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Post-secular geographies and the problem of pluralism: Religion and everyday life in Istanbul, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The concept of post-secularism has come to signify a renewed attention to the role of religion within secular, democratic public spheres. Central to the project of post-secularism is the integration of religious ways of being within a public arena shared by others who may practice different faiths, practice the same faith differently, or be non-religious in outlook. As a secular state within which Sunni Islam has played an increasingly public role, Turkey is a prime site for studying new configurations of religion, politics, and public life. Our 2013 research with devout Sunni Muslim women in Istanbul demonstrates how the big questions of post-secularism and the problem of pluralism are posed and navigated within the quotidian geographies of homes, neighborhoods, and city spaces. Women grapple with the demands of a pluralistic public sphere on their own terms and in ways that traverse and call into question the distinction between public and private spaces. While mutual respect mediates relations with diverse others, women often find themselves up against the limits of respect, both in their intimate relations with Alevi friends and neighbors, and in the anonymous spaces of the city where they sometimes find themselves subject to secular hostility. The gendered moral order of public space that positions devout headscarf-wearing women in a particular way within diverse city spaces where others may be consuming alcohol or wearing revealing clothing further complicates the problem of pluralism in the city. We conclude that one does not perhaps arrive at post-secularism so much as struggle with its demands.

The political role of religion has emerged as one of the most urgent philosophical and practical questions of our time (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 1994; Gorski, Kim, Torpey, & VonAntwerpen, 2012; de Vries & Sullivan, 2006). One of the buzzwords of an upsurge of attention to the role of religion in politics has been post-secularism. Post-secularism refers primarily to European contexts where religion is playing a renewed role in pluralistic public spheres (Habermas, 2008). Yet the term has also been applied beyond Western Europe, and recently scholars have begun grappling with the implications of the post-secular in Turkey as well (Göle, 2012; Kömeçoğlu, 2012; Rosati, 2012; Walton, 2013). An institutionally secular, democratic state in which religious lifestyles have been ascendant within the public sphere in the past decade, Turkey has been governed since 2002 by a political party (the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP, or Justice and Development Party) that has disavowed its roots in Islamist politics but has effectively combined Islamic values with neoliberal economic policies. Because of the seeming success of this accommodation, when popular uprisings rocked the Arab world in spring of 2011, many observers suggested that Turkey might be a model for the new Middle East (Tait, 2011). But is the Turkish model destined to flounder on the problem of how religious and non-religious ways of life can accommodate one another in a pluralistic public sphere? Key to Habermas' idea of post-secularism is the integration of religious ways of being within a public arena shared by others who may practice different faiths, practice the same faith differently, or be non-religious in outlook. Yet the problem of pluralism has proven to be a thorny one, not only Europe (see Cesari, 2005; Ehrkamp, 2010, 2012; Gale, 2005; Hancock, 2008) but in the Middle East as well (Muashar, 2014).

Despite the importance that religion is theoretically accorded in politics today, few studies attempt to bridge the gap between the transformations of secularism and religion writ large and the daily practices and ordinary discourses through which these are dynamically and spatially constituted. Indeed, Michele Dillon (2012:

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5391) has argued that what is missing from Habermas' idea of the post-secular is an appreciation of "how religion manifests and matters in everyday life." Approaching the problem of post-secularism and the practice of pluralism from the perspective of devout Sunni women in Istanbul, our study performs a feminist geopolitics of religion, both attending to the "mundane every-day practices of … religions in relation to politics" (Agnew, 2006, 2010: 44), and the "materialities of everyday life as they constitute the substantive foundations – the bodies, the subjectivities, the practices and discourses – of constantly unfolding geopolitical tensions and conflicts" (Dixon & Marston, 2011: 446; see also Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2001, 2004; Fluri, 2009). This nexus between religion and feminist geopolitics is a fertile one. Just as feminist geopolitics has relocated the political within practices of everyday life, a revitalized geography of religion has moved beyond the 'officially sacred' to include previously under-examined spaces and scales of religion and religious identities (Gökarıksel, 2009; Holloway, 2006; Hopkins, 2009; Hopkins et al., 2013; Kong, 2001, 2010; Morin and Guelke 2007; Olson, 2006; Olson & Silvey, 2006; Silvey, 2007). One of the concerns of this scholarship has been to show how religion interacts with the secular and the political in public space and how these categories might be questioned (Ehrkamp, 2010; Howe, 2009; Tse, 2013; Wilford, 2012). Tracing globally significant questions of religion and public life through the quotidian practices of devout, headscarf-wearing women in Istanbul, our research thus takes root within the space opened up by feminist geopolitics and new geographies of religion. Such a grounded approach has much to contribute to broad debates (which have too often remained theoretical, bound up with official politics and religion, and Eurocentric) about how religious ways of being interact within and are constitutive of public life in different contexts.

