

**THE STRUCTURE, MISSION AND SOCIAL FUNCTION OF  
THE DIRECTORATE OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS**

*This essay dwells upon several aspects of the state-religion relation in Turkey. The author stresses that secularism and the Directorate of Religious Affairs do not contradict with one another. The author emphasizes that the Muslim society is one that generates sound knowledge, rejects misinformation and thus develops and takes knowledge as authority. He points out that the concept of 'sound knowledge' refers to a struggle against superstitions, errors, ignorance, injustice and religious abuse. He concludes by stating that the Directorate of Religious Affairs has adopted the goal of embracing all people regardless of their religion.*

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**I**t will be useful to present an overview of the historical origins of the Directorate of Religious Affairs before moving on to its structure, legal basis, social and institutional functions. The Directorate of Religious Affairs is not a novelty in Turkey; it has its roots in our history. The Directorate which is one of the modern expressions of our culture and civilization can be associated with our Ottoman past.

a) It would be wrong to claim that the Directorate of Religious Affairs has carried on the institution of the Ottoman ‘Şeyhülislâmlık’ (the office of the sheikhulislam) and its structure. These two institutions differ in terms of their functions and mandate. Nevertheless, in the Ottoman society the relations between religion and politics and the organization of religious affairs were regulated by the State in granting total freedom; this was largely preserved and continued in the Republican period with some limitations in the field of authority. In fact, in the Ottoman system, the head of the religious administration was not sheikhulislam but the sultan. Sheikhulislam administered religious affairs on behalf of the sultan.

The ‘kaza’ (office of the cadi) system and cadis in the Ottoman Empire also deserve some attention in this context. Professor İlber Ortaylı has carried out a series of major research projects in this subject. Ottoman cadis reported to the Sheikhulislam but served a multi-functional post including both judicial and municipal services in the present sense. Religious education was a major area of activity of the office of the sheikhulislam and cadis, while all of these functions were separated in the Republican period. Religious education and training was annexed to the Ministry of Education. In the past there was the Ministry of ‘Şer’iye ve Evkaf’ (Religious Affairs and Charitable Foundations) but later on charitable foundations were separated from the ministry as an independent division. The Directorate of Religious Affairs also achieved a new structure under the Republican system as the institution carrying out religious affairs in the society, informing the society on religion and administering places of worship.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs which was created in the Republican period continued the Ottoman experience to a certain extent but was given a structure that complied with the secular structure of the state; it was given the mandate of carrying out religious affairs pertaining to faith, worship and moral principles, informing the society on religion and administering places of worship.

b) I would like to dwell upon the term ‘diyanet’ (piety) used in the Turkish original of the title of the Directorate with a few sentences. In classical religious literature ‘diyanet’ is used as the antonym of the ‘kaza’, i.e. the judiciary. ‘Kaza’ expresses the judiciary and the process by which legal, political and administrative relations among all people are regulated by material institutions through material sanctions while ‘diyanet’ expresses a higher value; the spiritual and moral aspects of life. In other words, ‘kaza’ is the judgment of the judiciary in the present sense and ‘diyanet’ is a process by which people discuss and evaluate their own consistency within their hearts and also take heed of their responsibilities before God. Sometimes the decisions of the judiciary does not satisfy people. People go beyond the strict and normative approaches of the judiciary in their internal world. So the term ‘diyanet’ signifies the consistency, integrity and spiritual piety in a person’s internal world. In that sense, the choice of the word ‘diyanet’ in the Republican period rather than simply using the term ‘religious affairs – din işleri’ can be interpreted as an effort to plan religiousness based on a moral foundation. Other interpretations can also be made, but this is the one I most favour.

c) There is another point that deserves to be mentioned: there is a thesis which suggests that there is no clergy in Islam. However this thesis should not be exaggerated and severed from historical facts. The lack of clergy in Islam means that there is no special class equipped with holy abilities that speaks on behalf of God and religion. Yet since the early days of the Prophet, there have been imams and religious officials rendering religious services and administering worshipping practices in the society. The idea suggesting the lack of clergy in Islam is a higher, more theological idea which pertains to the origins of theology and the message conveyed by religion in the world. On the other hand, the presence of a class rendering religious services relates to practical life and there has always been a class of religious officials. The organization of this class has been shaped by the social structures, institutional cultures and traditions of societies and has existed in various forms such as independent, free, semi-public or public.

