Can Alevism be Defined from the Perspective of Religious Studies?

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Introduction

In this study, theoretical debates on the definition of religion will be discussed related to Alevism, and an attempt of defining religion will be examined on whether the universal definition of religion is possible or not. The definition of religion is an important issue for many social sciences, from philosophy to sociology, from law to political science. One of the liveliest discussions of this in Turkey is about Alevism.

As a religious minority, Alevis live mainly in West Asia, Southeast Europe, and Europe. Here, I will limit my study to Alevis in Turkey and use Alevism as an umbrella term. I will focus on Alevis in Turkey for two reasons. First, Alevis consist of various and broad communities from Iran to Britain. Their organisational structures and languages are different, and it makes studying Alevism more difficult. Secondly, the definition of Alevism has been a vivid issue in Turkey more than in any other country. Moreover, I use Alevism as an umbrella term because Alevis are various both for their organisational and social structures such as Kizilbash, Bektashi, Nusayri, Tahtacıs and so on. Despite this variety, Alevis have similar beliefs and lifestyles depending on where they live. By the term Alevi I mean religious groups that believe in the holiness of Ali, bring together nature and ancestral cults and Islam, and do not need a strict orthodoxy to relate to the sacred. Although scientific interest in Alevism had started at the beginning of the 20th century, the mass migration of Alevis starting in the 1950s, increased this interest. From the 1990s, Alevi Studies peaked in the Alevi Revival process. Since the 1950s, Alevis, who constitute one-fourth of the population in Turkey, have migrated from rural areas to cities *en masse*. This has resulted in the transformation of their social organization and community ties.

The aforementioned migration and organizational change caused Alevism to become an outside-learned experience rather than an experience born into it for Alevis. Thus, Alevism has become a phenomenon that needs to be defined for both Alevis and academics working on Alevism. However, there are many problems with the definition of Alevism. The problem of defining Alevism is a question of defining not only a religion or belief system but a comprehensive political and cultural phenomenon. To do so, Alevi Studies defines Alevism through dichotomies such as traditional-modern[1], archaic-contemporary[2], and rural-urban[3] which both assume formers are right, the latters are wrong and change in religion means loss. In this study, the social institutions and power relations that Ayhan Yalçınkaya[4] uses while defining Alevism will be explained by going through the remarks of Pınar Ecevitoğlu[5]

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[1] Yıldırım, R. (2018). *Geleneksel Alevilik: İnanç, İbadet, Kurumlar, Toplumsal Yapı, Kolektif Bellek* (2. Baskı). *Araştırma-İnceleme Dizisi: Vol. 439*. İletişim yayınları. *;

[2] Yalçınkaya, A. (1996). *Alevilikte Toplumsal Kurumlar ve İktidar*. *Mülkiyeliler Birligi Vakfı yayınları: Vol. 17*. Mülkiyeliler Birliği Vakfı.

[3] Seher Sen & Bayram Ali Soner (2016) Understanding urban Alevism through its socio-spatial manifestations: *Cem*evis in İzmir, Middle Eastern Studies, 52:4, 694-710, DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2016.1176919

[4] Yalçınkaya (1996)

[5] Ecevitoğlu, P. (2011). Aleviliği Tanımlamanın Dayanılmaz Siyasal Cazibesi. *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 66(3), 137–156. DOI: 10.1501/SBFder_0000002218

regarding the political dimension of the definition of religion. Then, the classical approaches to the definition of religion in the field of religious studies will be briefly reviewed and Steve Bruce's substantive approach will be discussed. Finally, the possibility of pluralism as a theoretical approach to help define religion clearly and homogeneously will be evaluated and the definition of Alevism in this context will be attempted.

