Cultural Dilemmas of Muslim Youth: Negotiating Muslim Identities and Being Young in Turkey

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ABSTRACT The ways in which the identity of Islamist youth has shifted from the collective to the individual via a process of self-reflexivity within Turkey’s changing political and cultural social context encompass different expressions of the cultural dilemmas faced by Muslim youth. Through looking at textual and audiovisual autobiographical literary and factual accounts, this essay reflects upon the modalities of the particular transformation of well educated Muslim youth. It argues that such an exploration is an investment in a way to understand the problems of future generations of youth, which will be constantly open to new cultural dilemmas.

Every Friday afternoon just after prayer time, in one of the far corners of the Middle East Technical University (METU), a beautifully designed, large, green campus university located in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, a fairly large group of male students coming from somewhere that does not appear to be a mosque is a common sight. It is not possible to see even the point of a minaret from any corner of the university, as the mosque that the students unassumingly attend is actually located in a small village annexed to the campus. At these times, within the usual atmosphere of the campus, these young male students in their regular outfits of colorful shirts, shabby jeans, and casual haircuts with heavy school bags on their shoulders seem to be coming from a considerably crowded engineering class, a scene quite usual in a university that has several popular engineering departments mostly comprised of male students. Either male or female, these students who have managed to attend METU are the most successful among the many who pass a highly competitive general university entrance exam that must be taken by every high school graduate in Turkey for admission to both state and private universities. The students come from almost every geographic region of the country, especially from the well developed urban centers of the different provinces, but not necessarily from the largest metropolises. However, there is no doubt that their families invest a considerable amount of emotional labor and
financial capital in them to allow them to receive a better education and hence a better career.

For many, especially those who either belong to secular, Westernized sections of society or call themselves Muslim in name only, it is quite unusual to think of these students by giving precedence to their Muslim identity. It is even harder to imagine them as observant Muslims who perform their ritual prayers and/or go to a mosque for Friday prayers, if they are not to be thought of as the successors of the Islamist students who were active at METU throughout the 1990s. Typically, as students at one of the most prestigious international universities in Turkey, METU students are expected to be rational, enlightened young individuals who put scientific thinking above all else. Therefore, they are also assumed to be closer to Western and/or universal values and norms than local ones, including all kinds of religious persuasions.

Regarding this particular example, it is worth asking from a broader perspective why it is so unusual to think of such high profile university youth as Muslims first in a country such as Turkey, in which 90 percent of the population is said to be Muslim and 50 percent of the whole population is below the age of 25. Furthermore, the age group between 14 and 24 constitutes 31 percent of the whole population. What is the meaning of being a Muslim in Turkey then? More specifically, what does it mean to be both young and Muslim when these two terms—young and Muslim, and not young and Islamist—together create such a paradoxical effect?

Can such “paradoxical” situations be explained only by envisioning Turkey as a unique case? Can it be argued that “the story of Turkey is simple: its case is always different,” as has been stated by some observers of Islam and politics in Turkey who draw on commonsensical views in order to be able to point out the differences between Islamism in the secular Republic of Turkey and other Islamisms that exist elsewhere in the Islamic world? No doubt, the case of Turkey in general, and the case of youth in Turkey in particular, deserves a much more critical analysis that should focus on the complex relationships between the specific modalities of youth, the changing interpretations of both religion and secularism, and the rapidly globalizing Turkish social context. Moreover, as Sami Zubaida argues, for Muslims in the West, Muslims in Turkey are differentiated by a variety of dimensions that correspond to different religious or secular orientations and patterns of practice and association.