In this sense, the concept of ‘diyanet’ does not contradict with the idea of the lack of clergy in Islam. Rather, it covers the social organization of religious officials and services and the maintenance of public stability and strength in the field of religion. So the lack of clergy in Islamic theology does not mean that religious services were delivered in a haphazard fashion and that they were not subject to any controls or organization in the historical experience of Muslim societies.

d) There are three major features of the Directorate of Religious Affairs: its public, free and civilian nature.

1. In terms of its structure, the Directorate of Religious Affairs is a public institution. In other words, it is located within the state organization. Lawyers and scholars have always debated whether this contradicts with the secular structure of the state. In fact, this has to do with the way one views secularism. I would like to refer to the special summary assessment of the Constitutional Court about why secularism and the Directorate of Religious Affairs do not contradict with each other.

As a result of its deliberations, the Constitutional Court concluded that the public structure of the Directorate of Religious Affairs does not contradict with the principle of secularism. How do we perceive secularism then? Secularism is respect shown in religious affairs by the state and the lack of religious intervention in state affairs. However, this does not mean a total severance. Secularism does not entail a total independence and operation in two separate areas. As the Ottoman example illustrates, it is rather a relationship based on mutual respect and balance. In other words, it is an approach that prevents domination but enables communication, solidarity and cooperation towards developing the society further. In conclusion, the Constitutional Court based its judgment declaring that the structure of the Directorate of Religious Affairs does not contradict with secularism on the following facts:

1. Religion does not dominate or influence state affairs.
2. Unlimited and non-discriminatory freedom is granted to the spiritual lives of all individuals, thus providing constitutional guarantee to religion.
3. In order to protect public order and interest, provisions are made in order to limit religious actions and behaviour that go beyond the spiritual world of the individual and have an effect on social life.
4. The state is given supervisory powers over religious rights and liberties as the guardian of the public order and public rights.

The judgment is based on the guarantee extended by the state over religious freedom and the supervision carried out on religious demands in order to prevent them from violating social order. It is also based on an attempt to balance religiously-inspired public demands of individuals in the field of public liberties. Giving sound information on religion to the society, regulating the organization of religious affairs or meeting the demands of the citizens in this field are among the major aims of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The public nature of the Directorate of Religious Affairs stems from its organizational aspect. What matters is the kind of religious services the Directorate of Religious Affairs shall render and the kind of information it will produce during the rendering of these services. The question on the discourse the Directorate shall use while explaining about religion or while informing the public has nothing to do with its public nature. The public nature enters the scene while providing the organization required by the public power and the public order during the rendering of religious services and to establish the balance with other demands and freedoms.

2. The second aspect of the Directorate of Religious Affairs is that it is free in choosing the scholarly and religious discourse it will use. Indeed, no matter how different it may seem, I can safely say that for my term of office and my area of activity, the Directorate of Religious Affairs acts fully with its own initiative, its own scholastic competence and accumulation and with Turkey's scholastic capacity while it delivers religious services, responds to religious questions coming from the citizens or informs people on religious issues. It further pays attention to choosing the most accurate, the soundest and most enlightening preferences and interpretations and to remaining free and original. This is required by the interpretation of the principle of secularism. Because the way a secular state interprets religion is not to display a preference in the religious discourse to be used but to provide freedom to individuals and their collective organizations in the public sphere. A state definition of religion would mean a significant contradiction with secularism. The information Directorate of Religious Affairs relies on while rendering religious services, the religious interpretations it develops, prefers and produces while enlightening the people are directly connected to the capacity in Turkey, the personal and institutional competence of individuals and the accumulation of knowledge in Turkey, and even in the Islamic world.

Of course we cannot claim that all expectations and hopes are fulfilled. This depends on the nature of religious knowledge and the wide possibilities of interpretations in Islam. Looking back 14 centuries of Islamic tradition, it becomes clear that religion has clear provisions but that there have emerged regional and geographical differences in religious traditions and that religious practices may vary.

