DIFFICULT IDENTIFICATIONS:
THE DEBATE ON ALEVISM AND ISLAM IN GERMANY

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“There are five conditions¹ for Islam. We do not comply with them. We do not pray in the mosque, we do not fast in Ramadan, we do not go to Mecca. Why then should Alevism be a part of Islam?”

“In cem we invoke Allah Mohammed Ali. How could we assert that Alevism is not a part of Islam?”

1. Introduction

Is Alevism Islamic? This seemingly innocent question poses a major problem of self-identification to Alevis in Germany. It has lead to bitter and ongoing disputes within Alevi communities. From the vantage point of the history of religions, the question is almost non-existent as it is obvious that Alevism derives from Islamic traditions—especially from traditions related to the Shi’a—although Alevism has integrated a number of “heterodox” elements in faith and ritual. Yet, doctrines and practices can be interpreted in contradicting and mutually exclusive ways. The essence of the theological debate about the question of whether Alevism belongs to Islam is succinctly captured in the two statements quoted above, which I recorded during fieldwork among Alevis in Germany.² However, the problem is not simply a matter of dispute about different versions of belief and contradicting theological perspectives. It is intimately and inextricably entangled with highly politicized issues that

¹ In Turkish, the “five pillars” of Islam are referred to as the beş şart, “five conditions.”
² Fieldwork was carried out from 2000 to 2004, mainly in Hamburg, but also in Cologne and other German cities as well as in Turkey. Results of this research have been presented in my Habilitationsschrift, which is published as Sökefeld, 2008. I thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for the generous support of fieldwork.
relate to the relationships of Alevis with Islamic groups, to their positioning in the debate on Islam and immigration in Germany and to the problem of recognition of Alevism in Turkey. In this article I will disentangle some of these issues and focus especially on the significance of the question of Islam in the ongoing politics of recognition of the Alevi movement in Germany. Accordingly, the topic of this article is not the direct relationships between Alevis and (Sunni) Muslims in Germany or elsewhere but the question of how to categorize Alevis and Alevism in specific contexts. Indirectly, however, relations between Alevis and Muslims as they have been historically experienced and represented are deeply implicated in the issue of categorization.

2. Alevis and Alevism

Alevis are a religious and cultural minority that has developed in Anatolia since the 13th century. Sufism and mystical teachings, especially as they were represented by Hacı Bektaş Veli, played a significant role in this development. Alevis relate themselves back to the Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mohammad, and to the chain of twelve Imams. Also Kerbela and the martyrdom of the Imam Hüseyin (Arabic: Husayn) provide significant points of reference. From a perspective of the history of Islam, they can therefore be regarded as an offshoot of the Shi’a. In belief and particularly in ritual, however, Alevism is fundamentally distinct from the “orthodox” versions of both Shi’a and Sunni Islam. Alevis do not accept most of the “five pillars” of Islam. They neither keep the fast in Ramadan, nor do they undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca or pray five times a day. Generally, mosques are rejected as places of prayer. Alevis do not recognize the Sharia. The distinctiveness of Alevism is most apparent in the Alevi ritual which is called cem and which is in almost every respect an antithesis of Muslim prayer. Cem is a communal ritual in which men and women jointly participate. In the

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3 For a general introduction to Alevis and Alevism, see Kehl-Bodrogi, 1988; Vorhoff, 1995 and Dreßler, 2002.