The Alevi-Bektaşi religious group of Turkey.

Its history and today.

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Before all we have to know who are the Bektâsis and the Alevis. Like the most important scholars say, Alevis and Bektâsis have the same roots and basically the same teachings, the same founder and revered saints (veli)\(^1\). One of the important differences between them is that while Alevism (Kızılbaş) was a, by the educated Ottomans, very despised form of a belief practiced in villages, or among the nomad groups, named Yörük or Turcoman, led by uneducated religious leaders, called baba or dede, Bektâsis were an organized, stratified mystical Sufi order, spread in towns\(^2\), that put a big importance on the reading of different religious texts\(^3\), and who also influenced Turkish literature very deeply\(^4\). Another very important difference between them is, that while Bektâsis were considered a mystical order, in which could enter anyone who want, the Alevis are a religious group that accepts only adherents who have at least one of their parents as an Alevi\(^5\). In the past Alevis did not married with others than people who belonged also to the Alevi group. Those who broke this rule, were considered düşkün (who lost his honor) and were expelled from the community\(^6\).

While the Bektâsis follow a hard way of mystic learning through the teachings of the sheiks who claimed that they teach through the power given to them by the pir, the founder of the order, the Alevis have no pir, in the Bektâsi or other mystical orders meaning\(^7\). When a sheik dies, his successor is chosen by the other members, but they usually choose that person who was recommended before by the dead sheik. In the Alevi community after the death of the spiritual leader, the dede, his successor is usually his son, and it occurs no choosing by the other members\(^8\).

While the Bektâsis a very long time in the history of the Ottoman Empire were a very influential group that had a big importance in the founding of the empire, spreading of the Muslim faith in the conquered lands, and being the spiritual way that the elite military force of the Ottomans, the Janissaries followed; the Alevi (called until the 19. century kızılbaş\(^9\), râfîzî, zindik, mülhid\(^10\)) were a religious group, considered heretical,

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\(^{2}\) same place

\(^{3}\) For the religious texts they used, look


\(^{6}\) The same place

\(^{7}\) Timuroğlu: 19

\(^{8}\) The same place


and looked with suspicion by the elites. One of the reasons of this suspicion were their numerous revolts against the Ottoman power, and their alliance in the beginning of the 16. century, with the biggest threat to the Turks at their Eastern border, Persia, whos leader was Shah Ismail\textsuperscript{11}, and who, with a religious propaganda in Anatolia, in favor of the Shiite teachings created a so powerful anti Ottoman movement, that made not only the Kızılbaş his allies, but influenced also the Bektaş Janissaries, who were not very happy to fight against him\textsuperscript{12}. From these times originate the older name of the Alevis, Kızılbaş (red head), which designated the color of their headwear, which they wear in solidarity with Sheik Haydar and his son, Shah Ismail, the founder of the Persian Safavid dynasty. This is why the name Kızılbaş had a negative connotation, meaning „rebel, unbeliever”\textsuperscript{13}. In the 19. century the former Kızılbaş started to use another name, Alevi, which has the meaning of: „who is follower of Ali, who is devoted to Ali”\textsuperscript{14}, because of the fact that they revere Ali, the son in law of the Prophet, even considering him God\textsuperscript{15}. The changing of their name did not diminish their negative perception from the majority population\textsuperscript{16}. Their other names also show their beliefs, or if the name is given by the majority population, its perception about the Alevis. In Anatolia, Balkans or Iran their name is „mum söndürenler” (those who blow out the candle), in some places of Anatolia, because the fact that they consider the hares as unholy animal, their are called also „tavşan yemezler” (those who do not eat rabbits), do to the memory of a medieval state, which was leaded by a Turcoman group that followed similar religious practices, in the East they are called Karakoyunlular (those from Karakoyunlu), because of their belief that Ali, is in fact God, in Meşhet they are called „Ali Allahiler”, etc\textsuperscript{17}.