Moreover, the intellect, individual initiative and interpretation all play a special and exclusive role in Islam. However, this broad possibility for interpretation does not mean that Islam is ambiguous, that it is completely open to interpretation and that it can evolve in different ways through personal interpretations. No matter how open Islam may be to interpretation, it is the holy texts that define the limits of interpretation. Therefore holy texts and the authentic structure of Islam include both the possibility and the impossibility of interpretation. We regard religion as a sociological phenomenon, as an experience that reflects on daily life, that people live and experience and that serve the common interests of people rather than a science fiction narrative constructed and produced at a desk. This constitutes the reason why the Directorate of Religious Affairs always acts on free information in its mission to enlighten the public, why it produces knowledge freely and abstains from extreme or paradoxical explanations. Our religious tradition, our historical religious experience thus reminds us that we operate within an area of limited freedom.

Let me reiterate here that these limitations stem from the nature of the religion, the possibility granted by religious texts and our historical experience. These limitations are not set by its

public nature. However, people have false expectations or misconceptions and they may link the reserved and cautious approach of the Directorate in rendering religious services or of the Faculties of Theology or religious scholars in offering interpretations with this public nature. Both the Directorate of Religious Affairs and the Faculties of Theology act in a consistent fashion in that they are somewhat reserved in their religious interpretations and rarely go outside of mainstream interpretations. This originates not from the public nature and public contacts of religion in Turkey but from Islamic methodology and consistency of generating religious information.

3. The third feature of the Directorate of Religious Affairs is its civilian nature deriving from democracy. Since the majority is Muslim in Turkey, they need to meet their religious needs and to practice their religion freely equipped with true and accurate information, such institutions as the Directorate have emerged on their own. In other words, the Directorate of Religious Affairs has a democratic and civilian foundation. It is not a top-down institution that is detached from real religious life and demands. So while we render the services of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, deliver religious services, inform the society about religion we take our scholarly freedom into account and pay attention to remaining loyal to Islamic methodology of knowledge generation. We also take the experience of Islam of our people as well as their demands and tendencies into consideration. This is a process of education. That is why the Directorate of Religious Affairs follows not extreme ideas and implements but stable experiences that have been tried and proven to bring peace, trust and order to the society. The most striking difference between an academic institution and the Directorate of Religious Affairs perhaps lies here.

We regard the Directorate of Religious Affairs as an institution which takes the religious demands and traditions of people into account and if there are any diversions from these tries to improve them with true and authentic religious knowledge; this is an institution which tries to inform our people by providing them training and education under the light of a scientific and sound religious knowledge. To us, the Directorate of Religious Affairs is not an institution that disturbs and offends people neither condemns their religious experiences and preferences nor denounces them. Neither is it an institution that attempts to impose a certain model of religiousness on people. This is the civilian aspect of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. At this point, both the sensitivities of the public sphere and the sensitivities of free and civil society should be taken into account. The three aspects I referred to above define the structure and function of the Directorate of Religious Affairs today. They further enable us to see the minefield in which it operates.

e) In the tradition of Islam scholars have taken pains to give a certain shape to the social order, public stability and public opinion. Knowledge lies at the foundation of the society. Therefore the Muslim society is one that generates sound knowledge, rejects misinformation and thus develops and takes knowledge as authority.

Indeed there is no clergy in Islam. Muslims do not derive their power, authority and dignity from holy sources. Then where do these come from? From scientific knowledge that overlaps with the main sources of religion, derived from tradition and interpreted according to the needs of the time. However this is not positive science. It is a form of knowledge that is authentic, free and sound within its own methodology. So the Directorate of Religious Affairs needs to strike a fine balance between its knowledge-based freedom and respect for civil initiative. For the Directorate it is equally important to protect scholarly freedom and civil initiative and to take public sensitivity and neutrality brought by its public nature into account.

