CHAPTER 4

The Problem of Appropriate Psychology of Religion Measures for Non-Western Christian Samples with Respect to the Turkish–Islamic Religious Landscape

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Turkey with its geo-politic location is a Eurasian bridge connecting Asia and Europe. Although the Ottoman Empire, from which modern Turkey emerged, was considered a European state (Lewis, 1968) today’s EU leaders still delay Turkey’s membership to the Union. The main arguments – unspoken but implicitly obvious – are about the religious and cultural diversity that Turkey presents as a Turkish Islamic society. This attitude may emerge from global Islamophobia or a fear of Turks particular to Europe since the Middle Ages. What is this religious and cultural diversity about?

Currently Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and the second largest religious practice worldwide. There are over 1.5 billion persons who identify themselves as Muslims (Hall, Livingston, Brown & Mohabir, 2011). However, one cannot talk about homogeneity within these Islamic societies, from the main Islamic block between central Asia and the Atlantic shores of Africa, to the growing numbers of migrated or converted Muslims in Europe and the USA.

Islam is a religion that has to be evaluated with its effects on culture and social life. For Watt (1969), the words “dīn” and “religion” are synonymous, but their meanings differ fundamentally. For a Muslim, dīn covers all aspects of life, not simply private beliefs, or only a small portion of life as in some other religious traditions. Empirical results of international surveys like those from Gallup (2002, 2009) evidence this by finding that Turkish people involve their families, especially their parents, in making an important decision, for example. This respectful attitude towards the elderly in general and parents in particular reflects a religious sensitivity derived from Islamic notions.

The Turkish people accommodated quickly to Islamic conditions. The reason for this lies in their history of religion. Despite discussions that the Turks held shamanistic beliefs, historical records indicate that the religious life of the

early Turks shared many aspects similar to Islam. These commonalities are a monotheistic belief, an image of an almighty, merciful God, belief in the hereafter, the creation of the world, and a number of rituals (Ogel, 1962; Yıldırım, 1992; Baser, 1991; Gunay, 1996).

Islamic influences are observable throughout a wide range of Turkish life. Social life, customs, ethics as well as art, literature, architecture, etc. have Islamic traces. This is natural, since religion has a determent effect and role on the formation of culture. When we consider this and bear in mind that the human is a social being who creates culture and is himself influenced and nurtured by culture, then the appearance of different religious understandings and lives according to different human and societal types is expected. In that sense, it appears questionable whether we can even speak about one, absolute religion. For faith this argument might hold true, but for the concept and phenomenon of religion such absoluteness cannot be claimed. Sahin (2010) formulated this issue as the difference between “religion” and “the conception of religion,” with which he hit the mark. In this respect, the Turks possess a religious understanding and religiosity specific to their psychology that emerges from, and is nourished by, their own sociology within their historical-cultural composition. This is a phenomenon valid for any culture, because, depending on social and cultural conditions, people understand and perceive religion differently. Even within the same religious tradition there are varieties of interpretations, and religion appears as a factor that shapes people’s daily lives and societal ties and relations (Duriez, Fontaine & Luyten, 2001). Thus it can be concluded in Christian’s (1987) words that the “major world religions are, in practice, coalitions or mosaics of widely differing local adaptations that share a common core of beliefs, rituals, and organization.” The religious landscape of Turkey offers such a colourful mosaic.

In contemporary Turkey, we increasingly find many forms of religiosity – with “popular religion” being an outstanding instance that is to be explained in detail in the following sections. This religious diversity forms a challenge for Turkish research in psychology of religion. The challenge lies in the task to find the appropriate measurements that take into account several religious lifestyles. Thus measures which assume a monolithic Turkish Islam and assess traditional rituals and beliefs no longer seem to be sufficient. There is a growing need to assess the variety of religious forms, including popular religion. In addition, the measurement tradition in Turkish psychology of religion relies largely on adaptations or translations of Western-Christian measures. This habit of imitation holds disadvantages from various aspects. It will be helpful to explain points with regard to Turkish religiosity in order to proceed with, and demonstrate the measurement issue.