When it comes to defining a human organization, the problem of definition becomes inextricable due to the principle of conflicting interests. Everything that is said or not said affects the subject being explained and the person trying to define it. One of the most common debates about the definition problem has taken place recently in Turkey. Alevism is not recognized as a religion by the Republic of Turkey. Thus, the places of worship, religious rituals, and identities of Alevis living in the country are not legally recognized. The debate on defining Alevism, which flared up with the Alevi Workshops in 2009[6], came to the fore again at the end of 2020, when the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia gave Alevism a public corporation status.

To sum, in this paper, I will try to explain the definition of religion through the problem of defining Alevism. First, I will draw a general framework for the religion of Alevis. Then, I will evaluate the current debates on the definition of Alevism through their contributions to the fields of political science and religious studies. Thirdly, I will examine the debates in the literature on the definition of religion through the works of Berger and Bruce. Finally, I will evaluate how a pluralistic definition of religion can contribute to the definition of Alevism.

Who is an Alevi?

In this subsection, the religion, and social structures of Alevis will be explained to the reader who is unfamiliar with the term Alevism. Like many social science subjects, Alevism does not have an agreed definition and a standardized ritual catalogue of community members. It would be more accurate to describe the Alevis (the term is used here as an umbrella term to enable us to think of subgroups such as Kızılbaş, Bektashis, Nusayris, and Tahtacıs together) through their common characteristics and return to the subject of definition after passing the discussions in the literature.

What is Alevism look like

Alevism is a heterodox, syncretic religion highly affected by pre-Islamic Turkic traditions and Islam. This formation of definition dates back 1920s when Mehmed Fuad Köprülü[7], one of the most influential sociologists in Turkey, introduced his paradigm of Folk Islam and High Islam. "Fundamental to Köprülü's construct of Turkish religious and cultural history was a dichotomous framework based on a rigid and hierarchical separation between high Islam and folk Islam. High Islam, represented by established Sunni dogma, was defined by its book-based nature while folk Islam was defined by its orality."[8] Although it can be said that Alevism has

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[6] Subaşı, N. (2010). *Alevi Çalıştayları Nihai Rapor*. Ankara. T.C. Devlet Bakanlığı.
[7] Köprülü (2013). *Türk edebiyatında ilk mutasavvıflar*. (5th Ed). Alfa Tarih.
[8] Karakaya-Stump, A. (2019). *The Kizilbash-Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, politics and community*. *Edinburgh Studies on the Ottoman Empire*. Edinburgh University Press.

roots many years before Islam, it must be underlined that without Islam and its effects on Alevism, the founding myths of Alevism, which have their origins in the 7th century, cannot be understood. "Alevi tradition, however, in a manner reminiscent of the Sufi notion of *nūr Muḥammadī* (the Muhammadan light), unites ʿAli and Muhammad into one, as two inseparable halves of a cosmic entity emanating from the primordial divine light. It is this idea, it would seem, that underscores the famous Alevi triad of 'Allah (or Hakk), Muhammad, Ali'."[9] According to my research, since Mohammad is the Prophet of Islam and Ali whose followers are named Alevi is the cousin of Mohammad and the fourth (and the last) elected Caliph of Islam, it would be incorrect to place Alevism far from Islamic traditions by looking at its main theological assumptions.

The formation of the basic institutions of Alevism is shaped in the 12th century by many historians and Alevi scholars.[10] Its institutionalization took place in the 16th century with the rise of the Safavids in Iran. The Ottomans, who saw the rise of the Safavids and the loyalty of the Alevis living in Anatolia to the Shah as a threat to their power, tried to break this loyalty through the Bektashi lodge[11]. Although it can be said that the Bektashi lodge strengthened and institutionalized in the following two centuries, and the Kızılbaş communities lived more secretly, a close relationship between these two large communities began with the closure of the Bektashi lodge in the 19th century. Of course, this rapprochement does not mean that tensions do not exist between communities. However, these power relations are beyond the scope of this study. In the Republican era, although Alevis benefited to some extent from the principle of equal opportunity in a relatively secular regime, they also had to face many massacres that brought them closer and united them around identity. Some of them are: Dersim (1938), Muğla Ortaca (1966), Malatya and Maraş (1978), Çorum (1980), Sivas (1993), İstanbul (1995).[12]

Alevis (to remind again, the term is used here as an umbrella term for Kızılbaş, Bektashis, Nusayris, and Tahtacıs together) constitute approximately one-fourth of Turkey's population that equals between 20-25 million.[13] Alevis have spread all over the world with the migration of workers from Turkey, especially to Germany. According to the population ratio, it can be

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[9] Karakaya-Stump (2019) 4.

