A Critical Review of Religious Education Policies and Practices of Turkey from the Perspective of Inclusion

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Abstract

This study presents a critical review of religious education policies and practices from the perspective of inclusion. In this sense, it raises the problematics of compulsory and optional religious education courses and Imam Hatip schools, which have an important place in state-religion relationships in Turkey as an inclusive education issue. Considering the education policies and practices that emerged as a result of these policies, it can be argued that no matter how objective, democratic, pluralistic and thus inclusive the discourses the authorities and governments used were, from the very beginning, they did not manage to be independent of any ideology and included exclusive practices in differing aspects. Accordingly, what is expected from the Turkish education system is to embrace an inclusive approach that encourages the representation of all religious groups and atheists and to prioritise "students," not ideologies.

Keywords: religious education; compulsory and optional religious education courses; Imam Hatip schools; inclusion

Introduction

The state and religion relationship has been a matter of debate for a long time, and the role that religion plays in governments and democracies has been a controversial political issue in several states (Madeley 2009). While religion played a significant role in determining the position of the state and gave the authorities power and legitimacy during the Middle Ages, it gave way to such concepts as "democracy," "religious freedom" and "the principle of equality" with the modernisation period (Nieuwenhuis 2012). Although it was expected that the modernisation and secularisation process would lead to a decrease in the influence of religion in state

affairs (Fox 2007), religion started to play an increased role in social, cultural, and political domains all around the world, especially after the 1980s (Appleby 2000; Keyman 2007). Religion, which has the potential to shape the views of individuals about the society and state to which they belong (Özek 1982, 638), has been an important component of social and political life all around the world. While the church was the dominant ideological state apparatus during the Middle Ages, it was replaced by education in terms of its functions in the 20th century (Althusser 1971). Thus, it would be relevant to remark that education, which has been among the factors inherent in modernisation and secularisation (Fox 2007), has been affected by and under the control of religion and religious institutions for a long time and religion has occupied significant roles in determining education policies. Much of the culture-war debate regarding religion in public education has been constructed as a result of the combat between religious conservatives and democratic liberals (Nord and Haynes 1998).

Turkey has experienced constant tensions and violent clashes between its secular-Westernised and conservative-Islamist citizens (Cremer 2016, 285). The Republic of Turkey[1] (TR), which has been exposed to various transformations in terms of state structure and policies from its foundation, underwent important changes within the context of education policies and practices. A brief overview of the history of education policies in Turkey shows that the policies change with the transformation of religion's role in Turkish politics (Gürcan 2015), and every era reflects its own political dynamic in the education system. While education had a conservative and religious character before 1923, it started to have a more secular structure with the foundation of TR; yet in the present day where religion has struck back in policies in Turkey, the role of religion in education policies has come into focus again. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasise that neither conservatives who support making the curriculum and school practices more religious nor secularists who support keeping religion out of school practices and the curriculum have been able to create a plural and inclusive education system and the Turkish education system has been exposed to exclusive practices especially in terms of religious education from the very beginning. Within this context, this study attempts to present a critical review of religious education policies and practices from the perspective of inclusion and accordingly raises the problematics of compulsory and optional religious education courses and Imam Hatip schools, which have an important place in state-religion relationships in Turkey as an inclusive education issue. This study is expected to contribute to the literature in two important ways: First, it provides the readers with a comprehensive and critical analysis regarding compulsory and optional religious education courses and IHSs with special reference to the issue of inclusion. Second, it contributes to the more inclusive discourses gaining ground in both general education and religious education policies and practices in Turkey. This is a review paper that

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[1] The Turkish Republic was founded as a modern nation state on October 29th, 1923, replacing the Ottoman Empire which reigned for 600 years. It is characterised as "a democratic, secular and social law state" in its constitution (The Republic of Turkey 1982, 1). Turkey is a country which is also a candidate for European Union membership and has a population of almost 80 million.

includes description, analysis and interpretation of the literature about the religious education policies and practices of Turkey. In order to reach this aim, we used the data from the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), official papers, book chapters, journals and newspapers concentrating on the historical background of policies of religion in general and religious education in particular, and related them to the political and ideological structure of four different eras. Lastly, we discuss these policies and practices that emerged as a result of these policies from the perspective of inclusion.