However, it is also true that Turkey has a longer history of secularism than any other Muslim country, and religious politics contained in the parliamentarian democratic system are carefully controlled by state forces. This is so that the principles of secularism that constitute the very basis of the prevailing republican regime are not violated. It is such a strong reality that even the head of the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), Tayyip Erdoğan, promptly declared himself and his party to be thoroughly loyal to the principles of the secular republican regime. He redefined himself and his party as democratic conservatives rather than as Islamists as soon as the AKP came to power after the November 3, 2002 general elections in an effort to get rid of the party’s Islamist past, which had been deeply ingrained in both its public and personal identities for so long.
during the subsequent years of the AKP’s rule, some other prominent members of Islamist circles, once known as Muslim intellectuals who had been ideal role models for youth with Islamic leanings, also started to reassess their Islamist identities and issue self-criticisms.\(^8\)

The emergence of self-confident Muslim intellectuals who were strongly against justifying Islamic principles from a Western perspective, and who attempted to create a sense of authenticity for Muslims in Turkey, set the model for Muslim youth throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Yet in the 2000s not only did everybody start talking about a process of change that could be observed among Islamists, but the agents of such change have also been designated as post-Islamist intellectuals who no longer argue that Islam and Western democracy are incompatible. On the contrary, as some observers have pointed out, they have started to demand a genuinely liberal democratic regime in which principles of a just and egalitarian society will no longer be grounded in Islam and Islamic values but will be embraced by the universalistic values of modernity.\(^9\) How then can this process of change be connected to the situation of youth in Turkey, particularly to the condition of the pious youth?

Of all these changes one is certain: today, even the most religious activist young people do not want to be referred to as Islamist, which would have been perfectly acceptable before; instead they prefer to call themselves and to be called dindar, that is, pious or devout, as opposed to dinci, religionist, which is usually used interchangeably with Islamist.\(^10\) However, in addition to these terms, a third one, mütedeyyin, stands between the two in colloquial Turkish, denoting elderly, wise, and apolitical pious Muslims.

Whether religious or not, being labeled both young and Muslim still presents a difficult situation in Turkey because of the ways in which both secularism and modernity have been understood by large sections of polity and society, in spite of emerging trends of reconciliation between the two.\(^11\) On the one hand, being Muslim is taken for granted and highly respected; on the other, under normal circumstances it has been stripped not only of its political implications but also of being a matter of public display. This does not mean that one should hide his/her religious identity or suppress it. On the contrary, one should never be discriminated against for being a Muslim. Yet questioning the meaning of being a Muslim had not been a common issue in Republican Turkish society until the rise of Islamic revivalism in the 1980s. In this respect, it is extremely difficult to separate any discussion on Islam and Islamic identity from the ongoing discussions of Islamism and talk about the meaning of being a Muslim either as a part of youth or any other identity, such as those attached to class, gender, and ethnicity. In other words, it can be argued that in Turkey, Islamism has almost become the “other” of Islam-as-such as a consequence of trying to save Islam from political extremism, as if arguments of Islamism have nothing to do with Islam itself and what it means to be a Muslim.

Therefore, when it comes to thinking for what the urban, modern youth and their Muslim identity count in Turkish society, certain classifications about the kind of Muslim identity of the youth in question must be made. One such classification can
be made between those who have been raised with local and religious values rather than secular and Western ones for leading their ordinary daily lives. However, a clear-cut distinction between these two systems of thought is becoming almost impossible in recent modern Turkish society due to ongoing efforts of reconciliation between the two. Another classification includes those who were taught religion as a matter of other-worldliness, which might be recalled at difficult, troubling times when divine help is needed or as something with which to deal during the later stages of life, particularly at a time when one starts to feel him/herself getting closer to the other world. A third classification—and call it Islamist or dindar—comprises those who have been either trained by their families to be religious from childhood under the tutelage of different religious institutions, orders, or associations, or became religious during their youth, mostly by getting involved with either religious politics or Islamic intellectualism, or both.

Nevertheless, in all three of these cases, religion turns out to be a matter of negotiation rather than an inviolable set of normative rules when being young is at stake, despite the fact that different youth groups tend to interpret religion and incorporate it into their ordinary lives in their own ways, with considerable similarities between them. In this context, one such common characteristic is that Muslim youth in Turkey, as in many other Muslim societies, no longer rely solely on religious authorities to understand and make sense of their religion.  