[10] Anton Jozef Dierl. (1991). *Anadolu Aleviliği*. Ant Yayınları. *; Çakmak, Y., & Gürtaş, İ. (2015). *Kızılbaşlık, Alevilik, Bektaşilik: Tarih-Kimlik-Ritüel*. İletişim yayınları. *; Karakaya-Stump, A. (2021). Who Really Were Kizilbash? A Rethinking of the Kizilbash Movement in Light of New Sources and Research. In R. P. Matthee (Ed.), *The Routledge worlds. The Safavid world* (1st ed., pp. 37–55). Routledge; Kehl-Bodrogi, K. (2012). *Kızılbaşlar / Aleviler* (O. Değirmenci & B. E. Aybudak, Trans.). Ayrıntı Yayınları. *; Massicard, E. (2013). *The Alevis in Turkey and Europe: İdentity and managing territorial diversity*. Exeter studies in ethno politics. Routledge. *; van Bruinessen, M. (1996). Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey. *Middle East Report* (200), 7. DOI: 10.2307/3013260*; *Bektaşiliğin Doğuşu: Hacı Bektaş Veli'den Balım Sultan'a. Araştırma-İnceleme Dizisi: Vol. 456*. İletişim yayınları. *; Yıldırım, R. (2020). *Aleviliğin doğuşu: Kızılbaş sufiliğinin toplumsal ve siyasal temelleri 1300-1501* (B. Yildirim, Trans.) (3. baskı). *İletişim yayınları Araştırma - inceleme dizisi: Vol. 415*. İletişim yayınları. *

[11] A Sufi heterodox Islamic sect based on Hadji Bektash-i Veli's teaching. Followers of Bektashism lives mostly in Anatolia and Albania.

[12] For some examples and their remembrance culture see: Poyraz, Bedriye (2013): Bellek, Hakikat, Yüzleşme ve Alevi Katliamları. In *kültür ve iletişim* 16 (1), 9–39. Available online at https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1934807. (2013).

[13] USCIRF. (April 2017). *2017 Annual Report*. Washington, DC. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

assumed that a quarter of the workers who go to these countries are Alevis. They continued their existence by establishing Alevi organizations in the countries they went to. Despite their large population, Alevis are not recognised as a religious group by law in Turkey, which means they cannot gain equal rights for their places of worship, religious rituals, and identities. Consequently, there are many violations of rights orders given by the Constitutional Court of Turkey, and the European Court of Human Rights[14]. The subjects of the cases are education, religious freedom, and civil rights. As can be seen from the subjects of the cases, their main demands are equal citizenship, recognition of *Cem*evis[15] as prayer houses, and closure of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkey.