A other reason of the suspicion from the official religious, cultural and political elites of the empire towards the groups, known today as Alevis and Bektaşis was that they did not followed the strict rules of the orthodox Sunni faith, but believed in a form of Islam that had influences from many other belief and philosophical systems, religions or doctrines. As we upper showed, Bektaşis and those groups who today we call Alevis had basically the same doctrines. But while Bektaşis, because of the upper shown reasons, until 1826, were tolerated, the Kızılbaş’s or Alevis, were watched with suspicious eyes because their beliefs that did not suited the official Islam. The reason was that they based their beliefs not only on Koran, but also on the different doctrines and streams of Islam. In the base of their beliefs stands the Shiite veneration of the 12 Imams and the adoration of ‘Alī bin Abī Tālib, the son-in-law of the prophet, but also features from other Islamic denominations like the Sunnis, or elements from the teachings of the heterodox Islamic Sufi orders, or the kabalistic-like teachings of Hurufism\textsuperscript{18}, a religious movement that also accepted itself as Islamic. But they have influences from other religions too. For example they retain many elements from the ancient belief system of

\textsuperscript{11} For more informations look: Birge 2006, p. 72-78

\textsuperscript{12} Same place, p. 76-79

\textsuperscript{13} Mêlikoff 2006, p. 51-52

\textsuperscript{14} Timuroğlu, 9

\textsuperscript{15} The same place

\textsuperscript{16} Mêlikoff 2006, p. 52

\textsuperscript{17} For more informations look: Timuroğlu, p. 9-10

\textsuperscript{18} For more informations about the many influences on the Bektaş and Alevi teachings look at: John Kingsley Birge: Bektaşılık Tarihi, translated in Turkish by Reha Çamuroğlu, Ant Yayınları, İstanbul 1991; Vecihi Timuroğlu: Alevilik, Bektaşilik, Kızılbaşlık
the Turks, the so called Shamanism\textsuperscript{19}, but they have also many influences from Christianity\textsuperscript{20}. The relation with God of the Alevi-Bektaşi reminds us the Neo-Platonism, a Classical philosophy that had a huge influence on the Islam mysticism\textsuperscript{21}. This is normal, knowing that the Bektaşi were also a mystical order.

The Shamanistic elements came from Central Asia, with the Turcoman tribes that brought the seeds of the Alevi-Bektaşism, tribes that retained some of their ancient customs and beliefs, after they only superficially were converted to Islam. These Shamanistic elements we can find in the practices and beliefs of the Alevi-Bektaşi. Some scholars say that the origin of the Christian features from the Alevi and Bektaşi beliefs come from some Armenian groups who converted to the form of Islam, having Shamanistic elements and also elements from the other Asian beliefs that the Turcoman tribes took over in their history. They say that these Armenians added many elements from their former Christian faith\textsuperscript{22}.

In the age of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, in the XVIII. century, when some of the sultans tried to make reforms in the empire, by introducing the European technology and military organization, in order to withheld the European conquests from the Ottoman territories, the Janissaries, which in those times represented the core of the traditional Turkish army, were one of the major obstacles in the way of the reforms. Because they understood, that with the modernization of the Turkish army, it will be no need for their services, they revolted many times in the XVIII-XIX. centuries, and caused the fall and even death some many reformer sultans (Ahmet III., Selim III). This is why Mahmut II. (1808-1839), one of the sultans who wanted to modernize the empire, understood, that in order to succeed in his effort to modernize the Ottoman army, he needs to eliminate the Janissaries. And this leaded to the destruction, with cannons, of the caserne of the janissaries from Etmeydani by the sultans army, in 15 June 1826, and the killing of the 5000 janissaries, which were in the caserne. This was the bitter end of the janissaries. The end of the janissaries also brought an end to the Bektaşi order. The fact that the janissaries were sworn to Haci Bektaş Veli, who is considered by them the founder of the Bektaşism, gave the opportunity to accuse the order of heresy, and to bring to light all the antipathy against them, that the leaders of the official religion had to restrain in centuries. The cause of the antipathy towards them were their religious practices and beliefs, that were very different from the majority, because the majority of the Bektaşis did not followed the strict rituals and duties of the Sunni majority, like the five time prayer of the day called in Turkish Namaz, the fast of the Ramadan, the interdiction of drinking alcohol. Bektaşi considered that their intimate relation with God, frees them from the burden of those strict rules and rituals. And this relation also allows them to say things that were considered as blasphemy from the majority. Their perception from the Sunni majority is shown by the numerous, so called, Bektaşi anecdotes (Bektaşi

