Post-secular geographies and the problem of pluralism: Religion and everyday life in Istanbul, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The concept of post-secularism has come to signify a renewed attention to the role of religion within secular, democratic public spheres. Central to the project of post-secularism is the integration of religious ways of being within a public arena shared by others who may practice different faiths, practice the same faith differently, or be non-religious in outlook. As a secular state within which Sunni Islam has played an increasingly public role, Turkey is a prime site for studying new configurations of religion, politics, and public life. Our 2013 research with devout Sunni Muslim women in Istanbul demonstrates how the big questions of post-secularism and the problem of pluralism are posed and navigated within the quotidian geographies of homes, neighborhoods, and city spaces. Women grapple with the demands of a pluralistic public sphere on their own terms and in ways that traverse and call into question the distinction between public and private spaces. While mutual respect mediates relations with diverse others, women often find themselves up against the limits of respect, both in their intimate relations with Alevi friends and neighbors, and in the anonymous spaces of the city where they sometimes find themselves subject to secular hostility. The gendered moral order of public space that positions devout headscarf-wearing women in a particular way within diverse city spaces where others may be consuming alcohol or wearing revealing clothing further complicates the problem of pluralism in the city. We conclude that one does not perhaps arrive at post-secularism so much as struggle with its demands.

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The political role of religion has emerged as one of the most urgent philosophical and practical questions of our time (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 1994; Gorski, Kim, Torpey, & VonAntwerpen, 2012; de Vries & Sullivan, 2006). One of the buzzwords of an upsurge of attention to the role of religion in politics has been post-secularism. Post-secularism refers primarily to European contexts where religion is playing a renewed role in pluralistic public spheres (Habermas, 2008). Yet the term has also been applied beyond Western Europe, and recently scholars have begun grappling with the implications of the post-secular in Turkey as well (Göle, 2012; Komeçoglu, 2012; Rosati, 2012; Walton, 2013). An institutionally secular, democratic state in which religious lifestyles have been ascendant within the public sphere in the past decade, Turkey has been governed since 2002 by a political party (the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP, or Justice and Development Party) that has disavowed its roots in Islamist politics but has effectively combined Islamic values with neoliberal economic policies. Because of the seeming success of this accommodation, when popular uprisings rocked the Arab world in spring of 2011, many observers suggested that Turkey might be a model for the new Middle East (Tait, 2011). But is the Turkish model destined to flounder on the problem of how religious and non-religious ways of life can accommodate one another in a pluralistic public sphere? Key to Habermas’ idea of post-secularism is the integration of religious ways of being within a public arena shared by others who may practice different faiths, practice the same faith differently, or be non-religious in outlook. Yet the problem of pluralism has proven to be a thorny one, not only Europe (see Cesari, 2005; Ehrkamp, 2010, 2012; Gale, 2005; Hancock, 2008) but in the Middle East as well (Muashar, 2014).

Despite the importance that religion is theoretically accorded in politics today, few studies attempt to bridge the gap between the transformations of secularism and religion writ large and the daily practices and ordinary discourses through which these are dynamically and spatially constituted. Indeed, Michele Dillon (2012: 21) has argued that the key to understanding the role of religion in the Middle East is “to free ourselves from the idea that religion is a constant or universal element” and to begin with an understanding of how the secular is “constituted and reconstituted” in particular social, political, and economic contexts around the world. 

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Turkey is a prime context for studying the new configurations of religion, politics, and public life that mark our current era. While critical attention to secularism may provide a fresh viewpoint on Western Europe and the U.S., the topic has no less than dominated Turkish studies since the second part of the 20th century (Kuru & Stepan, 2012; Mardin, 1981, 2006, 2011; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Ozuñe, 2006; Tarhanlı, 1993; Yavuz, 2009). The Turkish mode of “strong secularism,” in which the constitution both removes religion from the public sphere and gives the state control of religious activities, is similar to French laïcism in its emphasis on the protection of the political process from the influence of religion (Berkes, 1964). At the time of the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, this meant not only pushing religion into a newly designated ‘private sphere’ (Çinar, 2005), but extending the arm of the state to the administration of mosques and the training of religious personnel through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA). Further, all religious activities that did not fall under the control of the DRA, such as Sufi sects, brotherhoods (tarıktas), and religious schools (medrese), were outlawed. Yet with Turkey’s transition to democracy in 1945–1950, religion quickly found its way into the populist strategies of party politics. Since the 1980s, many have considered religion and secularism to be a primary political division in Turkish politics (Kaya, 2012; Keyman, 2007). In fact, this way of parsing society has become so overworked that more visionary scholars have called for moving beyond the secular/religious dichotomy to fresh understandings of Turkish society (Kandiyoti, 2012; Göle, 2012). This call is not only academic: the redefinition of the secular is also a political project for the AKP. In October 2010, a member of the AKP charged with drafting the new constitution was quoted in domestic and international media stating, “We respect Turkey’s principles of secularism, but these need to be re-interpreted” (HaberTürk, 2010).

As the devout Sunni political and economic elite has begun to reshape politics and public life in Turkey, questions remain regarding the extent to which difference and pluralism are accommodated in the evolving public sphere. Our purpose is to take the problematic of post-secularism beyond an analysis of institutional politics and the ideology of the ruling elite. We begin by situating the concept of post-secularism and attendant notions of pluralism and the public sphere within the field of their uptake and critique. Taking post-secularism as a problematic that poses certain questions, we then turn to our fieldwork to show how these questions give rise to multiple contingent and embodied solutions in the lives of devout Sunni women in Istanbul. One of the outcomes of this analysis is that we can see how the ‘public sphere’ of engagement and encounter traverses spaces typically coded as public and private in women’s lives. Further, while mutual respect mediates relations between neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family, women often find themselves up against the limits of respect, both in their intimate relations with Alevi friends and neighbors, and in the anonymous spaces of the city where they sometimes find themselves subject to secular hostility. Finally, further complicating the expression of pluralism in Istanbul, we argue that the gendered moral order of city spaces creates ambivalence for devout headscarf-wearing women when they enter into diverse arenas. Building upon geographical approaches to religion and public space, we thus examine the everyday geopolitics of post-secularism, not as an objective statement about the world, but as a problematic that allows us to deconstruct the very categories upon which it is based.

Post-secularism and the problem of pluralism

The concept of post-secularism, which Habermas (2006, 2008) uses to describe a heightened awareness of the role of religion in the public sphere that has come about in response to broader social
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