Inclusion/Inclusive Education

"Inclusion" in education was first introduced with the concept of integration of children with special education needs in the 1970s and later widened to incorporate broader issues of social class, gender, ethnic group, religious group, mother tongue, etc. (Acedo, Ferrer, and Pamies 2009; Ainscow and Miles 2009; Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Çelik 2017; Florian and Rouse 2009). Thus, there is no agreement regarding the exact definition of the topic among the researchers and international organisations (Hayashi 2014) and various definitions are asserted in this sense. There are some researchers who argue that the concept has both narrow and broad definitions (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Westwood 2013). According to Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006), while inclusion refers to the inclusion of a specific group of students, mainly, but not exclusively, disabled students and/or students with special education needs in "mainstream" education in a narrow sense, it also refers to diversity and how the schools respond to the diversity of all students and covers several features of inclusion in a broader sense. With its well-accepted definition, inclusive education is "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities and reducing exclusion within and from education" (UNESCO 2005, 13). The topic of inclusive education has been one of the central concepts in education policies internationally since the 1990s and international agencies incorporated "inclusion" as a core principle of schooling and education systems (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). Especially UNESCO placed special emphasis on the concept and used inclusive education as a strategy to achieve the goals of "Education for all (EFA)." As a result of EFA, education was affirmed as a fundamental right and inclusive education started to be regarded as "one of the key strategies to address issues of marginalization and exclusion" (Peters 2003, 1). Inclusive education addresses the right to education as a basic human right; however, it is not limited to the right of ensuring schooling for everyone, as it has a much broader meaning (Stubbs 2008). Inclusive education implies that all individuals should be given the opportunity to achieve their maximum capacity and educational potential regardless of their abilities, religion, ethnic identity, social class, etc. (Acedo, Ferrer, and Pamies 2009). Accordingly, it is possible to assert that equality and non-discrimination, which are vital elements of a rights-based approach to education (UNESCO 2005), constitute the main elements of inclusion and that inclusive

education aims to eliminate any kind of inequality and exclusion emerging as a result of differences regarding ability, gender, race, ethnicity, social class and religion (Petrou, Angelides, and Leigh 2009). In addition to the emphasis on equality and non-discrimination, inclusive education focuses on power and participation as well (Stubbs 2008). Thus, it can be suggested that inclusion is related to the power relationships in education and requires the participation of all individuals in the education process. According to Zilliacus (2014), belonging to a minority group in schools creates walls between the majority and the minority and this is mostly concluded with power relations in which the minority has a lower status and feels the need to obey the rules of the majority, causing prejudice, intolerance and discrimination between the peers. Within this context, inclusion can be accepted as a process which aims to reduce the experiences of exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation firstly in the education system and then within school culture by embracing and valuing diversity (Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir 2016; Zilliacus 2014). As for diversity, such differences as disability, language, ethnicity, gender, social class and religion can be considered. However, it is remarkable that while discrimination against disability, ethnic and gender differences draws much attention, discrimination against religious differences draws less attention.

Religious discrimination in a state can take such forms as preferring some religions to others, restricting some religious institutions or sects and putting religious institutions in the same equation with other political or social institutions no matter how opposite the government is to them (Fox 2007). Religion-based exclusions in society can be described as obstructions that are encountered in any domain of social life regarding religion, sect and belief. Ignoring a religion, sect or belief is the most evident type of such an exclusion. Also, statements including insults towards different religions and beliefs in the curriculum and textbooks, and prioritising one type of education (religious or secular) over others, can be given as examples of exclusive religious practices.

From the standpoint of religion, an inclusive education should acknowledge different religions and be prepared to accept diversity and the religious education of children and adolescents should be addressed on the basis of diversity, plurality and a mutual understanding of the various beliefs existing both outside and within each community (Acedo, Ferrer, and Pamies 2009, 230–33). Schools should be places where religion and beliefs are treated with fairness and respect, and schools become fair and respectful only if they ensure inclusion about religion as a significant part of education in the curriculum (Nord and Haynes 1998).