Debate on defining Alevism

Defining Alevism has always been problematic because it is a complex issue with many goals. Thus, the definition attempts have never been only religious, rights-oriented, or political. Instead, it has been complicated and changed up to the scholar/person who defines' position. The biggest difficulty in meeting the demands for rights is put forward by the government as the problem of defining Alevism. The definition of Alevism is also an issue on which Alevi NGOs, who claim to be the representatives of Alevis, cannot agree. Being aware of this gap, the Turkish government are putting this conflict to the fore and imposing their agenda on the Alevis. Indeed, all actors who are parties to the issue have different views on Alevism. *CEM* Foundation, the right-wing of the Alevi movement, defines Alevism as pure/unspoiled Islam, while the left-wing Pir Sultan Abdal Association claims it is a culture/lifestyle.[16] For the European Alevi Union, which has a great impact on debates on Alevism not only in European countries but also in Turkey, it is a unique/authentic religion.[17] To Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), Alevism is the love of Ali and his supporters[18], while Alevi Workshops defined it as "the manners, customs, and methods of non-Sunni Muslims who are connected to Muhammad's family, especially to Ali's ancestry."[19] Nationalists say Alevism is the pure Turkic tradition which combines Shamanism and Islam. For Kemalists, it is the assurance of laicism while Marxists see Alevism as a form of primitive communism. Some sociologists, as mentioned earlier, define Alevism as "folk Islam."

The definition debate reached its peak during the Alevi Workshops that started in 2009. At that time, the government of Turkey decided to democratize state institutions and started a series of workshops called the 'Alevi opening'. Although attempts to define Alevism go back more than 100 years, it had never been argued this commonly. Academicians from different fields, columnists, politicians, clergymen and even laypeople have been involved in the debate. However, a much more recent discussion took place in the last month of 2020, after the German

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[14] Those are: 2007 Hasan and Eylem Zengin/Türkiye, 2010 Sinan Işık/Türkiye, 2014 Mansur Yalcin and others/Türkiye, 2014 *CEM* Foundation/Türkiye, 2016 Izzettin Dogan and others/Türkiye.

[15] *Cem*evi is a place where Alevis conduct their religious ritual *Cem*.

[16] Tuna, Hacer (2011): Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür ve Sanat Dergisinde Sunulan Alevilik. MA thesis. T.C. İstanbul Üniversitesi. Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü. Available online at http://nek.istanbul.edu.tr:4444/ekos/TEZ/48681.pdf.

[17] "Full support for the recognition of Alevism as an 'authentic belief'", Pirha, 03.05.2022. https://pirha.org/500u-askin-alevi-kurumundan-aleviligin-ozgun-bir-inanc-olarak-taninmasina-tam-destek-322226.html/03/05/2022/

[18] "Alevi", Encyclopaedia of Islam, Turkey Diyanet Foundation. See: https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/alevi

[19] Subaşı, N. (2010). *Alevi Çalıştayları Nihai Rapor*. Ankara. T.C. Devlet Bakanlığı.

state of North Rhine-Westphalia recognized Alevism as a public corporation. It is possible to follow this discussion from the news of different media organizations. Leftist Gazete Duvar used "A first in the world: Alevism gains *public corporation* status in Germany."[20] while Islamist Haksöz accused Germany of hypocrisy: "Germany, which does not officially recognize Islam as a religion, will give Alevism *official faith* status."[21] Mainstream Hürriyet announced this news with the title: "Alevi *faith* is now an *official religion* in NRW."[22]

The problem of definition is seen as a problem for Alevism as well as in the whole field of religious studies. Because a definition is expected to cover some aspects of the belief while excluding others. In this sense, it does not seem possible to make a universal definition of Alevism. Instead, focusing on the functioning of structures, their social institutions, myths, and historical relationships can yield more accurate results.

