Culture of Co-existence in Islam: The Turkish Case

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to show how exchanges between religion and secularism, Islam and democracy and cross-cultural relations over many years have shaped Turks' perception of Islam and their position towards freedom of religion and co-existence of different faith communities. Muslims are generally attributed a monolithic identity marked by intolerance despite the fact that they have considerable diversity in their understanding of Islam and its practice. The Turkish case challenges such essentialist views by demonstrating that despite some isolated events, Turkey succeeds in managing religious diversity because the perception of Islam has developed in connection with a variety of current and historical events. The perception that emerged in the course of Turkish cultural and political history provides strong grounds for peaceful co-existence within the shared social order. Turkey's achievement in establishing a political culture and a perception of Islam that facilitates religious pluralism can be attributed to factors as such democracy and secularism and Turkey's efforts to join the European Union.

This article aims to chart the parameters of cross-cultural exchanges, and the theological and experiential foundations of coexistence between Muslims and faith communities belonging to other religions. Drawing upon the legacy of the Ottoman past and the opportunities yielded by the Turkish experience in the republican period, this article provides a detailed picture of the Turkish case, which is the product of both historical legacy and modern exchanges between religion and secularism, Islam and democracy.

In the first part of this article, I will first touch upon how Islam is seen in the modern world and share my views on the widespread images of Islam, and the accompanying ignorance about the rich diversity in the interpretation of its religious legacy and experience in the Muslim world. In this part of the article I will draw attention to the major sources of prevalent images and misperceptions about Islam. In this context, I will also examine the

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main textual sources of Islam itself to see whether they warrant the images of Islam that are prevalent in the western world.

In the second part of the article I will focus on the Ottoman-Turkish experience of peaceful co-existence between Muslims, Christians and Jews in a state that governed a populous of religious, ethnic and cultural diversity for many centuries. Given the fact that we live in a conflict-ridden world, a look at the Ottoman-Turkish experience, I believe, may facilitate positive thinking about pluralism. This historical experience also encourages us to find legal and political instruments that would contribute to the management of growing diversity in a globalizing world.

In the third part of the article, I will briefly discuss the position of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and its role in facilitating a culture of peaceful co-existence in modern Turkey.

The Image of Islam and Muslims in the West

The image of Islam and of Muslims is subject to constant construction by the media, intellectual and political discourses and the popular cultural industry. Muslims are largely perceived through the influence these forces which themselves are informed by social, political and cultural policies and interests. On the whole, in the eyes of the west, Islam and Muslims have a negative image that they do not deserve. A close examination of the relevant political, intellectual and popular discourses will demonstrate that there is a widespread misunderstanding and misperception of Islam as a religion, and of Muslims as members of the global community. Suffice it to cite three well-known statements by public figures reflecting bias and prejudice against Islam. Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, has argued that 'the Qur'an speaks of violence against Christians and Jews.' For him Islam is 'a very evil and wicked religion.' Jerry Falwell of the Christian Coalition, for his part, has called the Prophet Muhammad a 'terrorist;' Pat Robertson called him a 'robber and brigand.'[1] It is beyond the scope of this presentation to give lengthy examples drawn from political and intellectual discourses. However, we can look at their impact on the public opinion and popular perceptions about Islam in the west today.

A recent study by the Pew Foundation (2007) supports our view about the

image of Islam among westerners. In the US for example, as this research shows, "nearly half (48%) of the respondents said that they had a negative opinion of Muslims." The same research also indicates that "public attitudes about Muslims and Islam have grown *more* negative in recent years. About four-in-ten Americans (43%) say they have a favorable opinion of Muslims, while 35% express a negative view. Opinion about Muslims, on balance, was somewhat more positive in 2004 (48% favorable vs. 32% unfavorable)".[2]

There is a similar trend in Germany; survey findings in 2006 indicate that German esteem for Islam has been falling since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, with 83 percent of the respondents agreeing with the statement that 'Islam is driven by fanaticism.' That amount is 10 percent higher than the survey results compiled in 2004. A majority of the 2006 respondents, (71 percent), are reported to have said "they believed Islam to be 'intolerant,' up from 66 percent in 2004. The same survey also reports that 'when asked what they associate with the word "Islam," 91 percent of respondents connected the religion to discrimination against women, and 61 percent called Islam "undemocratic." Only eight percent of Germans associated "peacefulness" with Islam.[3]

As the survey results from the US and Germany indicate, only a handful of people in the West associate Islam with peace; the great majority, on the contrary, associate this global religion of over one billion followers with violence, terrorism and authoritarianism. As I will explain later, there are various sources of such images.