Religious education policies and teaching practices show significant diversity all around the world. While religious education refers to the initiation of young people into various religions in developing countries, it refers to a minor, optional subject in the curricula in developed countries (Moran 2006, 38). Turkey is home to various religious minorities who struggle to maintain their religious culture. According to the

report of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2015), there are approximately 216,000 people belonging to different religious groups and around 20 million Alevis in Turkey, which has a population of almost 80 million. Also, it is asserted that around 2% of the population are atheists. However, there is a general tendency to believe within the Islamic communities and amongst non-Muslims in Turkey that Turkey's population is 99% Muslim (Çınar and Yıldırım 2014). Accordingly, it is possible to assert that religious education in Turkey, which is a developing country, aims to initiate the youth into the dominant religion, Islam, and thus religious education is accepted as a major issue in educational policies and given utmost importance. Although inclusion is accepted as a means of ensuring schooling and basic educational needs in developing countries such as Turkey, inclusive education entails more than just ensuring schooling and it should have a wider scope, including the concepts of diversity, discrimination, participation and power (Stubbs 2008). Thus, religious education, which is home to power relationships and discrimination in Turkey, is one of the arenas where inclusive discourses are mostly required.

Historical Background of Policies of Religion and Religious Education in Turkey

As a modern republic, Turkey consists mostly of a Muslim society with a strictly secular nation state. Thus, its modernisation and democratisation process has always faced the problem of establishing a delicate balance between politics and religion (Keyman 2007). Having been exposed to the Western world during the Ottoman Empire period in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Turkey's modernisation process proceeded with the foundation of TR in 1923. The modernisation and civilisation process required some necessary changes in order to evolve from a religious state to a nation state (Mardin 1997). Within this context, such kinds of policies and practices as the abolishment of the Caliphate, religious courts, cults, religious law, the elimination of Islam from the Turkish Constitution, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, the principle of secularism[2] and the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Berkes 1998) were initiated to fulfil the aim of "reaching the level of contemporary Western civilization of secularization" (Keyman 2007, 219). Since Turkish modernisation is also thought of as an education project (Özsoy 2009), these transformations manifested themselves in the field of education as well and brought some types of policies and practices into the educational system.

Following the proclamation of the Republic, Tevhid-i Tedrisat, the law including the unification of education and subordination of all education institutions to the Ministry of Education, was issued in 1924 and a significant step for the secularisation of

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[2] Secularism is used as the separation of religion and state affairs in this study, and this means mutual independence of religious and political powers and ensuring freedom of belief. According to this principle, a secular state must stand at an equal distance to all religions, beliefs and religious beliefs, and behaving accordingly is a personal right.

education was taken. As a result of this law, religious schools (the Madrasas), which offer education on a religious basis, were abolished and the compulsory religion courses were removed from all types of curricula. However, it must be noted that these policies and practices did not emerge as a demand of the majority of society or any social class but because of the civil authority (Canatan 1997). Thus, they caused some reactions as they excluded the rights of religious people in society, and they did not aim to raise individuals to become citizens through a "rights philosophy" (Keyman and İçduygu 1998). Accordingly, the multi-party period process starting from 1946 paved the way for reviving and promoting the role of religion, that is Islam, in Turkish politics and education (Keyman 2007; Meyersson 2014) and the status of Islam started to move from the periphery to the centre (Abdukadirov 2017, 517). Thus, the religious education demands of the public increased and this required some policies and practices regarding religious education (Kaymakcan 2006). Such practices as "putting religious courses into the programs of primary schools, establishing a faculty of theology and religious schools for training prayer leaders and preachers" (Mardin 2006, 235) were put into practice. These practices continued until 1980. Following the 1980 military coup,[3] state-religion relations in modern Turkey underwent a significant transformation, and Sunni Islam was accepted as an effective means to promote social and political stability (Şen 2010). In this sense, the legal and institutional position of the Directorate of Religious Affairs was improved in order to ensure national solidarity and integrity (Gözaydın 2006). Religious groups or organisations were allowed to play an enhanced role in all aspects of society (Meyersson 2014), "enlarging their network via economic and political liberalization, the expansion of education, and urbanization in order to take cultural, educational and economic spheres under control" (Abdukadirov 2017, 520).

Education was one of the most important fields that were used "to reorganise society and polity around national culture and Islamic values" (Şen 2010, 65), and significant transformations such as introducing divinity schools, compulsory religious courses to the curriculum, increasing the number and functions of IHSs and Quran courses were carried out in education (Bozan 2007, 11–19; Duman 1997, 150–63; Kaymakcan 2006). However, the increased role of religion and religious organisations in Turkish society was interrupted with the National Security Council's (NSC) intervention in 1997.[4] With this intervention, political parties and politicians that were not found

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[3] In 1980, the military seized control of the country by using force, and as a result of this, the parliament and the constitution were abolished, political parties were banned, the activities of unions and associations were ceased with the application of martial law all around the country. The military rule lasted for three years, but the constitution which was put into practice then and some anti-democratic regulations have continued to the present day.

