

SECULARIZING THE GOD: DEVELOPING A *SUI GENERIS* CIVIL RELIGION THROUGH SECULARIZATION OF ISLAM IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Aiming to renovate Turkey into a modern secular State, the first President of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, embraced the model of western societies and abandoned the Islamic legacy of the Ottomans. To materialize his westernization, Kemal declared secularism as a key principle of transformation. However, the Turkish secularization was not only circumscribed by excluding religion from the public sphere (like French secularism laïcité) but also by systematic modification and alteration of fundamental principles and practices of traditional Islam under State supervision. Pro-Kemalist secularists argued that Islam as a political religion is incompatible with modernism; hence, the Westernization of Turkey would not be possible unless Islam is reformed and regulated. Against this backdrop, this article scrutinizes the credibility of the Kemalist secularist claims by comparing the Turkish case with Bangladesh - a State imbued with alleged juxtaposition of Islamic tradition, western political system, and secularism. By scrutinizing the elements of secularism and westernization, this article will argue that there is little if not complete lack of theoretical basis behind the pro-Kemalist secularist claim of religion's (especially Islam) need to be controlled; that the justifications of Kemalist secularists' secularization and westernization as a means to control and modify Islam are irrational and politically motivated; and finally that the hybridization of Islam through secularization converted the Turkish secularism into a sui generis civil religion which has prejudiced the distinctiveness of both secularism and Islamic tradition.

I. PROLOGUE

John Adams, the former President of the United States, remarked that there is no government which has the power to contend “human passions, unbridled by morality and religion.”¹ This statement indicates that it is necessary for the State to consider people’s religious passions to have a reasonable control over them. However, what would be the case if the State in a certain way controls people’s religious passions by systematically controlling their religious practice and beliefs? Is it possible to use secularization to dictate

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¹ Bellah, R. N. & Hammond, P. E., *Varieties of Civil Religion*, 1st ed, New York, 1980 at p. 17.

one's idea of God or to force one to see religion in a particular way? If a State tries to control, modify, or alter a religion in the name of secularism, can that still be considered as secularism or will such neo-religious ideology be considered as a civil religion? The answer to these questions can be found by looking into Turkey, which presents one of the most discussed yet controversial secularism models for its unique *laicism* (secularization) which apparently has mechanism to control religion (especially Islam) in both public and private spheres.

II. INTRODUCTION

After the fall of the pro-Islamic Ottoman Empire in 1923, the Turkish Republic emerged under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. Kemal as the first President of Turkey with the view to renovate Turkey into a modern secular state embraced the model of western societies to abandon the Islamic legacy of the Ottoman. To actualize westernization, *Kemal* declared secularism as one of the key principles of transformation (from pro-Islamic Turkey to pro-western modern Turkey). However, the secularization (*laicism*) in Turkey was not only circumscribed by excluding religion (i.e. Islam) from the public sphere (like French secularism model *laïcité*) but also by systematic modification and alteration of the fundamental principles and practices of Islam under state's supervision. It was argued by Kemal and later, by the pro-Kemalist secularists that Islam as a political religion has elements that are incompatible with modernization² and hence, the westernization of Turkey will not be possible unless Islam is reformed and regulated.

This article scrutinizes the credibility of the Kemalist secularist claims by comparing the situation of Turkey with Bangladesh, a State where there is an alleged juxtaposition of Islamic tradition, western political system and secularism. In light of this comparison and by scrutinizing the elements of secularism and westernization, this article will argue: firstly, there is little if not complete lack of theoretical basis behind the pro-Kemalist secularists' claim that religion (especially Islam) needs to be controlled to establish secularism; secondly, the justifications of Kemalist secularists to use secularization³ to control and modify Islam in the name of secularism and Westernization are irrational and politically motivated; finally, the hybridization of Islam through secularization converted Turkish secularism into a *sui generis* civil religion which has prejudiced the distinctiveness of secularism and Islamic tradition.

² Kuru, A. T., *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*, New York, 2009 at p. 176.

³ The article used both secularism and secularization, but they are not used interchangeably rather secularism is used as the principle as reflected in the Constitution and secularization indicates the different measures taken to realize the principle.

This article will establish these arguments in three parts. Part III will delineate the standard principles of secularism and compare them with the Turkish secularism to show that Turkey exceeded the threshold of secularism. Part IV will scrutinize the limitations of the justifications for controlling religion in the name of secularism and westernization by comparing Turkish case with Bangladesh. Part V will discuss how Turkish control based secularization is a way to establish a civil religion to control the citizens and pacify pro-Islamic political force.

It is pertinent to mention that this article does not intend to give a complete normative insight of the secularism in Bangladesh. The reason for including Bangladesh as a case for comparative analysis is to show that the Islamic tradition, secularism and modernism can be imagined under one umbrella. However, whether or not this juxtaposition is possible in the context of Bangladesh is beyond the scope of this article and the limited discussions on the nature of secularism in Bangladesh are merely for clarifying the Turkish case.

III. THE THRESHOLD OF SECULARISM AND SECULARIZATION: WHERE TURKEY STANDS?

A. *Setting the Context: Influence of Kemalism⁴ and Kemalist Secularist in Turkey:*

The article's approach of arguing in light of the pro-Kemalist secularist perspectives⁵ may appear a little confusing because since 2002, the Justice and Development Party the JDP (also known as AKP- *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), a pro-Islamic conservative political party retains the executives and legislative authority in Turkey. The reason the Kemalist perspective is accounted here is because Kemalist secularism is a fundamental tenet of *Kemalism* which is the Constitutionally recognized state ideology⁶ and state imposed secularization introduced by Kemal, has not been modified even after the JDP secured political authority in Turkey. Ahmet T Kuru in explaining the reason (for such inability to reform) observed that the JDP was unable to reformulate Kemalist

⁴ Kemalism refers to the idea and principles expounded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. These principles are collectively known as Kemalism which is a constitutionally recognized official state ideology. These principles entail: republicanism, statism, populism, laicism, nationalism, and reformism, See, Tuncay, M., "Kemalism" at. <<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0440>> (Last visited on April 12, 2016)

⁵ In this article, pro Kemalist secularists belong to political party of Mustafa Kemal rather all other individuals and institutions which are influenced by the Kemalist ideology.

⁶ Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982, Article 2.