Introduction

Today, Alevism is generally held to be a ‘heterodox’ and ‘syncretistic’ interpretation of Islam strongly influenced by pre-Islamic Turkish customs, and particular to Anatolia and some adjacent territories. The two texts from the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century that this chapter introduces give exemplary evidence to the formation of this particular knowledge about Turkish Alevism and point to the influence of modern discourses on religion and nationalism on it.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Western presence in Asia Minor increased considerably due to a combination of economic and political factors. Westerners who lived and travelled in the Anatolian and Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire (such as missionaries, scientists, diplomats, and bourgeois adventurers), while often primarily interested in the Oriental Christians, inevitably also came into contact with the local Muslim population. The references we find in their writings about encounters with Kızılbaş-Alevi communities constitute the first modern records of these heterogeneous communities. For the first time an international discourse on the Kızılbaş-Alevis, if still rather rudimentary, began to take shape.¹

Kızılbaş (Redhead) is the historical name by which the primarily Turkmen and Anatolian followers of the Safavi Sufi Order, whose charismatic leader Ismail established the Safavid Empire in 1501, and who is regarded as the founder of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) of Iran, were called. Over time the connection between the Anatolian followers of the Persian Shah, regarded by the former as their religious leader, severed. The communities in Turkey (roughly two thirds of which are Turkish and the rest mostly Kurdish speakers) that are today called Alevi are for the most part descendents of these

Kızılbaş tribes, who had rebelled against Ottoman rule in the early sixteenth century and were ever since regarded by the Ottomans as politically unreliable. The mistrust was furthered by the Kızılbaşes religious deviance from what the Ottomans, who turned more explicitly to Sunni Islam in the sixteenth century, understood to be correct religion. After disconnection from the Safavids in the course of the sixteenth century, some Kızılbaş tribes over time associated rather closely with the Bektaşî Sufi brotherhood. Roughly since that time period the beliefs and practices of Bektaşîs and Kızılbaş began to merge to a considerable extent, although especially among the various Kızılbaş groups—who were organised through sacred lineages, some of which were cross-linked—strong socio-religious differences continued. Since the late nineteenth century the label ‘Alevi,’ which alludes to a relation (literal or metaphorical) with Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and fourth caliph Ali, became more prominent as self-signifier among the Kızılbaş groups. Such as the Shiites, the Kızılbaş-Alevi, too, give special reverence to the lineage of the prophet through Ali and Ali’s son Husayn. They share much of Shiite mythology, including memory of the Kerbela tragedy, where in 680 Husayn, son of Ali and according to Twelver-Shia doctrine the only legitimate Muslim leader of the time, is said to have been slain by the forces of the second Omayyad caliph Yezid (Arab. Yazīd)—it is therefore common among Shiites to curse the name of the latter; for Kızılbaş-Alevi in particular, the name Yezid represents Sunni fanaticism. The Kızılbaş-Alevi do not, however, believe in literal application of the Islamic law (sharia), and their rituals and beliefs in fact contain much that is not recognised by the legalist Islam of either the Sunni or the Shia legal tradition, but has been othered by Islamic apologetic discourse as heretical. Since the twentieth century, hegemonic scholarly discourse about Kızılbaş-Alevi difference from mainstream Islam has variously pointed to pre-Islamic Turkish, ‘heterodox’ or ‘popular’ Sufi, Christian, and various Iranian ‘influences.’

Since the first writings about the Kızılbaş-Alevi by American missionaries in the 1850s, the thesis of the Kızılbaş—at that time not yet called ‘Alevi’—being proto-Christians, and/or descendents from ancient inhabitants of Anatolia (for example Armenian or Hittite) figures prominently in Western/