[4] The decisions which were taken in the meeting of the National Security Council, a constitutional institution whose members are authorised generals of the military who give advice regarding decisions to the government, on February 28th, 1997. The government was urged to implement those decisions and the prime minister of that time had to resign as he did not want to sign them. In those decisions, strict secularity was emphasised as a necessity of democracy, and the implementation of laws for secularity was demanded.

secular enough were banned from political life (Koçak and Örücü 2003); women who wore full hijab and headscarf were not allowed to enter into public institutions; the movement of religious organisations such as Quran courses and cults were terminated and certain arrangements in order to ensure the training of religious commissaries were carried out (Çavdar 2004, 339–42). Within the field of education, various regulations were adopted to limit the scope and extent of religious education. Accordingly, compulsory continuous eight-year education was introduced in order to close the Imam Hatip secondary schools (IHSSs) and decrease the number of students studying in these schools; the Quran courses were inspected within a more detailed process, and the religious organisations and institutions which were in close relationship with cults were attached to the MoNE (Çavdar 2004, 339–42). However, such practices as the exclusion of religious people from political and commercial networks (Karaveli 2016), the banning of headscarves in public institutions, the closure of IHSs and decrease in the number of students in those schools caused serious reactions among the society. The Justice and Development Party (JDP), a party with mild Islamic references that faced objections from secular segments of society with the argument of its harbouring an Islamist agenda that could undermine Turkey's secular foundation, came into power in 2002. Since then, this party has been acting as a notable defender of a conservative value system (Acar and Altunok 2013) and "instead of secularization, Turkish society has recently been witnessing the processes of sacralization in which the presence of Islam is felt strongly in different spheres of societal relations" (Keyman 2007, 224). Although it is stated that the party uses a "Western-originating liberal democratic vocabulary" (Alaranta 2014), the discourses that the party uses about raising religious generations do not represent a democratic characteristic (Oda Tv 2012). This antidemocratic discourse has manifested in the field of education and various policies aiming to raise religious generations (Yılmaz 2014). Considering the religious education policies and practices which have been developed, it would be appropriate to assert that religious education courses and the statuses of IHSs are the most clear-cut examples as both have always been used as important tools by the authorities to implement their ideology and included exclusive practices from the very beginning.

Policies Regarding Religious Education Curriculum

Education has always been used to homogenise the youth and to construct "desirable citizens" by the authorities in Turkey (Yılmaz 2018) and the curriculum, which "is always part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge" (Apple 1993, 222), has always been an important apparatus of the state to achieve this aim. Within this context, with the foundation of TR the state intended to raise secular generations and the religious context of the curriculum was eliminated, but today there is the intention to raise religious generations and to this end various transformations have been carried out through the curriculum. Accordingly, in order to increase the religious content of the curriculum, such practices as "focusing more on values education; increasing the number and hours of

religious courses and decreasing the hours of philosophy and biology courses; removing Darwin and Evolution Theory from the biology curriculum and removing important historical events and leaders from the history curriculum replacing them with Islamised ones" have been put into practice recently (Yılmaz 2018, 11–12).

The curriculum plays a significant role in transferring a country's historical and cultural narrative, especially regarding the issues of diversity and inclusion (Grant 2007). Regarding the religious education curriculum, it is known that religious education in Turkey is mostly put into practice through the compulsory and optional religious courses, and these courses are highly open to dispute from the perspective of inclusion.

Compulsory Religious Culture and Morality Education (RCME) Course

How to teach religion and what to teach with religious education have always been a significant matter of debate in Turkey. As a result of the removal of the statement that "the religion of the state is Islam" from the constitution in 1928, the course of Religious Knowledge was completely abolished from the curriculums of all types of schools in 1928 until 1948, and all educational institutions providing religious education were closed. Following the 1946 elections and multi-party period in 1949, religious education courses entered into the elementary and secondary school curriculums in 1956 and the high school curriculum in 1967 as optional courses. Also, compulsory morality courses in addition to the religious courses were put into practice in 1974. Following the 1980 military coup, the role of religion to ensure secularism and to strengthen the bonds among citizens through "correct" instruction of religion was re-emphasised (Gürcan 2015) and the RCME course became one of the compulsory courses for the students beginning from the 4th grade to 12th grade with the constitution of 1982. Since then, the RCME course has been taught compulsorily from the 4th grade in elementary school to the 12th grade of high school for two hours a week and all students, except for the non-Muslims, Armenian Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Jewish students, are obliged to attend this course and answer the RCME questions in both the high school and university admissions exam.

