Analysis of oppositional Islamist movements in Turkey have tended to focus on the doctrines and activities of large, formally organized religious groups. These include the Fetullah Gülen movement (e.g., Yavuz and Esposito 2003) or the activities of other tarikats (religious orders) in Turkey (e.g., Saktanber 2002; Raudvere 2002; Mardin 1993) or the ideologies and local impact of the various Islamist-leaning political parties in recent Turkish past (e.g., White 2002; Yıldız 2003, Ayata 1996).

While these movements and political organizations are the most vocal and visible religio-political groups in Turkey, I want to turn some analytic attention to religiously conservative women’s (and men’s) Koran study groups that are alive and active – if largely invisible – in Turkish society. I will examine the discourse employed in the private spaces of an informal woman’s piety community, especially the way in which the women position themselves vis-à-vis the state and other religious authorities. The fact that the Koran course operates outside the context of Turkey’s Islamist party politics and the many cemaats (the large religious organizations in Turkey) active in Turkey today provides an opportunity to look at the interstices between more highly organized politico-religious movements at a women’s space in which both religion and authority are understood in less widely established and more personal terms.

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The overall goal here is to get beyond the very prominent discourse among many Turkish secularists and some outside observers that conservative Islam is a relatively monolithic movement in Turkish society – a movement many assume is dedicated to tearing down the secular foundations of the modern Turkish republic to replace it with a state based on shariah. The tendency in this secularist discourse is to assume that all public expressions of Islam that are not sanctioned by the state are manifestations of this anti-secular monolith. So, for examples, women who wear the headscarf, attend unauthorized Koran courses, or participate in Koran memorization competitions are seen as threats to the secularist order. This type of discourse mistakes plurality for an ominous unity that is given names such as “fundamentalism,” “Islamism,” or most recently “Islamo-fascism.”

We can see this trend in the current political upheaval in Turkey, where secularists assume that if anyone – inside the government or out – expresses religious ideas or norms not in keeping with the state’s norms, then that person must be part of a movement to tear down the secularist state.

What are the state norms? The Turkish state is not anti-religious or anti-Muslim, but rather the state has attempted to create and impart (through religious education, law, control over religious institutions) “proper” Islam that is compatible with nationalism and “modernity.” This Islam should not be unduly influenced by “false” traditional beliefs or other “harmful” sources (Kaplan 2006:61). And it is the secularist establishment (government, courts, the military) that has decided what those so-called “harmful traditions” are.

Thus the state has set up a dichotomy: “true” acceptable Islam and “bad” dangerous Islam – this is the “Good Muslim-Bad Muslim” opposition that Mahmood Mamdani has analyzed so well (2004). This discourse serves the Turkish secularist establishment well: it most obviously acts to polarize the political field, to create a good “us” vs. a bad “them” – a ploy that has also strengthened in the post-9/11 United States. By homogenizing and objectifying “Islamism” to include anyone that objects to the state’s definition of religion, the secularist establishment solidifies its own political position as protectors of the modern secularist state. These guardians – especially the military and the judicial system – can then act as the deployers of legitimate violence against the so-called threats posed by this “Islamist” monolith.

And obviously, too, this state discourse about Islamism obscures the rich diversity of viewpoints and contestations alive and well among religiously observant Turks. So I give a glimpse into the religious plurality obscured by the state discourse about conservative Islam. This also means, though, getting beyond the dominant forms of religiously conservative rhetoric articulated by the more organized and powerful Islamic political parties and the large religious organizations at work in Turkish society. The women of the Koran course reject in many ways any kind of authority that demands practices and beliefs that are not consistent with their own understanding of what it is to be a good Muslim.

