

EDITORIAL

A LESSON FROM REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

RELIGION AND CONSCIENCE

The Republic of Turkey has a secular state structure. Turkey is the only country among the Islamic countries which has included secularism in her Constitution and practices it. With the abolition of the Caliphate and the Ministry of *Shariah* (Islamic Law) and Foundations, on 3rd March 1924 during the Republic period, significant steps were taken on the course to secularism and by providing the unification of education (including religion) and later the unification of the judiciary. These steps were followed by other steps such as the Hat Reform (Tanzimat hatt ı humayun ıt: means document for regulation area) closure of the Sects and Convents, changing the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday and the adoption of the Latin alphabet and the Gregorian calendar.

Religious affairs in the secular Republic of Turkey are carried out through an organization within the structure of the state, organized under a central administration. Along with the abolition of the Caliphate on 3rd March 1924, and on the same date, the "**Presidency of Religious Affairs**" (**Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı**) responsible for the administration of religious affairs was formed, within the state structure, as an organization connected to the Prime Ministry. The function of this organization is to carry out activities related to the beliefs of the Islamic religion, the principles of worship and morality, and to enlighten society on the subject of religious issues and to manage the places of worship. The organization of the Presidency of Religious Affairs with its present functional structure is composed of the central and rural organizations and the organizations abroad. It is organized to assist Moslem Turkish citizens in Turkey and those working abroad, to fulfill their religious services, with its staff of more than 80 thousand persons. The Presidency of Religious Affairs, represented by Muftis in the provinces and counties, tries to instill the principles of Islam, such as unity, cooperation and helping one another, among the Turkish people according to the principles specified in the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, by aiming at national solidarity and unity and remaining above all kinds of political views and thoughts. As a public organization, it gives services to all Moslems without discriminating against their sects. The Diyanet had an allocated budget of 1,308,187,000 YTL or USD \$0.9 Billion for the year 2006 [2].

The Article of 24 of Constitution of the Republic of Turkey is related with the *Freedom of Religion and Conscience* and religious education and its instructions are determined such as education and instruction in religion ethics shall be conducted under state supervision and control. Instruction in religious culture and moral education shall be compulsory in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Other religious education and instructions shall be subject to the individual's own desire, and in the case of minors, to the request of their legal representatives.'

In a meeting M K Atatürk, who was a leader for the new state of Turkey, had said '*we haven't have a class of clergy, all of us have to learn our rules of our religion as equally. Of course everyone needs a place /an institution where s/he learns his/her religion, religiosity and faith. This place is a school.*'[1]

The above statement of Atatürk clearly indicates that the role of clergy in teaching and preaching religion has been eliminated. Although there is no clergy system in Nanakian Philosophy still the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar has created the posts of clergies {*Granthis, Head Granthis* and the *Jathedars* for five *Takhts* (thrones)}. The Jathedar of Akal Takht is accepted as the highest seat of Clergy and by some Sikhs it is compared to that of the Pope in Vatican.

The above steps taken by the Government of Republic of Turkey to become a secular government is a lesson for all the countries where Theo-governmental systems is prevailing or intend to go under Theo-governmental system. When I was in Turkey, from May 8 to 22, 2007 in connection with a research project to verify if Guru Nanak had been in Turkey during his stay in the Middle East around from 1511 to 1521 CE, I visited the Faculties of Divinity of Marmara University and came to know the extensive program of Research and Teaching of Islam on the following lines:

The Faculty of Divinity is divided into three Departments housed in four different big buildings of three stories each, one main Administration Building housing the Dean and the Vice Deans plus lecture rooms, classrooms and an auditorium provided with audiovisual aids. The total Number of Professors, Associate Professor, Assistant

Professors, and Assistants in all the Fields are 120.

Major Scientific Areas:

1. Department of Basic Islamic Sciences.
 - a. Interpretation (*tefsir*) of Qur'an
 - b. Hadith
 - c. Islamic Law
 - d. Islamic Theology
 - e. Islamic Sects
 - f. Islamic Mysticism
 - g. Arabic Languages and Rhetoric
2. Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
 - a. History of Philosophy
 - b. Islamic Philosophy
 - c. Philosophy of Religion
 - d. Logic
 - e. History of Religions
 - f. Sociology of Religion
 - g. Psychology of Religion
 - h. Religious Education.
3. Department of Islamic History and Islamic Arts
 - a. Islamic History
 - b. History of Turkish Islamic Arts
 - c. Turkish Islamic Literature
 - d. Turkish Religious Music.

I have also noticed very similar system of educational programs in the Faculty of Divinity of Istanbul University in Istanbul, and Selcuk University in Konya. I also noticed that almost all the professors were well dressed in European style with ties and were clean-shaven. However, I noticed that almost all the women students were dressed in long robes and wearing hijab. Besides the hijab they were also wearing hat over the hijab.

The most important point to be noted was that there was equal number of women getting higher education in religion covering various fields of Islam - History, Psychology, Philosophy, Sociology, and logic. Most of these women would be going for teaching the religion in schools and colleges. It means the future teachers of Islam will be having higher education at least up to Master level. According to this new system the education of religion is only through schools, colleges, and universities by well qualified teachers and professors. However, every individual is free to pray and practice one's religion at home any way they like.

The most important point to be noted in the above article 24 is the use of word 'conscience' with that of 'Religion' which is not allowed in many religions, so far as I understand. Introduction of word 'conscience' with 'Religion' prepares a person to question what is right and what is wrong.

The word 'Conscience' is defined in Encarta Dictionary as follows:

The internal sense of what is right and wrong that governs somebody's thoughts and actions, urging him or her to do right rather than wrong.

The use of conscience is recommended by Guru Nanak again and again in his *Bani* (verse) and advises that one should evaluate every thing/philosophy before it is accepted:

ਪਹਿਲਾ ਵਸਤੁ ਸਿਵਾਣਿ ਕੈ ਤਾ ਕੀਚੈ ਵਾਪਰੁ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 1410.

Nanak Say

One must evaluate the thing / philosophy properly, if convinced, then adopt / follow it.

The above recommendation is based on the following principle of philosophy of Guru Nanak (Nanakian Philosophy):

ਸੁਰਤੀ ਕੈ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਚਲਿ ਕੈ ਉਲਟੀ ਨਦਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਗਾਸੀ ॥

ਮਨਿ ਵੀਚਾਰਿ ਦੇਖੁ ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਕਉਨੁ ਗਿਰਹੀ ਕਉਨੁ ਉਦਾਸੀ ॥੩॥

AGGS, M 1, p 1329.

By following ones' conscience one turns away from illusion (Maya) and becomes enlightened.

Oh spiritual intellect! Use your conscience to find out which path is right. Is house-holder's path is right or the renunciation from it?

I am glad that my visit to the Republic of Turkey turned out to be very fruitful to know the novel system of education in religion at the university level and have developed a close contacts between the research-oriented Institute for Understanding Sikhism and the research-oriented Faculties of Divinity of Marmara University, Istanbul University, and Selcuk University.

I have not noticed such an extensive program on Research and Teaching in Sikhism in any university in Punjab. Although the SGPC is running a large number of educational institutions but none of them have such a grand Research and Teaching Program on Sikhism.

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