These survey results reveal the prevalent images of Islam among Westerners. In this context one should analyze the sources of these negative images and see if they correspond with Islamic texts, Muslim theology and the historical legacy of Muslim societies. This brings us to consider the Islamic texts and their approach to pluralism, diversity and co-existence with other faith groups in the same political and social world. Of course, theological or textual discourses are not sufficient to see the whole picture. Therefore one needs to look at the historical legacy to understand how these textual sources shaped Muslim history in regard to freedom of religion, the management of diversity and a tolerant political order in Muslim majority societies.

Islamic Sources on Religious Pluralism and Co-existence

At this point it is worth turning briefly to the main sources of Islam that inspired early Muslim states and the Ottoman Empire in their dealings with people

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of different cultures and religions. The Qur'an as the major source of Muslim theology provides us with extensive insights as far as other Abrahamic religions are concerned. The Qur'an clearly indicates that Islam is the continuation of Judaism and Christianity whose followers are described as 'People of the Book' (ahl al-Kitab), and whose sacred texts are also accepted as revealed sources. When Islam was revealed in the seventh century, it did not proclaim itself a completely new and different faith, but rather a reaffirmation of Abrahamic tradition.[4] Likewise, the Prophet Muhammad was declared not as the first or only prophet, but as the last circle of the prophetic chains. Although the Qur'an noted theological differences between Islam and these religions, it made a general call addressing all of humanity. Followers of Judaism and Christianity were not forced to convert to Islam when Muslims held political might, as the Qur'an made it very clear: in Islam 'there is no compulsion in matters of faith' (2: 256). Islam claims to be the last and most perfected religion (5: 3), but it values free individual choice to believe or disbelieve. Although Islam has declared itself a universal religion, neither the Prophet nor the followers of this faith started to spread the message of Islam with the assumption that all of humanity would necessarily become Muslims. Naturally however, the Prophet hoped that the message of Islam as the last revealed religion would be accepted by free will. As far as social, cultural, and religious formations are concerned, both theory and practice in Muslim history demonstrate that Islam has recognized diversity and pluralism as a natural human condition. This is stated in the Qur'an as follows: 'Had your Lord willed, all the people on Earth in their entirety would have believed. Would you force the people to make them believe?' (10: 99). In a different verse, the importance of individual choice is indicated in the call: "so let he who will believe, and let he who will disbelieve" (18: 29). These verses acknowledge that human beings have always followed different religious beliefs and practices throughout history, and that these differences may also persist in the future. It is on these principles that, in the formative of period of Islam, the foundations for managing diversity were laid down.

The document known as the Medina Covenant, dating back to 662 B.C.E., includes injunctions regulating relations between Muslims, Jews and the people of Medina. Although the textual sources of Islam provide normative, general rules and principles in matters of religious beliefs and practices, some references deal-

ing with social issues such as cross-cultural relations in the Qur'an and Sunna and some practices dealing with other religious groups, should be interpreted in their social and political contexts. Contextualization will prevent essentialism and the emergence of a monolithic form of understanding Islam and Muslim societies where politics, the economy, geography and cultural exchanges have inspired various interpretations of the same textual sources since the beginning of Islam.

Historically speaking, the concept of the 'People of the Book' provided one of the bases of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious states in Muslim history. The Umayyads, Abbasids and Muslim empires in Andalusia and in India managed to sustain religious diversity and pluralism in their own time inspired by the spirit of religious liberty and toleration found in Muslim culture.[5] The Ottoman state itself developed a unique legal and political instrument, the *millet* or community system, that enabled the co-existence of Jews, Christians and majority Muslims under the same political order and in the same social domain for centuries.