Defining Alevism

As stated earlier, the definition of Alevism is an insurmountable problem both in the field of interdisciplinary religious studies and in terms of daily politics. It should be said that the underlying problem here is that the organizational structure of Alevis is different from that of 50 years ago. Although it cannot be detailed here, it can be said that the "Ocak" structures, which are the basic organizational form of Alevis, have largely lost their validity today. The aforementioned *Ocak* organization is a geographically dispersed social organization led by charismatic religious leaders believed to be descended from Ali. The *Ocak* system lost its power due to the nation-state monopoly of basic institutions such as justice and education, and the mass migration from rural to urban areas that started in the 1950s. The *Ocak* organization allowed groups affiliated with this structure to have different rituals around certain basic teachings. This structure also allowed Alevis to continue their existence during the Ottoman Empire and the Republic period and affected the way Alevi groups were associated with the state. Alevis express their differences by saying 'the road is one and the way is thousand and one.' There is a strong possibility that this statement is important as it shows that Alevis have a pluralistic structure among themselves. However, in the report that emerged because of the Alevi Workshops, the only trace of the pluralism of Alevism is its definition as "a way, decency, method." Keeping the pluralistic structure of Alevism in mind, the views of two academics on the definition of Alevism will be presented below. The reason for presenting the opinions of these academics, who have made significant contributions to the literature on Alevism studies, is that they approach the problem of defining Alevism, which has already moved to a political level, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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[20] GazeteDuvar. (2020). *Bir ilk: Alevilik Almanya'da kamu kurumu statüsü kazanıyor*. https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/dunyada-bir-ilk-alevilik-almanyada-kurumsal-statu-kazandi-haber-1506866

[21] Haksöz Haber. (2020). *İslam'ı resmen din olarak tanımayan Almanya Aleviliğe resmi inanç statüsü verecek*. https://www.haksozhaber.net/islami-resmen-din-olarak-tanimayan-almanya-alevilige-resmi-inanc-statusu-verecek-137893h.htm

[22] Hürriyet. (2020). *Alevi inancı artık KRV'de resmi din*. https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/avrupa/alevi-inanci-artik-krvde-resmi-din-41685491

Pınar Ecevitoğlu's Perspective

In her famous work The Irresistible Political Appeal of Defining Alevism, which she wrote after the above-mentioned Alevi Workshops, Pınar Ecevitoğlu explains that by defining Alevism as a cultural and moral category, it is denied that it is a religious orientation. *"Denying that Alevis are a community that experiences a specific religiosity constitutes a ground for rejecting the equal citizenship rights they demand based on this specificity, particularly the recognition of the status of Cemevis as places of worship, the abolition of compulsory religion classes, and the abolition of the Presidency of Religious Affairs."*[23] Expressing in her article that this was a governmental strategy, Ecevitoğlu draws attention to some realities that Alevis experience and their consequences.

Modernization deeply affected Alevis as well as many other religious communities. Ecevitoğlu states that as the first of these effects, modernization, along with immigration, caused erosion and loss of function in the basic institutions of Alevism. As mentioned above, the "Ocak" organization is one of these structures. The loss of function in this deep-rooted structure causes the second effect that Ecevitoğlu draws attention to that modernization "*forced Alevis, who migrated to the city, to reinvent tradition.*"[24] Thus, "*urbanization has ceased Alevism, an experience that was born into, especially for the young generation of Alevis. For urban Alevis, Alevism has become an experience that can be learned by questioning from outside.*"[25] Consequently, this externality has created a gap between Alevism and the Alevi individual. Thus, a religion that is learned by living and does not need to be defined needs to be defined when it is learned from the outside. However, when it comes to Alevism, one side of the definition attempt is the Alevis themselves, while the addressee of all the demands of the Alevis, especially equal citizenship, is the government.[26]

Ecevitoğlu states that every definition attempt (of Alevism) should take this dual structure into account. According to her view, the gap between Alevism and Alevi individuals is a problem which must be solved by Alevis themselves. While they attempt to bridge the gap, it should not be labelled as "*creating a new religion.*"[27] Because religions, like people, change and transform according to people's needs. Just like the Alevis, who do not need a specific place of worship in the Alevi villages, with their migration to the city, their need for places of worship emerged and they built *Cem*evis to meet this need. Furthermore, the government requires the definition of Alevism to reduce the demands of Alevi NGOs to reasonable limits which target the sustainability of the Sunni Hanafi monopoly that is sponsored by the state. Because Alevis' demand for equal citizenship aims for a pluralistic environment all over the country and equal treatment to all religious groups. This would undermine the Sunni Hanafi monopoly in the country.