\textsuperscript{19} Like the respect for the holy trees, graves; the respect for the doorstep, the legends about Bektaşi saints that turn into deers or birds, or the ritual dances of the Alevi men and women that imitate the movement of the crane, called the Crane-danse. For more informations: Birge 1991, p. 239-240, Irène Mélïkoff 2006, p. 141-154, Irène Mélïkoff: Hacı Bektaş. Efsaneden Gerçeğe (Transl. Türan Alptekin), Cumhuriyet Kitapları, 3. baskı, İstanbul 2004, p. 29-56

\textsuperscript{20} For more informations: Birge 1991, p. 242-246

\textsuperscript{21} Birge 1991, p. 240-242

fıkraları), that survived to this day. But the suspicions towards the Bektaşis did not led every time to a funny ending. These, among together with the upper show reasons, in the end led in 1826 to the official condemnation of Bektaşism and the exposure of the so called heretical nature of their behavior, beliefs and rituals. This situation augmented by the fact that many Sunnite theologians, common people, but also adherents of other Sufi groups used the opportunity to accuse them.

In conclusion the sultan prohibited the order, and commanded the closing and destruction of all of its convents, called tekke. The undestroyed tekkes were given to the other mystic sufi orders. The leaders of the Bektaşı tekkes were convicted executed or exiled, and only those saved themselves, who swear that they follow the Sunni ways. Although all of these, after 1826 the Bektaşis slowly begun to recover, and by 1849, as the Englishman Charles Mac Farlain reports, they were in full growth, and their huge number was even regarded as dangerous by the Sunni majority. But after the events of 1826, Bektaşis feel not fully secure, and this is why their adherents sworn an oath of silence, and made their rituals in fully secrecy. The Europeans who visited İstanbul in the 2. half of the XIX. century, mentioned that the Bektaş had gained influence in the politics. In the same time, between 1869 and 1876, and after the reign of Abdulhamit (1876-1909), many books from Bektaşi authors, or related with the Bektaşı doctrines appear. Rumor said that many of these books (Vilayetname of Haci Bektaş Veli, Işıkname of Abdülmecid Firişteoğlu, Miratül Mekasit) appeared with the protection or even money from the mother of the sultan Abdulaziz, because she was a Bektaşi believer.

Towards the XX'th century, two opinions existed about Bektaşism. One of them claimed that the Bektaşis and all other orders, were obstacles in the way of the modernization of the Turkish state and society, while others, understanding, that Bektaş had a more tolerant, liberal approach to the religious, social questions of the country, or the rights of women, and had a huge importance in the development of the Turkish literature, taught that the national religion of the Turks should be the Bektaşism. But in 20'th November of 1925, after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic, the Turkish Parliament voted the 677'th law, which closed all the dervish convents in the country. All the aspects of the religious life of the mystic orders was prohibited, together with the titles of the orders hierarchy like sheikḥ, baba, dede, seyit, müretš, çelebi or khalif. Even the graves of the sultans and all other graves considered as sacred and important for the mystic orders were close to the public who used to go there to pray. The sacred objects, costumes from the convents were given to the Ethnographic Museum of Ankara, and the books to the libraries.

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23 For more informations: Dursun Yıldırım: Tür Edebiyatında Bektaşı Fıkraları, Ankara 1999
24 Birge 1991, p. 88
25 Birge 1991, p. 89
26 Birge 1991, p. 92-93
27 Birge 1991, p. 93
28 Birge 1991, p. 93
29 Birge 1991, p. 94
30 The same place
31 Birge 1991, p. 98
32 The same place
33 Birge 1991, p. 98-99
After this prohibition, the Bektaşism in Turkey could not exist anymore. We can say that after 1925 the Bektaşism is not alive in Turkey anymore. Today the federation of the Alevis, who remained untouched by the laws of 1925, because of not being a religious order, name themselves as Alevi-Bektaşis, taking over, mostly only with their name, the Bektaşi tradition, showing with this also the importance of Haci Bektaş Veli in their beliefs.