These brief observations on the Muslims' textual sources and historical legacy demonstrate that Islamic theology and Muslim experience challenge the widely-held notions about Islam. A detailed analysis of Muslim theology and discourse and, more importantly, its historical experience over the centuries indicates that a mere selective reading concerning the Muslim approach to diversity, pluralism and co-existence would do an injustice to Islam today. Therefore, instead of a selective reading of theory and practice which would prevent us from seeing the larger and more representative picture, one needs to examine a greater number of variables and factors that are constitutive parts of Islamic theology and practice. However, these arguments should not preclude us from developing a critical perspective on how Islam has evolved over the centuries. We should ask the following questions at this point: What are the sources of the current misperceptions and negative views of Islam prevalent today, if it they are not present in the text, the theology, or the historical legacy? How can we explain the contradictions between the peaceful messages of Islam that lie at the very center of the meaning of this religion, and the actions of some Muslims, who, although their numbers are few, are often more noticeable than the majority?

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There are no easy and short answers to these questions. Although I have noted the good practices in Muslim states above, we should also face the current reality that there are some cases, like the actions of some radical and extremist groups in the Middle East and elsewhere, that we can not defend. In recent years in particular we have witnessed the increasing use of religion to justify politically motivated actions in the Muslim world and beyond. We have seen acts of violence and terror that damaged the image of Islam and relations between Muslims and other faith groups. Acts of terror and violence lead to the perception of Muslims through a security lens. As a result of such developments, Muslims, especially those living in the West, have increasingly become targets of hate crimes. As many reports demonstrate beyond any doubt, Muslims are becoming victims of growing Islamophobia, since they are seen as a security threat in the midst of western democracies.[6]

In order to understand why some Muslims are drifting from mainstream Islam and its peaceful values, we need to look at social and political configurations in the modern world. When we look at the current context, we note the obvious reality that the world today is not a single bloc. There are competing actors struggling to achieve political power, consolidate their hold and establish domination either within a nation state, in a region, or globally. Religion is very often used to justify and legitimize political positions. Political actors employ a religious language and refer to its symbols and theology to make advances. Sociologically speaking, for an average individual on the street, such a discourse leads to confusion first, and then to a conviction that religion and politics are interrelated and inseparable. When such a public opinion is constructed, it becomes much easier to conduct political competition and struggle through religion. Reactions and opposition to such configurations also use religious language and rhetoric. Then religion becomes entangled in political struggles. Soon the masses can no longer differentiate between what is religious (spiritual) and what is political. Such a state of affairs easily leads to the hijacking of religion by politically motivated groups, as we see in some Muslim countries and elsewhere. In this context, some religious authorities or groups either remain silent or give tacit support to the use of religious language for political purposes.

In addition to the politicization of religion, we should also look at the mean-

ing attributed to this concept and how religion's relations are established with the social and political world. As far as Muslim societies are concerned, there is a widespread perception that religion regulates all aspects of life. Religion is considered a comprehensive project that governs social, political, cultural and economic life on both individual and societal levels. When such views become the basis of political justification, it is inevitable that religion comes to play a major role in shaping policy decisions and actions ranging from freedom of religion to democratic participation, and from international relations to the forming of new alliances. Viewing religion as a comprehensive project that defines all walks of life is rooted in social and political contexts. It is the product of historical experiences, and social and political conditions. Domestic politics and international relations, conflicts in and around the Muslim world, wars and invasions both new and old shape Muslims' perceptions. Religion in this context emerges as an important and comprehensive source of identity, solidarity, opposition and discursive ideology. Thus, as pointed out earlier, the boundaries between religious and political on the one hand, and between spiritual and worldly affairs on the other hand, often get blurred, and in the minds of the masses become more or less different sides of the same coin. So far, I have explained how and why religion and politics became entangled and how religion is hijacked and manipulated at times. I have also touched upon the implications of this composition on the image on Muslims and the culture of coexistence. These configurations all have bearings on the culture of co-existence in the modern world.

The Ottoman Case and Modern Turkey

Now I would like to move on to the Turkish case and examine how modern Turkey, a secular state with a majority Muslim population, is dealing with state-religion relations, religious communities and non-Muslim citizens. Modern Turkey inherited a culture of co-existence between different faith communities from the Ottoman Empire. When the Empire collapsed and the Republic of Turkey was established as a nation-state in 1923, Muslims and non-Muslims alike became citizens of Turkey. Before moving onto the current state of relations between different faith groups as citizens of the republic, we need to look at the Ottoman experience as a noteworthy example of how to manage religious diversity. Although predominately Muslim, the Ottoman empire had managed religious communities and non-Muslim groups under a policy of cultural diversity that thrived as a result of adopting a policy of recognition and tolerance for other cultures.[7]

The Ottoman State ruled over three continents. Its borders extended from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from the Middle East to North Africa be-

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tween the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries.[8] There were more than twenty ethnic communities living in the Ottoman lands, speaking dozens of languages. Christianity and Judaism, with their various sects and denominations, were the most prevalent religions after Islam in the Ottoman State.