This account is based on research on a woman’s Koran course located in Sincan, a famously religiously conservative town just outside of Ankara. This Koran course was led by a charismatic, intelligent and articulate young woman (she had just turned 20 when...
I met her). This young woman, whom I call Meryem, had only had formal education through the eighth grade, but through participation in cemaat-based Koran courses and through self study, she developed a neighborhood reputation as a young woman who is knowledgeable about the Koran and Islamic law and practices. Besides her role as a sort of hoca (master) of the Koran course, she had worked as a preacher at a local religious radio station two years before I first met her. Her Koran course, which consisted of a core group of about ten women and a never-ending parade of occasional students, met two hours a day, five days a week, to study Arabic, memorize and recite the Koran and listen to a sermon given by Meryem based on the day’s Koran passage.

There is much rich material that came out of this research and I can only provide a few snippets of that material here. What I will highlight is the negotiations that the students and teacher must make to find what they identify as “authentic” Islam, which often means trying to walk a thin line between the secularizing pressures of the Turkish state and the more radicalized religious organizations active in their neighborhood. The Koran course (and outside it) provided an opportunity to critique both the state and the prominent religious movements at work in Turkish society.

Meryem’s course and other courses like it have become increasingly popular in Turkey as part of what has been called the Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening that has blossomed in Muslim majority societies around the world since the 1970s (Mahmood 2005:3). Sincan is well-known for its sympathy to the Islamic oriented parties and more radical Islamist movements. Certainly, Meryem and her students embraced the Islamic revival and championed the Islamist parties in all their guises, often attending political events and rallies in support. The women saw the political parties as the best way to establish a society that made room for—but did not dictate – religious practice. But Meryem herself was not involved in the local network politics and activism that so successfully mobilized members of various lower class neighborhoods to support the Islamist parties that Jenny White has documented (2002).

Indeed, the women, especially Meryem, often expressed suspicion of the Islamist parties (the Welfare or Virtue parties of the late 1990s), even as they most often voted in favor of them. The suspicion was based on a sense that power – especially formal involvement in the government – can corrupt religious expression, a reference to corruption charges that had been leveled at political leaders in the 1990s. In one sermon that spurred a lively discussion, Meryem noted that the prophets of old tended to live modest lives and did not seek power (Süleyman and Davud were exceptions to this). According to Meryem, one side of Satan’s “triangle” of evil was composed of those who sought great wealth (wealthy businessmen), while another side was those who sought great power (the third side were those who sought great fame). The ensuing conversation focused on those in Turkish society who would fit into this “triangle.” Some of those who fit – beyond the usual rich and famous – included a number of wealthy “tarıkatçüler” – those who had joined some of the large tarikats and had benefited from that association.
Another concern was that religion could be used to further political ends and was not an end in itself. In one sermon, Meryem preached that the Koran is not a book of slogans, though some Islamist politicians seemed to sometimes use it as a source of slogans for political purposes. Social and political movements often arise after Cuma namaz (Friday prayers), when a large number of people are gathered and a politically oriented sermon is given. Sometimes these movements are constructive and important as in some of the protests against the banning of headscarved women from the universities, but at other times the movements have lead to destruction and chaos.

These views are in stark contrast to the assumptions that so many members of the secularist establishment have made about religious conservatives, that they are, for example, en masse opposed to secularism or seek to mold the Turkish state into a theocracy along the lines of Iran. Indeed, such oft-heard arguments caused the Koran students never ending exasperation and sometimes deep bitterness. Several of the students, as well as Meryem, had been forced to choose between wearing a headscarf and attending public schools or universities – and all had chosen the headscarf, again seeing God’s commandments (as they perceived them) as being more important than earthly commandments. One young woman had had to quit the university in her third year studying for a biology education degree, since continuing would have meant taking off the headscarf. The sister of another student had immigrated to Australia in order to get a college degree. The women were rather mystified by the state’s often cited rationales for the exclusion of veiled women from public institutions. Some rationales included the claim that Turkish institutions are enlightened institutions and the “backward” Islamic headscarf has no role there; or more ominously, the veiled women were in league with either domestic or international Islamist organizations from Saudi Arabia or Iran who would somehow use the women to bring down the secularist state (note the lack of agency granted to the women themselves).