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[23] Ecevitoğlu, P. (2011). Aleviliği Tanımlamanın Dayanılmaz Siyasal Cazibesi. *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, *66*(3), 137–156. DOI: 10.1501/SBFder_0000002218
[24] Ecevitoğlu (2011) 141.
[25] Ecevitoğlu (2011) 142.
[26] Ecevitoğlu (2011) 142.
[27] Ecevitoğlu (2011) 142.

Ayhan Yalçınkaya's Perspective

The second perspective is Ayhan Yalçınkaya's book[28] in which he focuses on how Alevis base and practice their own beliefs by explaining social structures of Alevis and their functions. Since it gives a solid perspective, it is valuable to track the structural change in Alevi institutions without disregarding its theological aspects. Yalçınkaya states that to examine Alevism in his work, which have been popular especially in the recent period, three main areas should be examined. They are Ali-centred world-building, social institutions, and identity building.

According to Yalçınkaya's perspective, Ali-centered world-building is vital for Alevism. The first question he asks is who Ali was and what he represents.[29] First, Ali is a historical figure. He is the cousin of Islam's prophet Mohammad who was raised by Ali's father. He also married Mohammad's daughter Fatima and became the parents of Hasan and Huseyn. This family, Mohammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Huseyn constitute the *Ahl al-Bayt* (Household) which is very important not only for Alevi mythology but also for Sunni narratives. Ali was the fourth elected caliph of Islam and a great warrior. Secondly, contrary to the Umayyad family, Ali is the representative of the poor classes. Mohammad forbids his family to have slaves and they lived a humble life. Alevis assume that for Ali, wealth should not be collected on one hand but rather spread to society. This made him likeable to the poor classes. Thirdly, for Alevis, Ali is the manifestation of God. Here, Yalçınkaya borrows Irene Melikoff's model[30] and puts Ali between God and the creations as the manifestation of God. Here, I would like add to Yalçınkaya's work the concept of tawallā and tabarrā (friendship and enmity) which is vital for all Alevi communities. It basically means being friend to Ali's friends and being enemy to Ali's enemies. All Alevi communities have this concept, and they use it in their religious rituals. Thus, it shapes both Alevi individual and society by putting justice as the main reference point and Ali as its representative. I think this concept is important to understand when Alevis try to build their positive self-image, they also draw the line of their identity by referring to the negative aspects of their out-group. Furthermore, cursing the enemies of Ali during worship makes Alevis slightly different from orthodox Shia, although this debate is controversial in the Alevi Studies.

The second point that Yalçınkaya draws our attention to is the social institutions of Alevism.[31] These are *Musahiplik* (companionship), *Cem* Ritual (gathering), and *Dede*lik (religious leadership). *Musahiplik* is one of the eroding institutions of Alevism. However, in the doctrine, every adult Alevi must marry and have a companion to be a full part of society. After the marriage union is established, the two Alevi couples become companions of each other. These people are responsible for each other's actions, and debts. They are judged and punished together in front of the community for inappropriate behaviour. The *Cem* ritual is vital in that it is the current repetition of the founding myth of Alevism which is the myth of the forties. This myth represents that even Muhammad's prophecy is null and void in the face of truth and equalizes everyone who participates in the ritual. This ritual has an important role in reflecting

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[28] Yalçınkaya, A. (1996). *Alevilikte Toplumsal Kurumlar ve İktidar. Mülkiyeliler Birligi Vakfı yayınları: Vol. 17.* Mülkiyeliler Birliği Vakfı.

[29] Yalçınkaya (1996) 38-59.

[30] Yalçınkaya (1996) 47.

[31] Yalçınkaya (1996) 60-97.

the egalitarian nature of Alevism and enabling Alevi women to act in relative equality in daily life.