The legal entity of compulsory RCME is based on the following statements of Article 24 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey (The Republic of Turkey 1982):

> Religion and morality education and teaching is carried out under the supervision of state. Religious Culture and Morality Education Course is among the compulsory subjects in elementary and secondary schools. Teaching religious culture and morality apart from this depends on only own demands of individuals or demands of guardians of young children.

As mentioned above, although human rights such as freedom of religion and conscience, the right to education and the ban of discrimination are under the

protection of the constitution and they are also emphasised in several international treaties (see the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UN 2015, Article 1 and 2], the Convention on the Rights of the Child [UN 1989, Article 2], the Convention against Discrimination in Education [UNESCO 1960, Article 1 and 5], the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [PWESCR 2015, Article 13 and 14], and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [UN 1979, Article 10]), the compulsory nature of the course has received much criticism as it is based on "Sunni Islamic belief" and attempts to ignore other religions and sects especially Alevis,[5] the largest minority. Despite various campaigns maintained by some Alevis and non-governmental organisations for over 30 years in an attempt to change the content and compulsory status of the RCME course and demands to be exempt from the course, from the very beginning no step has been taken to change this situation. In this sense, there have been applications of some Alevi citizens (Hasan and Eylem Zengin/ Turkey, ECHR, Application Number: 1448/04; Mansur Yalçın, Yüksel Polat and Hasan Kılıç/ Turkey, Application Number: 21163/11, Selnur Aysever) to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and the ECHR reached a verdict that a proper right of choice for the children whose parents have a different religion or belief from Sunni Islam is not provided and the opportunity to be exempted from the course is rather limited and imposes a real burden for both parents and children as it may bring the necessity to reveal their religion and belief.

Similarly, the number of demands from Christian and Jewish families to be exempted from the RCME course increased in 2014 compared to the previous years. In many incidents that occurred in İstanbul, İzmir, and Antalya, it has been observed that Christian children experienced such difficulties as being urged by their families to attend the course (to protect their kids from discrimination) and to pronounce Islamic testimony of faith even though they have the right to be exempted from the course (APC 2015). Furthermore, it has been even more difficult to be exempted from the RCME course for children whose parents are atheists and do not want their children to attend this course for any reason (Kaya 2015).

In addition to being compulsory, the content of the RCME textbooks has been criticised to a large extent. Although the name of the course seems to refer to the cultures of all religions and beliefs (Kaplan 2005), the content of the course is mostly based on teaching the theory, practice and rituals of Sunni, Hanafi belief (Gürcan 2015; Usal 2011), as is seen in the following statements of MoNE about the aim of the RCME curriculum: "The students must be able to access to Quran and Hadith as main sources in teaching of religion and they should center themselves to get religious knowledge" (MoNE 2010, 12).

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[5] Alevism is a denomination under the Shi'a denomination of Islam and it has the most followers after Sunnism. In this sense, Alevism presents a heterodox Muslim Shi'a community that has different characteristics. They differ considerably from the Sunni Muslim majority in their practice and interpretation of Islam.

Although it has been argued that the context of the course has been expanded to include different beliefs and denominations to some extent recently, the textbooks do not represent this inclusiveness adequately. Within this context, the report (Çayır 2014) of the Charity of History and İstanbul Bilgi University about the context of RCME textbooks remarks that despite the fact that different religions and beliefs such as Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Alevism are mentioned in RCME textbooks, the message of "the only true and legal life style is Sunni Islam" (2014, 31) is conveyed, and Alevism, the second largest sect in the country, is underemphasised and represented as a branch of Sunnism. In this sense, prejudiced and exclusive discourses regarding other religions and atheism were revealed in the textbooks, as can be seen in the following quotations (Çayır 2014, 31) (Grade 10 MoNE, Özgün, 74; Grade 9 RCM, Fem, 19):

> In the time that the Quran was revealed, some people had false ideas and beliefs about Allah, angels and prophets. For example, some people had adopted an understanding of god as a trinity. The Quran shows that this belief is incorrect, saying in one verse, "… do not say (God is) three; desist, it is better for you…"

> There are many forms of belief that are not based on revelations. Atheism, polytheism and Satanism: can be given as examples of these. These can give rise to the appearance and spread in society of false, baseless practices and beliefs that from time to time can even be harmful to society.

