

The Diyanet and Laicite: New Turkish Exports to Europe

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Articles & Testimony

European secularism, or laicite, practiced in France and other European countries, is distinct from American secularism. While the United States is secular, providing for freedom of religion in education and politics, European societies are laique, providing for freedom from religion in education and politics.

Secularism, however, is not a standardized concept and varies from country to country. Turkey presents an example of such secular variation within Europe. Today, as European countries struggle to delineate the boundaries between Islam, education and politics, Turkey's distinct brand of secularism is attracting a lot of attention. In fact, it is fast becoming Turkey's newest export to Europe.

American secularism was shaped by the American experience; the United States was founded primarily by people escaping religious persecution (from the Puritans to the Huguenots). These multi-religious groups established a form of secularism that permitted adherents of varying religions to practice their faith freely and provided all faiths with equal access to politics and education.

Conversely, European secularism emerged in single-faith environments in which one religion, and often times one sect of a particular religion, dominated politics and education. The Catholic Church, for instance, wielded absolute political and pedagogical power in France, and enjoyed similar sway in other countries in southern and central Europe. In northern Europe, Lutheran Churches had similar authority, while the Orthodox Church dominated in Southeastern and Eastern Europe.

In the age of the Enlightenment, however, European societies reacted by limiting the absolute power of one faith over the state. In turn, laicite was born, creating a new European space in which religion would be entirely separated from education and government. After an arduous process, France became officially laique in 1905. Other European countries followed suit.

There was a twist to laicite, however. In Europe, where one religion had dominated society for such a long time, the inextricable link between religion and politics was not so easily severed. Therefore, European laicite led to the subversion of the existing relationship between state and religion. Whereas religion had previously subjugated the state, now the state assumed a perfunctory role over religion.

With some country exceptions, such as Greece, laicite introduced a discretionary power for modern government over religion. In France, the government declared churches "cultural and historical patrimony," and accepted responsibility for helping with their maintenance. In northern European countries, such as Denmark, where church membership and national identity had once been synonymous, the head of the state became the head of the Lutheran Church, even as these countries became secular. Similarly, Germany became secular, but collected a church tax to maintain religious buildings and pay for the clergy.

This pattern of laicite, providing freedom from religion in education and government while subverting the relationship between state and religion, also ensued in Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk established Turkey in 1923 in the mold of modern France -- the "model country" of fin de siecle Europe. Ataturk set up modern Turkey as a centralized state with strong national institutions, as a republic, and finally, as a laique system. Following France's path, Turkey became a near perfect representation of laicite.

Yet, in Turkey, too, history shaped laicite. The Ottoman tradition of subjugating the Islamic clergy to the sultan's power subsequently molded Turkish secularism. The republican state created a bureaucratic department, the Diyanet, which positioned the Islamic clergy under government supervision. Ataturk's laicite did not simply exclude religion from education and politics; it involved state influence over religion. As a government department, the Diyanet builds mosques and pays imams' salaries.

Laicite has not only had a uniquely European look to it, providing for freedom from religion in education and politics, but it has also assumed a distinct appearance within each country.

Today, Turkish laicite is fast becoming an asset for Turkey's relations with Europe. European societies have traditionally worried about curbing the domination of one faith over the state. Now, however, with the continued growth of Muslim communities throughout the continent, European societies are coming to terms with becoming multi-religious societies.

Not surprisingly, the European societies are turning to Turkey, the world's first Muslim society to adopt laicite, for models about delineating Islam, education and politics. In January 2010, for instance, Germany announced that, following the Turkish model, it would start to train imams in public universities. France, too, has started its own initiative to use state property to help build mosques, and the Netherlands is studying the Diyanet model and has established publicly-funded programs to train imams.

Turkey is exporting Diyanet to Europe, as well as re-exporting laicite to the continent. Laicite is a growing asset in Turkey's ties with Europe and Ankara should bring this to the Europeans' attention. Perhaps, this will convince Paris, which objects to Turkey's European Union membership, asserting "Turkey is not European," that, in the end, Turkey, Europe and France are not so different politically.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

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