*Dede*lik, the third social institution, is in a transformation today and causes controversy in Alevism studies. However, *Dede*lik is very important in terms of showing how Alevism copes with authority in itself. One of the most special positions in Alevism is *Dede*lik. Unlike other ritualistic duties, it is based on this lineage alone. It is believed that all *Dede*s are descended from Ali. Some of these descendants undergo special training and take the oath after the approval of the community and become *Dede*. Here, the approval of the community is very important. *Dede*s can only fulfil their duties with the consent of the community. This consent must be obtained before every ritual, not just once. Thus, it prevents *Dede*s from obtaining a privileged position. They are fulfilling their duty to the community, not exercising their power over the community. *Dede*s are not looked after by the community so they do not have a privileged position economically. Like other members of the community, *Dede*s must have a profession and earn their living by their profession. This situation does not prevent *Dede*s from taking food and a piece of clothing from the villages they go to. It would be easily said that Yalçınkaya explains all these to show the power relations and their "check and balance" system in Alevism. With the *Musahiplik*, Alevi individuals bond together to look after each other. With the *Cem* ritual, community and individual gather together and check all small units in *Musahiplik* institution. Finally, the religious (and political) leader *Dede*, must take the consent of the community to perform their holiness as a duty, not as a privilege.

Defining Religion

Definition Alevism is not as easy as linking it to Ali and complete the task. So far, we have seen Ayhan Yalçınkaya's structuralist "description" and Ecevitoğlu's remark on not missing Alevism's religious orientation. However, both scholars avoid from defining Alevism in terms of religious studies by limiting themselves into structural functionalism. Although it is understandable from political science perspective, it is worth to look how religious studies define religion and if it is possible to define Alevism from this discipline. Therefore, I will try to reach a conclusion by sharing the views of two important names in religious studies in the following pages. The first author I will mention is Peter L. Berger (1929-2017) who defines religion in terms its social function. Yalçınkaya's and Ecevitoğlu's ideas resonate with Berger's point of view and as one of the most influential scientists in religious studies Berger has his own meta-theory which makes him unique among post-WWII scholars. Although their research explains many, I am not convinced that they are satisfactorily giving a solid conclusion about the definition of religion. Hence, I will look at Steve Bruce's substantive definition of religion that he offers to avoid renaming religious institutions by using functionalist definitions.

Peter Berger's Perspective on Defining Religion

In his tremendous work *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger reserves two chapters to the definition of religion.[32] Religion, according to Berger, provides a system of meaning for making sense of

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[32] Berger, P. L. (1990, 1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion.* Anchor Books, 150–161.

the world and for providing a canopy of sacrality and taken-for-grantedness to conceal contingency.[33] To support this, he quotes Max Müller's[34] conception of religion: "*Religion is a humanly constructed universe of meaning*". Berger's ideas agree with those expressed in Thomas Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion.* (1967) In his book, Luckmann defines religion in terms of its social function which is an objection to contemporary structural functionalism. According to them, "*the functionality is grounded in certain fundamental anthropological presuppositions, not in particular institutional constellations that are historically relative and that cannot be validly raised to a status of universality… Religion becomes not only the social phenomenon (as in Durkheim) but indeed the anthropological phenomenon par excellence*."[35] As Woodhead accurately underlines, according to Berger, humans must be able to impose cognitive order on the chaotic disorderliness of reality. This is not an individual achievement, but rather a collective one: cultural order enables social life, and society enables cultural order. In terms of secularization, Woodhead further points out that Berger claims that religion is threatened not so much by the dissolution of social community as by the emergence of cognitive pluralism in modern society, where people are forced to interact with a wide range of other belief systems.[36] Berger also states that the phenomenon of religion should be approached with methodological atheism. According to him, religion is to be viewed as a human projection, founded in specific infrastructures of human history, according to sociological theory.[37]

Steve Bruce's Perspective on Defining Religion

In his remarkable article *Defining Religion: A Practical Response*[38], Bruce rejects functional definitions of religion. He accuses Marx of ideological obfuscation and Durkheim of social cohesion. According to him, both attempts were "*simply a renaming*."[39] He advocates that religion cannot be defined solely by the functions it performs; it must be distinguished from those functions.

