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**THE TEACHER CANDIDATES' PERCEPTIONS AND  
EXPECTATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND MORAL  
COURSE IN FACULTY OF EDUCATION: A Case In Turkey\***

***EĞİTİM FAKÜLTESİNDEKİ DİN KÜLTÜRÜ VE AHLAK BİLGİSİ  
DERSİNE İLİŞKİN ÖĞRETMEN ADAYLARININ ALGILARI VE  
BEKLENTİLERİ: Türkiye Örneği***

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**Özet**

Eğitim, gelişim sürecindeki Türkiye'de bireylere bilimsel ve laik perspektif kazandırma çabasıyla bugüne kadar olduğundan daha da fazla önem kazanmıştır. Laik eğitimde, okullardaki Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi dersinin, ilgili formasyona sahip üniversite eğitimi öğretmenler tarafından verilmesi beklenmektedir.

Bu çalışma, öğretmen adaylarının almakta oldukları dersle ilgili algılarını ve beklentilerini belirlemeye odaklanmıştır. Katılımcılar Eğitim Fakültesi sınıf öğretmenliği Anabilim Dalı'nda son sınıfta okuyan 11 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Görüşmeler, öğretim dönemi başı ve sonu olmak üzere focus grup tekniğinden yararlanılarak iki oturumda gerçekleştirilmiştir. Analizde içerik analizi kullanılmıştır.

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Bulgularda, katılımcıların dönem sonu itibarıyla dersin nasıl öğretilceği konusunda hala bilgi sahibi olmadıkları, bunu kendi birikimleriyle uygulayacakları belirlenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye’de Laik Eğitim, Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi, Öğretmen adayları.

#### **Abstract**

Education has become more important than ever structuring scientific and secular perspectives for individuals in Turkey’s developmental process.

In secular education, Religious Culture and Moral Course in schooling is expected to be taught by university graduate teachers equipt with its formation. Thus, this study focused on teacher candidates’ perceptions and expectations with the course. Participants were 11 volunteering students attending the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school department in education faculty. Focus group gathered in two sessions being asked 7 questions to discuss. Data were gathered by content analyzing technique. Findings indicated that participants were still lacking the knowledge of formation related with the course, and will be teaching it by their own way.

**Key Words:** Secular education in Turkey, Religious Culture and Moral Course, teacher candidates.

## **1. Introduction**

When having a look at the last 500 years of humanity, it’s found that the Scientific Revolution which took place in the mids of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had given roots for today’s scientific, technologic and contemporary developments in civilization. It is accepted that the Scientific Revolution had started in 1543 with Copernicus’ study in astronomy as a product of the mind. With their scientific studies, the leaders of Scientific Revolution had important success in their struggle against the religious authorities. The enlightening process and Industrial revolution (1759) followed this.

The Western countries after paying too many costs, internalized the secular education concept which became a lifestyle. In this process, Ottoman Empire was indifferent to these developments in Europe. Thus, in the time being, this indifference would cause the Ottoman Empire’s decline.

The great leader and the founder of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk had known the reasons of the Empire’s decline. He knew all about the developments in Western countries that started with Renaissance and Reformist acts and continued with Industrial Revolution. During the developmental process of European countries, the political principles of the regime in Ottoman Empire had still been integrated with religious principles. Indeed, for a long period, this perception has considerably prevented the upbringing of intellectuals who could foresee the situations the society would experience, and who could develop projections for the future in Ottoman- Turkish intellectual world. It is obvious that, this aspect of

Ottoman traditionalism left a very limited opportunity both to the intellectuals and to the whole society.

From the sociological perspective, it is the fact that, the ideas and opinions in favour of improvement could start to develop only if traditional ways of thinking and concepts are put aside. Nevertheless, such a development could not occur in a short time. Having a look at Turkish modernization history, some examples indicate that intellectuals from time to time could not be independent from the influence of traditions, because in a traditionalist perspective, talking about modernization or being contemporary is impossible. Then, no “change” can result in “good”, and, every change results in corruption. That’s why it has to be emphasized that the concept of traditionalism has to be regarded rather than the concept of religion while discussing modernization and social change, because the most important characteristics of Ottoman regime was traditionalism rather than religiosity (Aslan, 2009).

Considering that societies are dynamic, it can be said that there is no society that can resist changes forever. In the process of development, some people start giving up their common values, or some others internalize the new values or tend to refuse the changes. However, in societies which go through this process, some conflicts begin to arise, and this can shake the social structure - just as the shake caused by the Declaration of the Republic. Faced with such a change of structure, societies reflexively cling to their most common and highest values. Nearly all of these values are religious values, because religion is the last shelter and the last defensive weapon of tradition (Berkes, 1978, Friedman, 1994). The customs that are related to the social life can easily become religious. In other words, in societies where the traditional values are dominant, people cling to religious values to resist the social changes.