Similarly, other researches on RCME textbooks revealed that the textbooks adopted a political Islamist discourse and they have become more Sunnite centred (Çimen-Aratemur and Bayhan 2018; Türkmen 2009). Accordingly, it can be argued that the RCME course with both its content and practice violates the constitution and the international treaties (ERI 2007; Kaya 2015) and "does little to develop a pluralistic imaginary and understanding of democratic citizenship" (Çayır 2014, 25).

Optional Religious Education Courses

The number of optional courses in secondary and high school programmes has been increased to 21 in secondary schools and 44 in high schools in Turkey since 2012 and within this context three religious optional courses called "The Life of Prophet Muhammad," "The Holy Quran" and "Basic Religious Knowledge" were added to the curricula of secondary schools and high schools. Although it is argued that these courses are optional and students are free to elect the course they wish, it has been observed that they are either elected directly by the school administration in some schools instead of parents or the students are urged to elect them (Gün and Baskan 2014; Norwegian Helsinki Committee 2015). In a study, it was identified that 64.7% of the students stated that the school administration was the determining factor in the selection of optional courses in the curriculum and only 5.9% of these students stated that optional courses were opened by taking their interests and skills into consideration (Kamburoğlu 2009). Also, it was revealed that government authorities themselves

influenced people to select these courses directly or indirectly. For example, the president of Turkey, R. Tayyip Erdoğan, invited the families to select the course on the Quran and "The Life of Prophet Muhammad" in a speech of his (cited in *Hürriyet* 2013).

Such invitations have also had an impact on school administrators. In a high school in Ankara, the students were forced to take optional religious courses although they selected some other courses (*Sol* 2013). Similarly, in a formal document sent to the schools by the Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of National Education, schools were asked to encourage their students to choose religious optional courses (*Cumhuriyet* 2016). As urging students to elect the courses they do not demand is not democratic and cannot be carried out on an equitable basis, the content of these courses does not represent a rights-based approach. As a result, it is possible to suggest that the religious education curriculum in Turkey lags behind in terms of being an inclusive and pluralistic approach because of its compulsory nature, its content and the increased number of courses imposing a single religion and belief. Both compulsory and optional religious courses serve the purpose of creating a homogenous and mono-religious nation maintained through the curriculum/textbooks (Çayır 2014), making the education system of Turkey blind to differences (Armenian Culture and Solidarity Association 2013; Çayır 2015).

Imam-Hatip Schools (IHSs)

IHSs, which are officially among the vocational high schools, are one of the institutions in which religious education is pursued in Turkey. With the aim of training preachers, imam and hatips, IHSs are gender-segregated schools and provide the students with both religious and secular education. The students in these schools spend approximately one third of their time on religious subjects and rest of their time studying other subjects such as mathematics, literature, history, etc., and they receive the same curriculum as the students in other schools (Özgür 2012). As to the religious education curriculum, only Sunni Islam is taught in these schools and this is clearly seen in the names and content of the religious education courses.[6] Apart from the course "History of Religions" taught in the 12th grade of high schools, there are no other courses pointing to the different religions and beliefs.

IHSs, which are considered one of the state's apparatuses to control religious education in Turkey (Kaya and Tecmen 2014), have always presented one of the most significant matters of debate and opposing views about them have been expressed since their establishment in 1924. Within this context, while they were considered a threat to the secular republic with the foundation of the Republic in 1923, they are

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[6] There are such compulsory religious courses as the Holy Quran, Arabic, the Life of the Prophet, Basic Religious Knowledge in addition to the compulsory RCME course in Imam Hatip Secondary Schools. Similarly, there are such compulsory religious courses in Imam Hatip High Schools as Arabic, Quran, Vocational Arabic, History of Religions, and Islam Culture and Civilisation.