The Ottoman state defined its subjects according to their religious affiliation. This system of categorization, called the *millet* (community) system defined each religious community as a separate community. The Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453, during the early years of Mehmet II's reign (1451–1481), marked a historical turning point in Turkish history. Mehmet's policy of accommodating various religious persuasions attracted many Muslims, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Slavs, and others to settle in Istanbul. "Istanbul became the centre of Muslim-Christian co-existence which lasted for over five hundred years."[9] It is noteworthy to make a brief analysis of the rationale behind the *millet* system and how it operated. Such an analysis should prove relevant to contemporary debates on ethnic and religious minority groups in multi-racial and multi-religious societies.[10]

The *millet* system had a "socio-cultural and communal framework based firstly on religion, and secondly on ethnicity."[11] The *millet* system divided the Empire's citizens into communities according to religious affiliation. Each religious community formed a *millet* and the collection of *millets* formed the *millet* system. Each *millet* established and maintained its own institutions to care for the functions not carried out by the ruling class. Individual *millets* governed institutions of their own such as education, religion, justice, and social welfare.[12] Under the *millet* system, each religious community maintained its own courts, judges, and legal principles pertaining to civil and family laws.[13] The *millet* system allowed Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews and Armenians to form their own ethnic-religious communities and to establish independent religious institutions in Istanbul.

As historical experience shows, theoretical approaches that determine relationships between the Muslim majority and non-Muslim minorities became concrete policies and practices under the administration of Ottoman rulers. During this process, freedom of religion for non-Muslims and the protection of their places of worship were guaranteed.

Religious freedom was extended to legal practices. Non-Muslims were allowed to institutionalize their own legal systems and to administer their courts within their community according to the principles of their faith. As a result of this policy, the sale and use of goods prohibited by Islam was allowed within a non-Muslim community if there was no such ban in the latter's religious laws.[14] Muslim rulers were held responsible for the protection of the lives and goods that belonged to non-Muslims. Moreover, there was no restriction against employing non-Muslims in public offices.[15] The autonomy and freedom available to minorities in the Ottoman Empire attracted large numbers of displaced Jewish communities, who were among the victims of persecution in Spain, Poland, Austria and Bohemia. While Jewish communities in Russia, Romania and most of the Balkan states suffered from persecution due to anti-Jewish laws, Jewish communities established in the Turkish territory enjoyed an atmosphere of tolerance and justice.[16] Later, Turkey continued this tradition by sheltering many Jews who fled Nazi oppression in the modern period.

When judged according to the standards of liberty and freedom integral to the period concerned, we can argue that non-Muslims enjoyed a remarkable amount of freedom – an amount that would have been unthinkable for many states in the same period. Non-Muslims enjoyed several important freedoms which would later become fundamental rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Freedoms ranging from selecting religious leaders; building temples; practicing religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals; and opening religious schools in vernacular languages were important achievements in providing liberty in a period when no one talked about basic human rights; these were guaranteed by the Ottomans. In this period, authority in matters of internal legal matters and educational issues within the community was generally granted to religious leaders who were freely elected by the community concerned. Moreover, these minority communities enjoyed certain financial privileges. For example, lands belonging to churches and synagogues were exempt from taxes. The *millet* system provided freedom, then, not only in the area of religion and worship, but also in areas of civil law and politics. All of these policies and practices indicate that the dominant perception of religion and culture in the Ottoman lands developed in such a way that a formula enabling faith communities of different religions to live together with the "other" was established.

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Despite the advances it had made, the Ottoman Empire collapsed following the Second World War. The Republic of Turkey was established on the ruins of this multiethnic and multi- religious empire. This brings us to the question of how far modern Turkey inherited the culture co-existence and which new instruments it developed to consolidate this culture.

The Transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic

The transition from a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire to a nation state, a concept underlined by homogeneity, has not been an easy process. A number of social, political and economic reforms had to be introduced to ensure public participation in the making of a new nation. In the meantime, transitional conditions, stormy international relations, and the war of independence all left their imprints on social memory. Modern Turkey was established as a nation state on secular foundations; Muslims and non-Muslims alike are incorporated into the fabric of society as citizens. Today, several non-Muslim religious groups exist in Turkey, most of which are concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. Since census results do not contain any data pertaining to the religious affiliation of Turkish citizens, the exact membership figures for Christians, Jews and other religious groups are not available.

Article thirty-nine of the Treaty of Lausanne guarantees equality among Turkish citizens regardless of their religious conviction: "Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities will enjoy the same civil and political rights as Muslims. All the inhabitants of Turkey, without distinction of religion, shall be equal before the law." Article 40 of the Lausanne Treaty further stipulates that:

> Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.

Article 42 reaffirms this proposition:

> The Turkish Government undertakes to grant full protection to the churches, synagogues, cemeteries, and other religious establishments of the above-mentioned minorities. All facilities and authorization [sic] will be granted to the pious foundations, and to the religious and charitable institutions of the said minorities at present existing in Turkey, and the Turkish Government will not refuse, for the formation of new religious and charitable institutions, any of the necessary facilities which are guaranteed to other private institutions of that nature.

Although the constitution guarantees the fundamental rights of minorities, and the law describes a range of freedoms, such institutions alone cannot change everything about public perceptions regarding the freedom of religion. Constitutional arrangements and legal protections may produce perfect theoretical solutions; however, public perceptions need to be changed to accomplish structural changes and to accept legal arrangements as valuable instruments to protect freedoms. Otherwise, the implementation of laws and institutionalization of freedoms encounters social and political resistance. Therefore, the structural changes and legal arrangements of the state should be supported by institutional efforts aimed at strengthening the social basis for defending and supporting the freedoms of the "other" in a given society. In this context, as will be explained in greater detail below, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (the *Diyanet*) has made considerable institutional contributions to the promotion of religious diversity and the culture of co-existence in Turkey. But before moving onto the position of the *Diyanet*, we need to look at the factors that prepared a ground for egalitarian perceptions of religion and social order.

Foundations Facilitating Freedom of Religion and Religious Diversity in Turkey

As it stands, despite some isolated events, Turkey succeeds in managing religious diversity because the perception of Islam has developed in connection with a variety of current and historical events and variables. The perception that emerged in the course of Turkish social, cultural and political history provides strong grounds for peaceful co-existence within the shared social order. Turkey's achievement in establishing a political culture and a perception of Islam that facilitates religious pluralism can be attributed to numerous factors. These factors range from democracy and secularism, to the perception of Islam and Turkey's efforts to join the European Union. However it should be noted that, although we have achieved considerable success, we still need to make more improvements in these areas.

The development of Islamic understanding among Turks has much to do with their status as a frontier nation. Turks have had contacts with other re-

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ligious groups since their arrival to Anatolia in the 11th century, and Turks on the move have always had commercial, cultural and political relations with other nations and states. The resulting web of relations contributes to an inclusive understanding of religion, as Turkish Muslims have never lived in their own ghettos in cultural and geographical terms. Turks sustained this non-isolationist legacy and developed it further in the process of their social, cultural, political and economic relations with the other communities they have encountered throughout their history.

Turkey's western orientation, known affectionately as Turkey's European vacation has, since at least the 19th century, shaped Turkey's political culture, legal instruments and public policy. Even during the Ottoman Empire, it contributed to the rise and expansion of the ideas of liberty and equality. Constitutional reforms and modernization efforts, as well as increasing contacts with the western intellectual and cultural heritage, have served to strengthen Turkey's European orientation. Moreover, Turkey's EU membership project, begun in the early 1950s and gathering momentum in 2005, brought Turkey much closer to Europe. The legal and political reforms undertaken during the membership process have also consolidated the freedom of religion and protection of minority faith communities.

Secularism and the culture of democracy in Turkey likewise provide principles that are crucially important for the protection of pluralism and freedoms. By embracing democracy, the rule of law, and secularism, Turkey has chosen a path that enables people of various backgrounds to live peacefully in the same social and political order without abandoning their culture, religion or identity. Structural and legal provisions, as well as their social acceptance by the majority of Turkish citizens, have led to the establishment of individual freedom of religious belief and practice, as well as the freedom of expression as far as interpreting religion is concerned, i.e. what might be called intra-religious freedom or freedom within a religion. This is one of the peculiar characteristics of modern Turkey today.