Sound knowledge means a struggle against superstitions, errors, ignorance, injustice and religious abuse. Theologians have been the ones to continue the struggle against injustice, superstitions, abuse and fanaticism in the Islamic tradition. Religious knowledge involves this

kind of a struggle in its heart. By basing its actions on sound religious knowledge and information, the Directorate of Religious Affairs tolerates various hard-line tendencies that disturb social peace by training, convincing and informing them. This is a minefield full of risks. Piety which is based on emotions rather than knowledge usually remains reserved and withdrawn. It becomes nearly impossible to enlighten people who have surrendered to a certain force, movement and center of attraction in an emotional atmosphere with sound knowledge. In Turkey, the Directorate of Religious Affairs and Faculties of Theology are charged with this near-impossible task. Under these circumstances, success arrives with great difficulty and failure is almost invariably seen as the fault of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and Faculties of Theology. Indeed, it is very difficult to achieve success in this field. It is difficult to tell trainers that they also need training and it is equally difficult to test and challenge the knowledge of a person who sees and defines himself as a true devout Muslim. Despite everything, centers of religious knowledge and the Directorate of Religious Affairs attain a level of success in this difficult task. Full success is not possible in any case. We need to see things from a more optimistic perspective. I have always seen life and its events in a positive light. In conclusion, I can safely suggest that a sound religious tradition and understanding have been established in Turkey after numerous experiences.

f) The piety and religious experiences of Turkey play a very important role and constitute a role model for Islamic countries. Both due to its dynamism and transparency and due to its political flexibility and secularity, Turkey's piety and view of religion constitutes a special example and a role model in the Islamic world and provides a major opportunity for the West. I sincerely think and believe that the Turkish experience has a great deal to contribute if we want to free religion from being the source and cause of violence, tension and disagreement and establish a common ground for peace.

When I refer to dialogue, I mean realizing our differences and coexisting without exaggerating and worrying about them. To me, creating uniform and heterogeneous groups of people with no difference is not a way of establishing dialogue. What is essential is to love each other despite our differences. There are very good examples of this in our history and traditional culture. Apart from the bad and much-debated examples that are perceived as the image of Islam in the West, we also have beautiful examples. We have examples such as Mevlana, Yunus Emre and Hacı Bektaş Veli who extend a loving and peaceful message to the whole world. We have the responsibility of showing and promoting these examples and the West is responsible for getting to know them more closely. Nevertheless, religions can always be manipulated and seen as the source of violence for not being understood or explained well. This is not only valid for Islam but also for Christendom and Judaism. The respective histories of Christendom and Judaism are full of bitter examples of this fact.

g) We can overcome these problems by developing differences in positive ways and by establishing a communication network which will prevent religions from becoming sources of unease, tension, unrest and violence. We cannot claim that violence, tension and unease have no relationship to religion. Yet we should take heed of two potential mistakes. Firstly, the lack of religious education and training will bear grave and serious negative results. This will make it impossible for societies to enjoy the positive contribution of religion to social development. Secondly, religion should not be used for attaining national or international interests, for instance for reaching expansionist targets. These mistakes often follow from one another.

h) Our need to listen to and understand each other is undeniable. This is an aspect that we always need and require. Because where there is knowledge there will always be self-confidence and freedom. A knowledgeable person is one that has self-confidence and is able to leave a sphere of freedom for others. The road to freedom travels through self-confidence. Persons or systems without self-confidence will also restrict spheres of freedom. It is indispensable to

produce and update knowledge through sound, accurate and dynamic methods in order to develop our European Union policies and international dialogue. In other words, religious knowledge should take a form that will bring peace, trust and the joy of peaceful co-existence. We all have things to do and to learn from each other in this respect.

j) As the Directorate of Religious Affairs, we aim to produce a service policy embracing the whole of our population. Our human nature is our common denominator and common identity. In terms of the services rendered by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Islam is our common identity. We have adopted the goal of embracing all people regardless of their religious awareness and level, serving and informing them. This is required by our interest, knowledge and experience. This goal also covers members of other religions.

Emphasizing the free and civilian nature of my directorate rather than its public structure, I would like to state that my biggest wish is to see everyone practicing their own religion, sect or cultural tendencies freely in this land. This is also the impression I gained based on my contacts with other religious leaders. They also displayed the same positive attitude. Then let us reciprocally take the required steps for religious freedom. But we want the same freedom with the same sensitivities to be granted to Muslims, among others, in Europe, in the Balkans, in Western Thrace and everywhere else in the world. No matter where one may be in the world and to which religion one may belong, we should all assist those who cannot practice their religions freely and in line with the public structure and public order. I am happy to see that everyone has reached a certain level of awareness about this issue. I hope that this awareness will be our common point of departure and that we will make use of every opportunity in order to fulfill the responsibility we have to ourselves, to our societies and the whole of humanity.