considered as one of the tools of saving the natural and cultural heritage today (Özdalga 1999, 428). These schools, which were established to end the duality between religious and secular schools, have had a rich experience throughout the history of Turkey. All these schools which were first established in 29 different locations in 1924 were closed on the grounds that there were not enough students until 1930. Following the multi-party period in 1949, they were reopened with an aim of training officials who would address the demands of religious people, and in 1951 they were re-established as a 7-year primary school based on IHSSs. Then, especially with the National Education Basic Law issued in 1973, these schools were converted into high schools. The graduates of these schools were accorded the right to study in some departments in university and female students were also allowed to study in these schools. So, both the numbers of these schools and the students attending them increased dramatically (Kaymakcan and Aşlamacı 2011, 72–73). However, the basic step to increase both the quantity, quality and prestige of these schools was discredited with the 1980 military coup as it gave way to "the transformation of IHHSs from vocational-religious schools teaching religious functionaries into an alternative educational establishment" (Akşit 1986, as cited in Şen 2010, 67). As a result of this process, IHHSs' graduates were first allowed to enter all the departments of the universities in 1983 (Aslanargun, Kılıç, and Bozkurt 2014; Bozan 2007; Duman 1997). Thus, both the number of IHHSs and the number of students in those schools increased in the following years. Nevertheless, with the NSC's intervention in 1997 aiming "to limit the extent of religious education" (Meyersson 2014; Şen 2010), the secondary parts of the Imam Hatip High Schools (IHHSs) were closed (TOG 1997) and a range of practices deteriorating the status of IHSs were implemented. The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) on 30 July 1998 made it difficult for all vocational high school graduates including IHS graduates to enter faculties except for their graduation fields with the aim of diverting the students of vocational high schools to the university programmes related to their graduation fields in high school and in this regard, the graduates of IHSs were only able to enrol in departments related to the faculty of theology. As a result, the number of students fell dramatically in 2002. With the government of the JDP, the number of IHS students started to rise again in 2003 (Çakır, Bozan, and Talu 2004) and the number of IHSs, which was 450 in the 2002–2003 academic year (the first year of the JDP government), reached 537 in 10 years (2011–2012) and the number of students increased from 71,100 to 268,245. What is more, with the 4+4+4 amendment[7] giving way to the opening of secondary parts of IHSs, the number of schools and students increased much more rapidly. Following this amendment, 1,477 public schools with better physical infrastructure and technical equipment have been converted into Imam Hatip Secondary Schools (IHSSs) (Egitim-Sen 2016) and this contributed to the increase in both the number of schools and students. Accordingly, in the 2017–2018 education

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[7] With the 4+4+4 amendment issued in 2012, the duration of compulsory education was extended to 12 years, and it was reconstructed as 4 years for primary school, 4 years for secondary school and 4 years for high school.

year, while the total number of IHSs (secondary schools, high schools and open education) reached 4,891, the number of students studying in these schools reached 1,350,611, thus constituting approximately 15% of all secondary schools and 13% of all high schools (MoNE 2018). In addition, the number of students studying in IHSs has been attempted to be increased through the government's discourses that attribute good values to these schools, efforts to provide teachers, staff, and donations for these schools, promotions such as providing employment for graduates, and various scholarships to attract successful students with low socio-economic status (*Birgün* 2017).

With regard to the history of IHSs, it is possible to say that what determined the existence of these schools was the different ideologies that changed with every government. The issue of IHSs is a political rather than a scientific one (Kaymakcan and Aşlamacı 2011) and this can be clearly seen in the numerical fluctuation of both the IHSs and students studying in these schools. While the number of IHSs increased within the rule of a government supporting these schools, it deteriorated with a government opposing them. As ideologies themselves are not objective, it is not possible to expect schools that adopt different forms according to these ideologies to be inclusive, thus they all included exclusive practices. The most concrete example of this exclusive practice was seen in the coefficient problem. With this practice, the university admission exam points of students preferring to study in a field other than their graduation fields were taken off and thus not only the students studying in IHSs and other vocational high schools but also all students studying in other types of schools were constrained to prefer certain fields of study. The practice of the coefficient rule was intended to save the regime and was implemented successfully by the CoHE specially to reduce the social tendency towards the IHSs (Çavuşoğlu 2011). According to research, the rate of people who accept the practice of the coefficient rule as an attempt to prevent the religious and conservative families' children's rights to education is 47.7%, constituting almost half of the participants (TIMAV 2012). However, this practice not only affected the students who had religious tendencies but other students studying in vocational high schools and preferring other jobs apart from their fields also and constituted a discriminative burden for them. Nevertheless, in the current era in which a conservative government is in power, all the practices of government resulted in favour of the conservative class of the society, leaving the secularists in a difficult situation. With the conversion of the schools with better physical structures into IHSs, the number of these schools increased in the neighborhoods and people who had secular tendencies had difficulty in finding schools to which to send their children (Egitim-Sen 2016). Also, the government's apparent efforts to make these schools more appealing, for example by providing teachers, staff, and donations for these schools, encouraging families from a low socio-economic class to send their children to these schools through scholarships, and promotions like providing pensions and employment in the future, created another kind of inequality. Such attempts create inequality in two ways. First, it creates inequality as IHSs have more opportunities compared to other schools. It is already

known that IHSs are the schools which have the most pension facilities of all high school types in Turkey. Second, it creates inequality for the students who are obliged to attend these schools as a result of their families' preferences (Korkmaz 2013; Özdemir and Karateke 2018) and these preferences are mostly a result of their families' disadvantaged socio-economic status and the advantaged status of IHSs.