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Although there is a wide consensus on the acceptance of secularism and democracy, there is an ongoing debate in Turkey on state-religion relations, as is to be expected in a dynamic society. This debate is sometimes extended to include the limits of freedom of religion in the

name of protecting the public order. Therefore, in this context, some groups under the effect of the social memory of Turkey's formative period consider expanded religious liberty, including missionary activities, problematic. Foreign observers of these debates among Turkish politicians and political groups in particular may get the impression that there are conflicts, contradictions and tensions between religion and democ-

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racy, and Islam and the secular principles of the state. However, sociological studies of modern Turkish society indicate that there is neither a social basis for, nor an acceptance of such conflicting views on the part of everyday Turks themselves. Although politicians use discourses of conflict, either to consolidate their position or to criticize their opponents, they remains limited to political statements and rhetoric. An overwhelming portion of Turkish society considers religion, democracy and secularism compatible with each other.[17]

In this context, I would like to share some observations about the position of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) as far as promoting and defending freedom of religion and the culture of co-existence in Turkey is concerned. The *Diyanet* is a constitutional institution which is mandated to administer Muslim religious affairs in Turkey. The position of the *Diyanet* as regards freedom of religion has been a contested issue. Some people claim that the *Diyanet* was established to control the religious sphere by the state. Others argue that the *Diyanet* enables religion to emancipate itself from the control of the state.[18]

The *Diyanet* takes positive positions about the protection of religious freedom and liberty for minority faith groups in Turkey. It does not support any acts of violence on national and international levels, including the targeting of members and institutions of minority religious groups. The *Diyanet* plants seeds of respect, tolerance and acceptance of religious and cultural diversity, believing that freedoms are the basis of social cohesion. It is due to the historical legacy, constitutional provisions and efforts of the *Diyanet* that Turkey provides a ground where members of various faith groups can live side by side as equal citizens of the same state. I should point out here that the *Diyanet* has expanded its own realm of freedom and its realm of defending freedoms of other religions. The *Diyanet*'s consolidation of its positions on freedoms stems from the fact that

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we strongly defend religious liberty and pluralism.

The Diyanet promotes a knowledge-based practice of Islam in Turkey, viewing it as one of the foundations of authentic understanding of Islam. Islam values scholarship and strongly emphasizes acts and deeds either based on knowledge achieved by a self-search or provided by the consensus of learned people. Such an understanding of Islam, based on an authentic knowledge derived from learning and scholarship, provides self-confidence to Muslims. This self-confidence leads to a more open society where minority faith groups are not be seen as a threat to the public order and dominant religion. Moreover, such an understanding of Islam prevents the misuse of Islam for political purposes by extremist groups.

Defending freedoms is another significant factor contributing to peaceful co-existence in Turkey. In this context the *Diyanet* believes that religion inspires people to respect plurality and religious liberty. Turkey differs from many other Muslim countries regarding the provision of freedom of religion. In Turkey, we defend the freedom of religion not only for the Muslim majority but also for minority faith groups and even for atheists. I will give you one recent example to show the extent to which we have expand our view of freedom of religion inspired by Islam. In the last issue of our official journal, we stated that conversion to other religions is an individual right even if a Muslim chooses to become a Christian. It doesn't mean that we approve his/her choice on religious grounds. One might ask why the *Diyanet* promotes such a perception underlined by the notion of freedom. The answer to this question lies in the fact that we read and interpret the same text differently from many other Muslim societies.[19]

Lastly, I would like point out that in the *Diyanet*, we consider it our main responsibility to teach Muslims in Turkey their own religion correctly on the basis of scholarship and learning, and to represent Islam well. Our aim is not to convert members of other religions to Islam. It is true that we consider Islam to be the true religion. Yet we recognize that members of other religions consider their own faith as the true one, and that this is their natural right. Still, we trust that our differences on this issue should not prevent us from engaging in dialogue over matters of common interest.

Endnotes

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18. For more information on the *Diyanet* see Ali Bardakoğlu, "The Structure, Mission and Social Function of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA)," *The Muslim World*, Vol: 98, No. 2-3, (2008), pp. 173-181.

19. For more information on the position of the *Diyanet* regarding various issues such as religion, democracy, pluralism and human rights see Ali Bardakoğlu, *Religion and Society: New Perspectives from Turkey* (Ankara: Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2006)