). The travails of the secular: Puzzle and paradox in Türkiye. *Economy and Society, 41*(4), 513–531.

Kirdiş, E. (2023). Education, media and civil society: The building of an Islamic cultural hegemony in Türkiye. *The International Spectator, 58*(1), 146–161.

Konuralp, E. (2020). Limits of post-secularism in Türkiye: Comparing the attitudes of the Justice and Development Party towards the headscarf and Alevi issues. *Religion Compass*, e12352. https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12352

Laumann, E. O., & Pappi, F. U. (1976). *Networks of collective action: A perspective on community influence systems*. Academic Press.

Mahmood, S. (2005). *The politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.

Mahmood, S. (2015). *Religious difference in a secular age: A minority report*. Princeton University Press.

Molendijk, A. L. (2015). In pursuit of the postsecular. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 76*(2), 100–115.

Parmaksız, U. (2016). Making sense of the postsecular. *European Journal of Social Theory, 21*(1), 98–116.

Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup contact theory. *Annual Review of Psychology, 49*(1), 65–85.

Rosati, M. (2012). The Turkish laboratory: Local modernity and the post-secular in Türkiye. In M. Rosati & K. Stoeckl (Eds.), *Multiple modernities and postsecular societies* (pp. 61–78). Ashgate.

Sivil Sayfalar. (2020, July 24). "Herkesin kendini özgürce ifade edebildiği alanlar yaratmak istiyoruz" [News article]. https://www.sivilsayfalar.org/2020/07/24/herkesin-kendini-ozgurce-ifade-edebildigi-alanlar-yaratmak-istiyoruz/

Smart, A. (2012). Anthropological shades of grey. In I. Pardo & G. B. Prato (Eds.), *Norms and illegality* (pp. 21–40). Routledge.

Stoeckl, K. (2011, February). Defining the postsecular. Academy of Sciences in Moscow. https://synergia-isa.ru/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/stoeckl_en.pdf

Sunstein, C. (2001). *Republic. com*. Princeton University Press.

Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press.

Tuğal, C. (2009). *Passive revolution: Absorbing the Islamic challenge to capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

White, J. (2012). *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*. Princeton University Press.

Wohlrab-Sahr, M., & Burchardt, M. (2012). Multiple secularities: Toward a cultural sociology of secular modernities. *Comparative Sociology, 11*(6), 875–909.

Yavuz, M. H. (2003). *Islamic political identity in Türkiye*. Oxford University Press.

Žižek, S. (2019). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso Books.

Zuckerman, P., & Shook, J. R. (Eds.). (2017). *The Oxford handbook of secularism*. Oxford University Press.

Article Information Form

Authors Contributions: Büşra Kırkpınar contributed to the study by participating in the concept/design of the study, data collection, data analysis/interpretation, drafting of the manuscript, technical/material support, critical revision of the content, and literature review. Nalan Turna contributed to the study by participating in data analysis/interpretation, drafting of the manuscript, technical/material support, and critical revision of the content.

Artificial Intelligence Statement: Grammarly and Quillbot AI-based tools were used for language correction purposes without affecting the content and originality of the article.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure: No potential conflict of interest was declared by authors.

Plagiarism Statement: This article has been scanned by iThenticate.