Actually, there is no unchanging society. Since changes under natural circumstances occur slowly and through society’s own dynamics, most of the time they are not noticed. Besides, such natural and slow changes turn out to be parts of social tradition in the time being. However, when abrupt changes occur, especially the changes of which sources are thought to be foreign – like the Republic regime which was not so familiar to Turkish society, the conservative fractions are the first to realize the results of new values. Furthermore, those who lead to or support changes or who mediate for these changes are regarded as irreligious by these fractions. Thus, modernization and religization are contemporary and tend to be one another’s antithesis.

As can be seen, any attempt to change the traditional structure of a society is met with a reaction. But as mentioned above, no society is static and every society goes through a change by some means or other. The impulsive force of this change can be influenced by the society’s own inner dynamics, or other events happening around the world can play a vital role in this. As a matter of fact, the developments that shepherd all nations worldwide towards modernization have

always been the developments in Western European tradition. One of them is the phenomenon of the declaration of the Republican regime and the rearrangement of social life related with it. The most distinctive characteristic of the Republican regime is the substitution of the society which seemed as “theocracy”, and thus considered to be a Muslim Community with the concept of “Nation State”. The “Nation State” established by the Republic started a series of reforms in modernization process. These reforms were mainly covering the social life and culture, as law, education, lettering, and language.

### **1.1. Education and religion in Turkish Republic**

The most effective means of social development was education, and thus it would be necessary to structure the legal regulations which would prepare the basis for this process, as well. In other words, to increase the awareness of political will would be very important. That’s why, after the declaration of the Republic, two basic laws were put into practice concurrently with the abolishment of the caliphship. One of these laws was the one which abolished the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Charitable Foundations. The other was the one which closed all the madrasahs (Muslim Theological Schools), tariqats (religious cults) and small dervish lodges, thus, made the whole education institutions unite under the roof of the Ministry of Education. In November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1928 the political developments and legal regulations to this process were completed with the abolishment of the Article in Constitution which expressed the link between the state and religion. In other words, the fact that the Turkish Republic is a secular state was declared officially. This reform was emphasizing that Republican Period is based upon national sovereignty and the principle of secularism, not on the traditional Islamic – Ottoman understanding.

The model that would cover the whole social life was a Western-social structure. The basic characteristics of this structure are nationalism, a national economy and a scientific way of thinking. The reason why Atatürk, who valued scientific methods much, structured his principles on and perceived Western civilization as the objective was that the West had a lifestyle based on science which had universal values. According to him, the internalization of the basic principles of Western civilization would maintain the universality of the revolution (Kongar, 1994: 120).

In addition to the legal system structured by the Republican regime, education was very important to deal with. The process of modernizing the education system has been more problematic than the legal system. While law regulates the relationships among people according to certain rules, education should be functioning in adapting people to a system based on these rules. Republic would be functioning in putting the Turkish society into the framework of modern civilization. In this sense, it can be claimed that Republican regime had two major

missions. The first one is to change the understanding of traditionalism. The second is to substitute the traditional values with rules, organizations appropriate to this framework and to establish the link between the traditional and the modern era by having new generations socialized into the requirements of this framework. From this perspective, all the social changes of the Republican period are the acts of modernization and contemporarization (Yalçınkaya, 1996).

Within these circumstances, the new regime would naturally require a modern and contemporary education for the new state and a social structure which would be rearranged. The law that introduced this system was accepted and put into practice on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1924 (Koçer, 1967: 73). This law explained that the traditional educational institutions called Madrasahs (mostly religious education was given in these institutions), which had continued for centuries and were degenerated in the last decades were closed down, and that it would be compulsory to open and spread institutions which would give education in a modern way under the administration of the Ministry of Education. During this period, important changes in education and accordingly social life were structured. However, bringing up democratic and secular individuals has not been easily structured. Although the institutional structures and legal bases of democracy and secularism have been improved considerably, a democratic and secular culture has not been established properly (Tezcan, 1983: 130). This is completely a cultural problem. The formation of a culture of democracy and secularism in Turkish society definitely requires a longer time just as it did in Western societies. However, the Republican regime has started to root in Turkish society. The basic function of educational system will be to deepen and strengthen this root.

The founders of the Republic, who considered secularism the cornerstone of the Republic, did not exclude religious education from the system. The most obvious indicators are that, schools which will educate religious officers were opened, Department of Religious Affairs was founded to conduct religious affairs (Tosun, 2005), and the Holy Qoran was translated into Turkish. Nevertheless, education of religion has always been problematic in the history of Republic and it has still been. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is the fact that the phenomenon of religion has turned out to be a problem of culture and identity against the wave of globalization worldwide. There is a close relationship between the individuals' identity and their cultural heritage (Tok, 2003: 29). It is argued that increasing migration movements in developed countries causing various ethnic and cultural groups to live together, the crisis of global capitalism which intensified in 1970s and the increasing poverty of the Third World countries causing nation state to lose power have resulted in the nation state's losing strength. In this case, the question is what people would do to keep their identities and cultures. The answer of this question is shortly "groups". For instance, they can have such labels as ethnic / religious minorities. No matter what the reason is, it can be said that with the effects of globalization, culture has started to determine individual, ethnic and cultural identities more than ever (Toffler, 2008).