As to the curriculum of IHSs, it can be argued that while it had a secular structure and aimed to equip the students with religious knowledge and to train religious officials for the future when they were established, it turned into a key conveyor of the Sunni movement and has become the source of the grassroots of Islamist parties recently (Yılmaz 2018, 19). Thus, it is possible to argue that a pluralist, inclusive and democratic understanding is not adopted in terms of the curriculum in IHSs.

Therefore, taking the historical process of IHSs and exclusive practices regarding them into consideration, it can be asserted that they were not only exposed to inequality, injustices and exclusion but they themselves exhibited inequality, injustice, and thus exclusive practices as well.

Conclusion

The role of religion in Turkish politics has always been a matter of debate and this has manifested in religious education policies and practices of the Turkish education system (Kaymakcan 2006; Keyman 2007). The education system in Turkey has been at the forefront of the struggles between the advocates of secular education and the ones who want to shape the education system according to religious rules. Accordingly, the discussions around the topic of religious education have been mostly based on the effect of the political, ideological stances of the governments on education rather than the scientific fact (Kaymakcan 2006). It is possible to refer to four milestones after the foundation of TR in this regard: The start of the multi-party period in 1945, the military coup in 1980, the NSC's intervention in 1997 and the JDP's coming to power in 2002. Considering the religious education policies and practices which were developed and implemented during these eras, it can be argued that most of them were not able to manage to be inclusive enough: while they paid attention to the dominant ideology, thus the voices of the majority, they turned a deaf ear to the opposing ideology.

The education system in Turkey has been designed in such a way as to raise individuals around a single definition of citizenship and has always included religious discrimination, though the norms of this citizenship have changed from time to time (Armenian Culture and Solidarity Association 2013). In this sense, citizenship in Turkey is defined not from an inclusive perspective but from an exclusive one, with a single religion—that is, the Sunni Islam, Hanafi belief (Çayır 2014; İnce 2012). In Turkey, where the majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, the topics of IHSs and religious education are considered within the context of fundamental rights and freedom; however, the demands of groups from different religious sects for their rights

are not met with the same sensitivity and while the rights of people who belong to "us" are defended, the rights of "others" are not (Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2007, 14).

Although Turkey is a party to national and international legislations regarding human rights which forbid discrimination and protect minority rights, the minorities in Turkey are only described as Turkish citizens who belong to non-Muslim minorities and there is a tendency to ignore other religious minorities such as Assyrians, Syrian Catholics, Yazidis, Alevis and atheists in religious education policies and practices. "Discrimination and intolerance in matters of religion or belief are a serious dimension of the catalogue of violation of human rights" (Boyle and Sheen 1997, 1) and in this sense it is possible to argue that the children of parents whose religion or belief is not Sunni Islam or who are atheists are exposed to discrimination by the religious education curriculum and the issue of IHSs in Turkey. Although it is argued that both conservative and secular governments use a democratic and pluralistic discourse and it is asserted that Turkey has been undergoing a democratic transformation process recently, both the policies and practices do not confirm this. Religious courses are still given compulsorily and attempted to be supported with optional courses. Religious minorities are not included in the curriculum/textbooks, and if they are, the textbooks include negative statements about them (Çayır 2014). Similarly, the current government is attempting to generalise the issue of IHSs all around the country and it continues to be an ideological means of authority. Therefore, what Turkish education calls for is a system that does not sway from one ideology to the other but embraces a participative democratic pedagogy which gives ear to the voices of all individuals in education. This kind of an education system is only possible with educational policies that promote a pluralistic language and represent people with different religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds/cultures, genders, and social classes. Within this context, what is expected from the state is "to take concrete measures to ensure equality of treatment in matters of religion or belief and to provide remedies or redress for those who are victims of any discrimination or intolerance because of their faith or secular beliefs" (Boyle and Sheen 1997, 7).

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