In the past decade, Turkey’s official image as a country of Sunni Muslims has been vigorously challenged by the ‘coming out’ of the Alevis, a large heterodox Islamic minority, which has been banned by law. However, a shift in government policy in the early 1990s enabled the Alevis to come to the fore and to inaugurate an ethno-political movement to achieve official acknowledgement.

The politicization of Alevi identity is accompanied by a religious revivalism which regards the nature of traditional Alevism – appears to result in a re-construction of community structures, beliefs and rituals. The renewed knowledge of the shari’a, not to be dismissed to anyone but those born into the community. The esoteric knowledge was handed down orally in a number of holy lines (ocak) – which claim descent from the Prophet – and passed on to the laymen (talip) in special initiation rites. Though a kind of hierarchy existed among the ocak, none of them could pose the role of a central religious authority. This segmented organization along with the lack of a binding script forestalled the development of a single and uniquely valid religious tradition among the Alevis.

Aside from strong Shi’i (and extreme-Shi’i) influences, the Alevis preserved several non-Islamic religious traditions. What brings them into sharp contrast with Islamic orthodoxy is the rejection of the sharia. Rather, the Alevis have believed that the word of God (‘alam) and religion, Kehl-Bodrogi, K. (1988). Die Kozulbasu/Aleviten: Untersuchungen über eine neuer Gemeinschaft: Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.

Notes

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One of the new erected houses of worship (cemevi), Ankara.