In this case, education has become more important than ever in structuring the scientific and secular perspectives for individuals. That means teachers' responsibilities increased more than ever in that developmental process in Turkey.

## **1.2. Education of Religion in Turkish Education System**

In Turkish education system, there are a number of schools having education of religion such as some vocational High schools, some Theology faculties, also some official courses (Kavcar, 2005). Besides these, in elementary and in high school curriculum there are "Religious Culture and Moral" courses compulsory for the students. Being compulsory has been a discussion point in the last decade in Turkey. However, one of the most important issues in the secular education is that Religious Culture and Moral course in schools should be taught by university graduate teachers with the formation of it. For this purpose Ministry of Education and Higher Education Committee (YÖK) have included it to the curriculum of Education Faculties. The elementary school teacher candidates have this subject in their last year of faculty education. It is expected that the teacher candidates will be having formation on how to teach this subject in their classes as they have formation on other subjects in curriculum.

The purpose of this study was to inquire the teacher candidates' perceptions and expectations with the course "Religious Culture and Moral" at the beginning of the semester before they took the course, and their expectations and satisfaction with its content at the end of semester.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Sample**

Among 35 fourth grade students elementary school department in Faculty of Education in Izmir, a group (n: 11) of volunteering students participated in this study. Participants were between the ages of 21-24 (mean= 22, 3) including 5 females and 6 males.

### **2.2. Instruments**

The data were gathered by the focus group technique which has been more valued among social science researchers. Open-ended questions developed by the researchers were asked. 3 of the fourth grade students participated in the pilot study. The focus group of eleven students gathered in two sessions. The first one was at the beginning of the semester before the students took the course of "Religious Culture and Moral", and the second one was at the end of the semester.

The aim of the session at the beginning of the semester was to learn the participant students' perceptions and expectations for this course. Thus, the group of 11 participant students was asked to discuss on the questions such as;

- 1) What do you think about the Religious Culture and Moral course being taught in the last year of Education Faculty?
- 2) What do you think about the content of the course?
- 3) How do you think the evaluation will be?
- 4) Do you think this course is necessary to take?

This session lasted two and half hours.

In the second and the last session which was at the end of the semester, the same participants were asked to discuss:

- 1) What do you think about Religious Culture and Moral course being taught in the last year of Education Faculty?
- 2) What was the content of the course?
- 3) How was the evaluation?
- 4) Considering the academical knowledge you achieved during this course, do you think you have had necessary formation to teach it?
- 5) What were the shortages of the course?

These topics were discussed with the participants in a warm atmosphere and recorded on a tape-recorder. It lasted three hours.

### **2.3. Analysis**

The content analysis was used. The names were coded and the responses were grouped according to the questioned topics.

### **3. Findings**

The findings were grouped in two categories as; the first session results before they took the course and the second (last) session results at the end of the semester. Within this framework, the participants' perceptions and expectations with the course of Religious Culture and Moral were analyzed.

#### **3.1. The First Session**

*The Reason of Taking the Course in the Last Year of the Faculty:* All the participants emphasized that Religious Culture and Moral is a subject that will

contribute to child's socialization. Being members of the society, children should be equipped with moral values. Basically, this course should emphasize this, and religious culture is only a part of this content. All of the participants added that religion should not be considered as learning the rituals of religion, but learning the norms and values of the society. The other important issue was that the other basic religions would be discussed. And they would be emphasizing their students to be tolerant to other beliefs. Thus, as teachers they would be transmitting the required knowledge to their students. For this purpose, they thought they needed the knowledge and formation to teach it:

*“We are not the authority in religion but we will be teaching the truths on the subject and try to keep the balance between the child and the parents.”*

*“We should keep the children's minds away from dogmas and misinformation they already have.”*

*“A teacher should not impose his personal beliefs to the children but know what and how to teach objectively.”*

*“In Turkey, standart and objective knowledge of religion and moral is necessary to teach in schools. For this purpose the teachers should have the formation of this course.”*

***Expectations about the Content:*** The participant teacher candidates all emphasized that the content should basically be on Moral which is considered to be the basis of religious culture and social structure. Second, they expected the content would include the knowledge of all religions but they were not sure for this. They thought Islam might be the central topic as it has always been in the courses in schools since their childhood. Third, they also expected to find the history of religions.

