CHAPTER ELEVEN

ISLAM, GENDER, DEMOCRACY AND VALUES:

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Turkey is the only predominantly Islamic country that has participated in every wave of the World Values Surveys since 1990. Although some other Islamic countries have been in and out of the study, unfortunately, they have failed to provide time series WVS data for all four or even three of the waves of surveys conducted around the years 1990, 1996, 2000 and 2006. Similarly, the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) and the Eurobarometers, the two other long term international social survey programs, have not included any predominantly Islamic societies in a systematic manner until very recently. Looking back a decade and a half, one can only wish that such had not been the case and that the world had realized the crying need for such data long before the profound shock caused by September 11, 2001 and the developments subsequent to this tragic event. Nonetheless, the only longitudinal data set on the values of predominantly Islamic societies comes from Turkey, a country with a population that is over 95 percent Muslim.

For the study of value change in Islamic societies, the Turkish case is beset by at least two disadvantages. First, the story, for reasons of data availability, covers a period of less than two decades—an extremely short span of time for studying value change. Second, and more important, Turkish society is hardly representative of the Islamic world by any stretch of the imagination. With its long history of Westernization attempts, its strictly secular constitution, its transition to a competitive multi-party system way back in 1946, its long term military alliance with the West, and its intense economic, cultural and political relations with Western Europe as well as North America, Turkey is a truly unique case within the Islamic world. Nevertheless, by and large, the overwhelming majority of its population are devout Muslims and a good proportion practice their religion on a daily basis. So much so that, many see this cultural (translate: religious) difference as the main barrier to Turkey’s
full membership in the European Union. Indeed, this concern about admitting an Islamic society into the EU has been raised time and again by politicians, researchers, journalists and academics. Commenting on the subject, *The Financial Times* (Quentin Peel, September 16, 2004:15) wrote that “…the technical challenges are manageable. The real challenges are cultural. Is Europe prepared to accept such a large Islamic country into its midst?” *The Economist* (18–24 September 2004:36) agreed: “…the biggest issue of all is Islam. Few people now insist that the EU is a Christian club, but *the feeling that it should be is widespread*, especially among Christian Democratic parties. September 11th, Iraq and the war on terror have all focused renewed attention on whether the EU is right to consider admitting a Muslim country.” [emphases original]

In brief, despite all its differences with the rest of the Islamic world, many still see Islam as an outstanding if not the defining characteristic of Turkey and the Turkish people. Why is this of any relevance for the present chapter? Why should religion be the focus of attention in a study of value change in Turkey in the 1990s? The question has an obvious answer which has only been amplified by Huntington’s thesis on “the clash of civilizations.” Islam is a distinct civilization, it is said, which fosters values quite different from other civilizations. According to Huntington (1998), these profound value differences, often referred to as a “cultural fault line,” between the West and Islam are highly likely to clash in the post-communist era.

The crucial question is, then, what is so different about Islam and Islamic values that is assumed to set Islamic societies miles apart from the West. After all, Islam is a monotheist religion that originated in the same geographic region as Judaism and Christianity—the two religions explicitly recognized by its Prophet. Any discussion of this question inevitably centers around gender issues and the status of women in Islam, at least as it is understood and practiced by a vast majority of its adherents. Both macro and micro level data show clearly that Islamic societies lag far behind the rest of the world with respect to the equal treatment of women in all spheres of life. And this is not just a question of economic development and welfare. The relationship holds even after income is controlled for.