This paper draws upon research with headscarf-wearing women who identify themselves as moderately to very devout (*dindar*)[2] to provide a first step towards a broader understanding of the reconfiguration of religion and secularism in Turkey. Our choice to focus here on those who identify as devout Sunni Muslim is based in the particular importance of this sector for the reconfiguration of Islam and Turkey's public sphere over the course of the past two decades (Göle, 2002; Gümüşçü, 2010; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; White, 1999).[3] According to a 2006 nationally representative survey, approximately 60% of the Turkish population identifies as very or extremely devout (Çarkoglu & Toprak, 2007). Amongst those who do not identify as devout Sunni Muslims will be Alevis,[4] non-Muslims, the non-practicing, or the non-religious. As a group, headscarf-wearing women have been negatively affected by state-imposed restrictions on personal freedom and religious belief, and have actively and publicly resisted these restrictions (Göle, 2003; Kavakci Islam, 2010; Secor, 2002, 2005; Şişman, 1998). Headscarf-wearing women are therefore an important constituency with whom to discuss encounters with difference in urban spaces. Thus with the goal of opening new perspectives on the significance of post-secularism for the case of Turkey, we conducted four focus groups in Istanbul with headscarf-wearing ('covered' in Turkish parlance) women who self-identified as devout Sunni Muslims in July 2013.[5] A total of thirty-nine women participated in focus groups, which we grouped according to age (below 30 or above) and socioeconomic status (working class or middle/upper-middle class). Of course, Istanbul is a very particular Turkish city. Embedded as they are in the fabric of everyday life in the city, our findings – much as we feel that they speak to larger questions about the role of religion in as constitutive of a spatially variegated 'public' sphere – are also particular to this context. As a small slice of a much larger picture, the research presented here is preliminary to a multi-method, nation-wide project on religion in public life in Turkey.[6]

Turkey is a prime context for studying the new configurations of religion, politics, and public life that mark our current era. While critical attention to secularism may provide a fresh viewpoint on Western Europe and the U.S., the topic has no less than dominated Turkish studies since the second part of the 20th century (Kuru & Stepan, 2012; Mardin, 1981, 2006, 2011; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Özyürek, 2006; Tarhanlı, 1993; Yavuz, 2009). The Turkish mode of "strong secularism," in which the constitution both removes religion from the public sphere *and* gives the state control of religious activities, is similar to French laicism in its emphasis on the protection of the political process from the influence of religion (Berkes, 1964). At the time of the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, this meant not only pushing religion into a newly designated 'private sphere' (Çınar, 2005), but extending the arm of the state to the administration of mosques and the training of religious personnel through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA). Further, all religious activities that did not fall under the control of the DRA, such as Sufi sects, brotherhoods (*tarikats*), and religious schools (*medrese*), were outlawed. Yet with Turkey's transition to democracy in 1945–1950, religion quickly found its way into the populist strategies of party politics. Since the 1980s, many have considered religion and secularism to be a primary political division in Turkish politics (Kaya, 2012; Keyman, 2007). In fact, this way of parsing society has become so overworked that more visionary scholars have called for moving beyond the secular/religious dichotomy to fresh understandings of Turkish society (Kandiyoti, 2012; Göle, 2012). This call is not only academic; the redefinition of the secular is also a political project for the AKP. In October 2010, a member of the AKP charged with drafting the new constitution was quoted in domestic and international media stating, "We respect Turkey's principles of secularism, but these need to be re-interpreted" (HaberTürk, 2010).

As the devout Sunni political and economic elite has begun to reshape politics and public life in Turkey, questions remain regarding the extent to which difference and pluralism are accommodated in the evolving of public sphere. Our purpose is to take the problematic of post-secularism beyond an analysis of institutional politics and the ideology of the ruling elite. We begin by situating the concept of post-secularism and attendant notions of pluralism and the public sphere within the field of their uptake and critique. Taking post-secularism as a problematic that poses certain questions, we then turn to our fieldwork to show how these questions give rise to multiple contingent and embodied solutions in the lives of devout Sunni women in Istanbul. One of the outcomes of this analysis is that we can see how the 'public sphere' of engagement and encounter traverses spaces typically coded as public and private in women's lives. Further, while mutual respect mediates relations between neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family, women often find themselves up against the limits of respect, both in their intimate relations with Alevi friends and neighbors, and in the anonymous spaces of the city where they sometimes find themselves subject to secular hostility. Finally, further complicating the expression of pluralism in Istanbul, we argue that the gendered moral order of city spaces creates ambivalence for devout headscarf-wearing women when they enter into diverse arenas. Building upon geographical approaches to religion and public space, we thus examine the everyday geopolitics of post-secularism, not as an objective statement about the world, but as a problematic that allows us to deconstruct the very categories upon which it is based.

Post-secularism and the problem of pluralism

The concept of post-secularism, which Habermas (2006, 2008) uses to describe a heightened awareness of the role of religion in the public sphere that has come about in response to broader social