***Evaluation of the Course:*** The participants thought it may be as discussions, and visiting some places of worship.

***Necessity of the Course:*** The participant teacher candidates thought this subject necessary for them to take, because they would be the ones who will be teaching this to their students in school. Therefore, they believed that they should take it.

### ***3.2. The Second (the last) Session***

***The Reason of Taking the Course in the Last Year of the Faculty:*** The teacher candidates stated that the reason of having this course in the last year was that they would be more equipped with formation of teaching.



***The Content of the Course:*** The students mostly mentioned that the content of the course was focused on:

The philosophy of religion and history of religion.

Comparing the other religions with Islam.

Principles of Islam and its importance.

However, the participant students insistedly emphasized that the course covered Islamic knowledge more than the other issues.

***Evaluation of the Course:*** Classical methods as midterm and final exams were applied.

***The Acquisition of Necessary Formation:*** All the participants reported that they were not satisfied with the course because they still did not know how to teach it:

*“We wanted to have the formation of it as we already had in other courses in the Faculty. But, instead, we had had a regular knowledge of religious culture and little on moral as we had taught in schools before we started the Faculty.”* That was the chief disappointing issue for them.

However, all the participants added that they themselves would be finding out the best ways of teaching it by reading and searching more about it.

*“We will transmit our potential knowledge about the subject while teaching it to our students, and we’ll emphasize the importance of tolerance to other beliefs.”*

They all agreed to avoid the mistakes their teachers had made in teaching religious culture and moral in previous schooling. These teacher candidates were indeed aware of the responsibility of teaching this subject in the Turkish society where most of the parents are not well educated and may not approve the contemporary views the teacher transmits to the students. Thus, the participants emphasized that they should be very careful while talking on especially religious topics. However, they said they would have no problems in teaching topics related with moral.

***The Shortages of the Course:*** The participants all emphasized that they could not find answers to any of the questions in their minds about how to teach this course:

*“Still, we don’t know anything about how to teach this course when we start teaching in our schools in future.”*

They said they couldn’t communicate with the professor as the lecturer during the courses related with their formation. They said they would prefer an elementary school teacher as a lecturer so that he would probably know the real

applications and problems related with the subject. Besides, all of the participants agreed that they would do their best to find the proper answers to their students' questions about religious topics.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study focused on the teacher candidates' perceptions and expectations for "Religious Culture and Moral" course in Faculty of Education in Ege University. The participants all agreed that this course has to be taught by well-equipped, contemporary teachers by having its formation in their faculties. However, these teacher candidates who would be teaching this course in the next couple of months in their schools were pessimist. They all stated that they did not have any formation of it and thus, they would try their own way to teach it. Besides, the participants were aware of the importance of teaching religious subjects in a secular education system in Turkey. Teaching religion in schooling system has been a hard job for teachers not only because it deals with metaphysic issues, but more than this, because of the social conditions and practices. In society, the believers or nonbelievers have certain perceptions and attitudes for religion (Zümürüt, 2005). Therefore, the expectations of individuals related with the education of religion differ from one another. Thus, the teachers of religious culture and moral course have a great responsibility in being equipt with its formation and knowledge. If not, those teachers may harm both religion and institutions (Aydın, 2000). During the child socialization process in the family circle, he achieves the religious knowledge and moral values before starting the school. The knowledge transmited to the child by the parents basis on the parents' values which will be differing according to their cultural and educational background. Thus, specifically teachers who are teaching this course in elementary schools should be more careful and should consider their students' background knowledge of religion while teaching them (Zümürüt, 2005).

Up to now, this course was taught by the teachers -who are few in numbers- graduated from theology faculties. Therefore, until the time when the branch teachers for this course will be trained adequately by quality and quantity in Religious Culture and Moral teaching departments in education faculties, the present system applied in education faculties should be strengthen and supported by the necessary knowledge the teacher candidates needed.

The teacher candidates all stated that this course should cover not only emphasizing the religion of Islam and its history but also the other worldwide religions. The course, they said, should focus on moral which the human behavior is based on, and should emphasize the tolerance and flexibility to other beliefs which the individuals of globalizing world need. Since the societies and cultures started to be familiar with each other much more than ever by the effects of globalization, today's teachers are expected to prepare the young generations for

these rapid social changes. Moreover, considering the differences in beliefs in Turkish society, this course should be optional in Turkish education system, and should be supported by sociology and philosophy.

It is important to state that the Turkish society is undergoing a rapid social change from being a traditional, rural, and patriarchal society into an increasingly urbanized and industrial society. Values and attitudes, however, seem to lag behind changing social structures and functions (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1981; 1996a). Thus, Turkish education system insistently needs well-equipped teachers for keeping the secular system on and carrying the society to the contemporary world for future.

If the religious culture and moral courses are taught objectively and effectively by qualified teachers of future, this will be contributing to bridging cultures through education for future.

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