

'Ne mutlu ateistim diyene'¹

Atheism

&

The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey

The purpose of this research project is to investigate contemporary discourses on **atheism in Turkey**. In doing so, it will not only produce a detailed overview of the situation of Turkish atheists, but, moreover, will retrieve information on the present human rights situation in Turkey, in particular with regard to the freedom of belief and conscience and the freedom *of* and *from* religion. Atheism in the Islamic world is still a widely neglected issue in academia. Consequently, this research will provide an important piece to the jigsaw of global atheism and hopefully help to encourage further research on atheism in the Islamic world.

The issue of atheism in Turkey must be seen as embedded into a wider (counter)hegemonic discourse on **the politics of culture**. Political power in modern, capitalist societies, as outlined by Antonio Gramsci in his famous *Prison Notebooks*, works through consensus more than force. Consensus, however, is based on the ruling elite's ability to obtain cultural hegemony and to establish its world view as the commonly accepted norm. Accordingly, culture must be seen as a site of ideological struggle and a terrain of containment and resistance, in which different world views and ways of life compete with each other. From this perspective, the question of how a person lives—or, more particularly, how a person displays his or her way of life publicly—can easily turn into an ideological power struggle, resulting in the stigmatization of the ideological 'Other.' Lifestyle presence, in this sense, can be an efficient means to lay claim to public space and to demand or contest political power.

¹ "Happy is the one who calls himself an atheist." Adaption of the phrase "Ne mutlu Türküm diyene" ("Happy is the one who calls himself a Turk"), which goes back to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Until a few years ago, Mustafa Kemal's words have been an integral part of the Turkish Student Oath. In its function as a pledge of allegiance to the Turkish nation, the phrase has to be considered politically sensitive; not only as a reference to Mustafa Kemal, but as a symbol for the denial of cultural pluralism in Turkey.

The issue of atheism will be investigated from this perspective. On a related note, this project aims to bring together researchers from different academic fields who are interested in engaging in critical discussion on the politics of culture in contemporary Turkey.

The present study, which relies on a cooperation between the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at the Philipps-Universität Marburg and the Department of Sociology at Istanbul Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi (BAU), will approach the issue of atheism from different angles. In a first step, qualitative expert interviews will be conducted with representatives from **Ateizm Derneği** ('Atheism Association'), Turkey's first representative body of atheists, and **Ateist Dergi** ('Atheist Journal'), a monthly magazine which considers itself as a platform for the dissemination of non-theistic, humanist, and secularist thought and ideas. This focus on atheist actors in the first place aims at mapping Turkey's 'atheist field,' and, moreover, at gaining an overview of the legal and political situation of Turkish atheists, their needs and demands, their organizational structures, and their tactics for visibility in the public sphere. The latter directly leads to the question of (counter)hegemonic discourses in regard to Turkey's presently dominant culture of religious conservatism.

In a second phase, the 'atheist field' will be further explored by conducting **biographical interviews** with Turkish atheists. Drawing on biographical experiences will not only help to learn more about how individuals are being socialized into atheist thought, but also to study the politics of everyday life as related to the presence of atheist lifestyle practices. Studying the individual experiences of the 'deviant (atheist) other' will enable the researchers to identify the mechanisms of social pressure and dominance ('*mahalle baskısı*') and to better understand how atheist lifestyle practices pose a challenge to the dominant culture of religious conservatism. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the (counter)hegemonic discourses on atheism, it will be also necessary to study the content and discussion of selected **social media** sites on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Finally, the present study will also investigate a set of **cultural representations** of atheism and anti-religious lifestyle practices in the fields

of visual and musical arts. For the purpose of publicly displaying the politics of culture in contemporary Turkey, an art exhibition on “Turkish Deviant Art” will be organized in the summer of 2018.