He also targets Talal Asad's view of religion. According to Asad, religion has no universal definition because its constitutional elements and relationships are historically specific. Thus, the definition itself is a historical product and it authorizes particular forms of history-making.[40] Bruce rejects this view and says that discovery is not the same as invention. In a response to the history-making debate, he says "*An idea, has been used for bad ends, does not demonstrate that the idea is badly conceived and should be discarded*."[41] It is necessary to remember three characteristics observed in sociology's definition of religion.

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[33] Woodhead, L. (2011). Five concepts of religion. *International Review of Sociology*, *21*(1), 121–143. DOI: 10.1080/03906701.2011.544192 , p. 124.
[34] Berger (1990, 1967) 150.
[35] Berger (1990, 1967) 151-152.
[36] Woodhead (2011) 124.
[37] Berger (1990, 1967) 155.
[38] Bruce, S. (2011). Defining Religion: A Practical Response. *International Review of Sociology*, *21*(1), 107–120. DOI: 10.1080/03906701.2011.544190 Bruce (2011)
[39] Bruce (2011) 111.
[40] Bruce (2011) 113.
[41] Bruce (2011) 108.

> *"First, the professional formulation is generally abstracted from more widespread usage than the lay counterparts. (…) Second, sociological concepts are generally broader than lay concepts because they are designed for purposes more abstract and enduring than those which motivate the layperson, and they are refined in arguments between large numbers of scholars from diverse backgrounds. (…) Third, sociological concepts will generally have a degree of consistency and cohesion, an orderliness not required in everyday life."[42]*

Bruce's criticism is important to consider in Alevi studies, too. His substantive definition of religion gives an opportunity to end discussions if Alevism is a religion or not. He says that "*Religion consists of beliefs, actions and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose.*"[43] This definition can be adapted for Alevism since it is a religion that includes supernatural powers and has its own institutions, actions, and beliefs like many other religions.

Conclusion

Either functionalist or substantive definition of religion do not question religious aspects and theology of Alevism. Since Alevism important for social scientific research, religious studies give multiple options from defining it to systematically studying it. Although it was not mentioned here, a recent work[44] in religious studies questions what religion is. These attempts of defining religion in scientific and philosophical ways should encourage scholars in Alevi studies to test the possibility of mobilizing such attempt for defining Alevism.

These debates let us say that Alevism has syncretic and heterodox qualities without annihilating its religious aspect. It is syncretic, because it has fed from many sources, from Asiatic religions to Islam, from Middle Eastern mysticism to Christianity, and has been able to include it all within its own structure. However, one of the most important difference in Alevi syncretism is that when Alevism adapt a feature from another religion, it keeps this features originality, too. For instance, adaptation of Christmas tree into Christianity is a type of syncretism, but we do not see its pagan roots. On the contrary, some Alevi groups celebrate Easter by commemorating the crucifix and resurrection of Jesus, without needing "Alevisation" of it. Alevism is heterodox because the power relations it describes can live with hierarchical state systems only in certain conditions. Thus, it has never been the main religion of a state or state elites. Aside from its truth and falsehood, the point of view of Alevism through history shapes its myths and rituals accordingly and tries to build a different world from both its Sunni and Shi'a neighbours.

If we borrow Bruce's definition and apply it to Alevism, it has institutions, practices, and beliefs that presuppose the existence of supernatural beings with the ability to act. To sum, from religious studies perspective, Alevism is a religion with its similarities and differences with other religions and traditions.

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[42] Bruce (2011) 114.
[43] Bruce (2011) 112.
[44] Aaron W. Hughes and Russel T. McCutcheon (2021). *What Is Religion? Debating the Academic Study of Religion*. Oxford University Press.