Linda Herrera argues that the term “youth” simultaneously refers to a cultural group, an age cohort, and a sociopolitical category.  

For the Islamist youth in Turkey, however, the emphasis has always been on the last categorization, and their emergence as a social collectivity has been associated with those episodic instances of Islamic revivalism. On the other hand, young people are regarded as “youth” as long as they develop and express a consciousness of themselves and act upon this consciousness across various lines of divisions.  

Envisioning youth as a collective identity that bears a collective consciousness fits well with Karl Mannheim’s classical work on generations, in which he suggests that members of a generation are held together by the experience of historical events from the same or similar vantage points. For Mannheim, generations can transform society by challenging customary thoughts and offering new political and cultural visions when radicalized by traumatic experiences. However, to explain how generations act strategically to bring about change, June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner suggest that the way in which generations shift from being a passive age cohort into a politically active and self-conscious one must be understood. For them, this can be only possible when generations are able to exploit political, economic, and educational resources to innovate cultural, intellectual, and political spheres. Although all of these discussions can provide a productive perspective with which to study how Islamist youth have developed a collective identity and consciousness that also forms the basis of their collective action, this paper argues that additionally, self-criticisms and reassessments of Islamist youth regarding their collective identity can constitute a very important aspect of the orientation of the sociopolitical and cultural change that they can cause. In this respect, cultural dilemmas and paradoxes that Islamist youth have
experienced throughout one or two generations played a significant role in their breaking with that collective identity and allowed at least some of them to develop a new discourse of reflexive subjectivity.

In order to follow the significant thresholds of such a discourse and to see the ways in which the boundaries of the identity of Islamist youth in Turkey have shifted from a thoroughly communal identity to an individual one via self-reflexivity in a constantly changing political and cultural Turkish social context, some of the textual and audiovisual literary and factual autobiographical accounts of the once Islamist young activists who now identify either as dindar democrats or as liberated individuals will be brought into the discussion. However, the new trends that are evident among Islamist youth in Turkey have not come into being in a social and cultural void. Thus, before concentrating on these narrative constructs, in order to provide a general framework of the common characteristics of the meaning of being both young and Muslim in Turkey, some of the findings of a representative survey done on Turkish youth will be interpreted and underlined. This survey, which aimed to explore the place of religious values in the process of shaping the worldviews of youth in Turkey, is a rare one in terms of including certain specific data.17

The Meaning of Being Young and Muslim: “Where Does the Meaning of Life Lie?”

According to a representative survey that was conducted on Turkish youth at a time when the leading partner of the coalition government, the pro-Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party), was closed down by the Constitutional Court in 1998 for using religion for political purposes, the primacy of religious values in the worldview of youth falls short of the extensiveness of religious faith and practice. This is despite the fact that 90 percent of the respondents are believers in Islamic terms, and only about 5 percent of them consider themselves “believers in their own terms” while skeptical of established forms of religious teaching.18 However, regarding the fact that 27 percent of all respondents mention terms that included “Islamic faith” when using terms of self-definition, religion seems to form the main axis through which youth construct an identity outside the modernist project of Turkey.19 Another interesting point is that more than half of the respondents who define themselves in nationalistic terms that reflect conformism (32 percent of all respondents) simultaneously refer to traditional-Islamic terms as well.20 In addition to these strong associations between nationalistic and Islamic terms, a considerably high percentage of respondents who define themselves in conformity with the modernist project of Turkey also include those who also refer to tradition/Islam, nationalism, and “neo-modernity” (those who see themselves outside official patterns of the modernist project). Thus, although it is argued that no set of identity- or personality-defining terms belong purely to a specific group, it is also pointed out that “[…] still identity formation is observed to proceed largely along the axis of traditional, Islamic, and rightist-nationalist references through the medium of cultural identification.”21
In addition to these aforementioned points, this survey shows that although religious faith is equally widespread among men and women, this is not so when it comes to the public practice of religion. For instance, regular mosque attendance drops to 2 percent among women, as opposed to 9.2 percent among men. Likewise, the rate of going to the mosque from time to time is 34.8 percent among female respondents as opposed to 69.6 percent among males. In other words, only 36.8 percent of the women are associated with the mosque, whereas that percentage rises to 78.8 among men. Therefore, it is evident that the mosque remains a predominantly male environment within the Turkish tradition of Islamic practice. However, more common and relatively private religious practices, such as fasting, praying, or reading and thinking about religion, do not vary significantly between men and women. However, if not gender then regional/cultural background and socioeconomic status do indeed create a difference when it comes to regular religious practice. Thus, a concentration of regularly practicing respondents (in all forms of religious practice) is observed in more traditional areas, such as in the cities that are either located in Southeastern Anatolia (Gaziantep, Diyarbakır) or Central Anatolia (Sivas, Tokat). Nevertheless, only 15 percent of the respondents appear to be both believing and practicing Muslims, observing formal rules of religious practice and living their lives as regulated by religion. Respondents who combine regular formal practice of religion with regular intellectual involvement in religion are also strikingly rare. Only 3.2 percent of the respondents both go to the mosque and read or think about religion regularly, and only 7.8 percent both observe prayer hours and read or think about religion regularly.