In fact, a rhetorical device wielded by secularists (both in personal conversation and in the mainstream media) was to point to Iran any time there was a question about loosening the state’s control of religion. For example, one popular newspaper columnist in the mainstream newspaper Hürriyet, argued on more than one occasion that allowing women to wear the headscarf into such public institutions as the universities or the parliament would constitute a compromise with the “reactionary” forces that would certainly lead to other more serious compromises, or a giving into Şeriat forces. For example, allowing a veiled parliamentarian into the assembly would without fail result in a successful movement in which all women would be forced to veil, as in Iran (Çölaşan 1999).

Yet all the women in the Koran course – indeed, all veiled women I knew – saw Iran as an authoritarian, anti-democratic state that held little appeal, and after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, a number of conservative religious women expressed to me their horror that such a regime that would so restrict the rights and movements of women. Meryem more than once preached about the importance of educating girls and incorporating them into society, citing Aziz Meryem as an example of a well-educated woman in Muslim his-
One of the Koran course students said to me in regards to the Taliban, “That’s not Islam. Islam favors the education and freedom of women. They are just wrong.”

Though the women frequently expressed outrage at the claims made by the state about religious conservatives, the women’s attitude toward the cemaats were also not entirely positive. Meryem and her own family had belonged to a cemaat of a Nakşibendi sheik dominant in Istanbul when she was younger, but they had cut off their association with that cemaat a number of years before I met them. Meryem was rather disdainful of the leadership and the practices of the order: she found the hoca to be too overbearing and concerned with petty issues, and she described the zikir services as at least ridiculous, if not blasphemous. For example, she heaped scorn on the visions reported by women participating in these services, likening their visions to delusions.

In sum, Meryem seemed to bristle against authority of any kind in religious matters, taking to heart the notion that the believer has an unmediated relationship to God. She saw herself as a guide to show other women how to cultivate this relationship, while she herself studied Muslim texts – medieval and modern – to enhance her own understanding of and relationship with God. Her students seemed to appreciate this about her, and in fact many of her students were also deliberately not involved with the cemaats, preferring the more individual contemplative Islam Meryem offered. Like the Islamist communities described by Ayşe Saktanber in Turkey (2002) and Saba Mahmood in Egypt (2005), Meryem and her students sought guidance from Islamic law and tradition, looking to the Prophet Muhammad as the exemplar of Islamic thought and behavior, while trying to accommodate this idealized past to the requirements of the contemporary society (cf. Saktanber 2002:164). But unlike those groups described by Saktanber and Mahmood, Meryem’s class functioned outside the more established religious organizations, such as the cemaats and the Islamist parties, and actively carved out a relatively independent space in which women could create their own methods for religious development, rather than passively receiving religious instruction from a more remote, usually male, authority.

One thing I should make clear, though, was that there were points of debate within the Koran course group – indeed, I do not want to create an impression that the group itself was somehow homogenous. One point that created a bit of tension with in this group relates to the nationalist sentiment that swept through Turkish society during my initial fieldwork period. Because of a series of events relating to Kurdish separatists, Turkish nationalism reached an almost fever pitch in 1998-1999. Several of the Koran course students had placed nationalist placards on the walls of their homes and suggested that they might vote for the nationalist party in the 1999 elections. This clearly bothered Meryem, who visibly bristled when one student discussed her nationalist opinions about foreign policy. While Meryem did not directly tell her students not to align themselves with nationalist interests – she did not see herself as having this sort of authority – she did clearly state on a number of occasions that the subordination of religious concerns to nationalist interests was a corruption of “religious principles” – comparable to putting human creations before divine creations. For her, the ultimate authority is God’s authority, thus the ultimate allegiance
should be to the Muslim community, the broader ummah that stretches beyond the Turkish borders.

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