The negative perception of the Alevis unfortunately continued to this day. For example, do to their secretive way of practicing their religion, and the wider rights of the women (who participate actively to the life of the community and rituals, and have no obligation to cover their hair, unlike in the orthodox, religious majority) many people believed that they give their wives to their guests to sexual intercourses, or they have so called “candle was extinguished” (mum söndü) nights, when Alevis make sexual orgies.

Another reason of concern is, that although the Alevi belief, like the most researchers (Fuad Köprülü, Ahmet Yaşar Ocağ, Irène Mélikoff, John Kingsley Birge, Suraiya Faroqhi, etc.) show, is of Central-Asian, Turcoman origin, many believers, some 20% of them, are Kurds, and this bring to the discussion the fear of the Kurdish separatism. All these unfounded accusations led to some very brutal recent atrocities against Alevis in Turkey, like those in 24 October 1978 from Maraş, 2 July 1993 in Sivas (with 37 deaths), or from 12 March 1995, from Gazi Mahalle, Istanbul, in which tens of Alevis died. This is why the Alevis have a fear of the more conservative religious groups or parties, and Alevi leaders usually followed a republican, Kemalist, left wing and liberal approach to the politics, and supported the left-wing parties. In the 1990’s the majority of the Alevis were supporters of the socialist CHP (Republican Popular Party). In 1960’s the pro-Communist TİP (Workers Party of Turkey) was founded, with many Alevi supporters. The traditional image of Haci Bektaş Veli was changed by some Alevi politic leaders from a saint person to a revolutionary fighter and philosopher. In October 1966, the BP (Unity Party) was founded, that tried to be the party of the Alevis but it was closed in 1980. In the 2000’s the new, moderate Islamic party of AKP, which today leads Turkey from 10 years, try to approach the Alevi and to make peace between them and the right wing government. AKP claims that it wants to resolve their problems. This is why they started the so called “Alevi opening” (Alevi açılımı), that tries to resolve the Alevi-Bektaşi-Sunni antagonism, that it is as old as the Alevi/Kızılbaş-Bektaşi belief, and to make possible the recognition of the demands Alevis, which include the recognition of the past crimes, assaults, and unjust practices against the Alevis by the Turkish state and Sunni’s, and the legal and political steps which would meet the demands of the Alevi.

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34 The same place
35 Mélikoff 2004, p. 325
36 Fuad Köprülü 1993, p. 14-20
37 Ahmet Yaşar Ocağ: Bektaşi Menakıbnamelerinde İslam Öncesi İnanç Motifleri. İstanbul 1983, p. 18-94
38 Mélikoff 2004, p. 29 and the following pages, Mélikoff 2006, p. 141-154
39 Birge 1991, p. 33 and the following pages
42 The same place
43 Mélikoff 2004, p. 335
44 The same place
45 The same place
46 Mélikoff 2004, p. 335-336
The official recognition of the atrocities against Alevis came in 12 December 2008, by the Minister of Culture, Ertuğrul Günay, who apologized for aggressions like the Sivas and Maraş events. The prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also showed reception for the recognition of the Alevi requests. Although all of these, there is no officially recognition of the Alevi as a faith, there is no branch of the Ministry of the Religious Affairs, dealing with the problems of the Alevi, the worship places of the Alevi, called cemevi, are still not recognized as religious establishments, and their religious leaders are still not considered as clergy. This is why the Alevi problem is still unresolved in Turkey, and today also happen sad incidents between Alevi and the Sunni majority, like that at the end of July of this year, in which a house of an Alevi family was stoned by a group of Sunnis, because they complained about the drum beatings of the Ramadan drummer, that called Sunni’s to eat at the dawn.

48 Talha Köse, footnote, p. 162