According to the researchers, these percentages may actually be used as a basis to estimate the size of the “religiously agitated” group among youth. Nevertheless, they also point out that it is worth noting that this group is formed largely by young people who live in relatively traditional areas, who have low levels of income, low levels of education, and a low ranking on socioeconomic status (SES), and that it includes a high percentage of young women and girls who stay at home. They also suggest that time devoted to religious topics in conversation among a circle of friends may also be taken as a strong indicator of actual level of religious activity among the youth who regularly practice religion.

However, only 25.8 percent of regular mosque-goers (1.5 percent of the sample) and 33.8 of regular observers of prayer hours (4.9 percent of the sample) indicate “religion/faith” to be among their most frequent topics of conversation with friends. A much higher percentage (44.4 percent) of regular mosque-goers and 23.7 percent of regular observers of prayer hours talk about football. Political discussions among both groups, on the other hand, are about as common (about 10 percent) as seen in the sample as a whole. However, it is also argued that topics of friendly conversation among regular mosque-goers or prayer hour observers are not different from those of other young people. They also appear to share a largely secularized world. Similarly, within the commonly shared secularized world of the youth, fasting during Ramadan, for instance, has the function of a cultural code that unifies them “seasonally” around a common system of religious reference.
The researchers go on to argue that it is therefore hardly surprising that the percentage of those who never fast during Ramadan should remain under 10 percent. Thus, fasting as a religious practice is quite distinct from other Islamic rituals, to the extent that even the 8.3 percent of those who believe in God but not religion, who are unconventional in their beliefs, or who do not give much thought to religion fast regularly, and 35.7 percent of the same group fast now and then.

Other types of similarities can also be derived from this survey data about youth in Turkey, 90 percent of whom self-identify as Muslims. In this regard, for example, challenging tradition is not given any priority while listing their urgent problems. As the researchers argue, unemployment, problems in education, and sheer poverty top the list of difficulties youth face. However, although politics is important to them in solving these top priority problems and when asked to name a youth group they almost immediately think about groups formed around political references, they do not seem optimistic about the ability of the political parties to solve their problems. This becomes clear when they are asked to name the political party that best addresses the problems of the youth: 41 percent of the respondents who primarily referred to political groupings among youth answer this question as “none!”

On the other hand, social peace and order is expected to prevail (57.9 percent) and democracy is expected to govern (73 percent). Nevertheless, a strong relationship is observed between economic and sociopolitical expectations, in that two-thirds of the respondents who believe in the likelihood of widespread poverty also expect social unrest, and about 45 percent of the same group expects an oppressive regime, restricting freedoms. However, only one-tenth of the respondents who expect an overall improvement in standards of living (who overall constitute the remaining one-third of the respondents) feel that an oppressive regime is likely to be established. Respondents who are pessimistic about Turkey’s economic and political future also expect Islam to exert greater influence on social and public life. About 45 percent of the one-third of the respondents who expect an oppressive regime to restrict freedoms in the country believes that Islamic values will prevail in social life and public administration. Moreover, while effective Islam is conceived as a desirable development by the respondents who see Islam as the guarantor of freedom, they also stand antithetical to an oppressive regime. Indeed, three-fifths of the same respondents who expect Islam to prevail in social and public life also believe in the likelihood of increased democracy in the country.

It should be emphasized that when the youth in Turkey are asked “Where does the meaning of life lie?” they list the hierarchy of values as follows: first, family values (family, partner/lover, child); second, intellectual values (education, knowledge); third, social values (struggle to realize ideals, having a masterpiece to one’s own name); fourth, individual values (professional success); fifth, religious values (religion, faith); and sixth, material values (wealth, money). Here, it is also indicated that overall 21.1 percent of the respondents indicate “religion and faith” to be among the top three values that impart meaning to life. In addition to these, according to the survey results, a negative relationship between a rising SES and the significance attached to religion and faith is also evident. Consequently, the
frequency of reference to religion and faith is particularly low among respondents ranking higher levels on the SES. However, the highest percentage of respondents who associate religion and faith with the meaning of life is found in the clusters that are concentrated by the cities located in the Southeastern and Central Anatolia regions, which constitute, respectively, economically less developed and moderately developed regions of Turkey. This percentage drops below average in Istanbul (the largest and most developed metropolitan city in the country), declines sharply in Izmir (the biggest port city on the Aegean Coast), and in the cities that are in the third cluster of this survey, that is, Antalya and Edirne. The former is located on the Mediterranean coast, one of the most famous cities in Turkey among foreign tourists, and the latter in the northwest of Turkey, at the gate to Europe. Moreover, a similar pattern is observed in the distribution of references to religion as a virtue acquired from the family.31

**Shifting Muslim Identities: Between Communal Identity and Self-Reflexivity**

Considering the differences of the place of religious values in the worldviews of Turkish youth depending on the socioeconomic level of their place of origin, it is not at all surprising to see that in the first novel written in English by a Turkish author, entitled *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* (2004), all the male characters have some religious cultural repertoire except for the Turkish one, who has been raised in a secular, highly modern, upper-middle class urban family originating from Istanbul.

The novel, written by Elif Şafak, a young female writer and a rising literary star, particularly among Turkish youth, is based on the stories of three young male and three young female graduate students whose lives cross paths in Boston.32 The three young men share the same apartment. One is a peaceful, good-natured Spaniard with deep Catholic leanings, obsessed with cleanliness and sharp objects. One is a Moroccan with considerably well developed Islamic cultural capital, deeply attached to his local cultural values yet quite modern; he is a highly conscientious character with slightly paranoid tendencies. The third one is a Turk with many sharply drawn characteristics, such as his heavy addiction to coffee and alcohol; he is a sophisticated music freak, a fast womanizer, a witty intellectual, and a charming friend with no religious identity whatsoever. In terms of religion, this Turkish character, Ömer—whether deliberately or not—is depicted as if he comes from a planet whose inhabitants are not even aware of religion or religious cultural codes.

This actually very accurately reflects the essence of one segment of youth in Turkey, sketched out in the earlier classification about the ways in which they acquire religious identity in modern Turkish society. The fictional identity embodied in Ömer can also shed light on another situation that was pointed out at the beginning of this essay, related to those observing METU students and the reasons for the bewilderment these students create among the secular Turkish elite. The fact is that “the case of Ömer” has been construed by such an elite as almost “the way it should be.” For them, characters such as Ömer, not the particular type of METU
students who fit the profile of a practicing Muslim, represent normalcy, despite the fact that they also have an elite university education background as Ömer does.

As always, there is another side to the story. The new Islamist youth in Turkey put great effort into the reconciliation of Islamic intellectualism with popular culture, through which they can find different ways to express themselves and their subjectivities in all walks of life in a secular, highly fragmented post-modern context. In this respect, since the 1990s, new radio stations, television channels, newspapers, magazines, music groups, novelists, and filmmakers that cater to Muslim youth have become ordinary players in the market for popular culture, as well as the publishers of Islamic cartoons and comic strips, and all kinds of “small media” such as postcards, stickers, and posters.\textsuperscript{33} Public spaces and performances such as fashion shows, concert halls, fancy restaurants, coffee shops, tea gardens, and summer resorts are no longer merely construed as the domains of modern secular public life in Turkey.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, by the end of the 1990s, with the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, the construction of new websites and web blogs and thus communication through the internet, had become quite widespread among Muslim youth in Turkey, as has been the case in the entire Muslim world.\textsuperscript{35}

Thus, due to these developments, debates on the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private spheres regarding religion have also become one of the most favored discussion topics of both academia and the mainstream media in countries such as Turkey, where religion has been essentially confined to the private realm as a matter of individual conscience. In this context, the “headscarf dispute” and its several cultural and political connotations not only created a heated discussion but brought Muslim women, if not the critique of Islamic patriarchy, into the heart of public debate.\textsuperscript{36} This also created a remarkable situation regarding the gendered aspects of Muslim women’s identities, to the extent that Muslim women are almost only taken into account as long as they participate in public life with their heads covered.\textsuperscript{37} This particular issue has been singled out among many others without opening a meaningful discussion on their gender identities as a whole. Similarly, the covered women themselves did not seem to be willing to open up such a public discussion. They mostly remained satisfied with raising their immediate problem of being unable to use their rights to attend institutions of higher education while wearing their headscarves, and hence became the object of debates on Islamism in Turkey.\textsuperscript{38}

The question of becoming either an “object” or a “subject” is not a new problem for the many generations of youth in Turkish society.\textsuperscript{39} However, in this article, it is argued that when Muslim identity is at stake, the tension between the imperatives of communal identity and the desire for reflexive self-expression can best be observed from the self-narratives of the 1990s of young men and women who eventually transformed themselves from being militant Islamists into “dindar Muslims.” One such example of an autobiographical exposition on the transformation of political identity was penned by Metin Metiner, who was once a fervent advocate of Islamism.
In his autobiographical book, titled *Yemyeşil Şeriat, Bembeyaz Demokrasi* [All Green Shari’a, All White Democracy], Metiner, as a young Muslim Kurdish man in the 1970s and 1980s, relates the ways in which he had struggled to develop an intellectual identity within the very limited economic and cultural capital of his own. However, it is his great conviction that the Islamic cause is the only one with which one could impart meaning to this unjust world of inequality. Although political activism filled almost his entire life, he also got married at quite an early age (in an arranged marriage), had children, received a higher education, and became a writer. After all those tough years, the only resentment he felt toward his private life was about his marriage. He criticized himself for how he had forced his wife to have an extremely modest wedding ceremony, how he had denied her wish to walk with him on the streets hand in hand, how he had forced her to cover her head, and how he left her and his first daughter alone for years back home while he pursued his own political career and education by traveling between different towns in Turkey. Nevertheless, it can be understood in between the lines of his narrative that during those lonely days, especially when pursuing a life in Istanbul surrounded by his young Islamist fellows to whom he almost became a mentor, he could not prevent himself from the dictates of sentimentalism. He listened to the sad love songs of the most famous and popular female music star in Turkey, Sezen Aksu. Nonetheless, he hid this from his roommates, who would probably have thought of listening to such music, and particularly the songs of a liberal woman like her, as almost an infidelity.

It seems that romantic love and sentimentalism as a transformative force has not played a significant role in the self-development process and the questioning of subjectivity of only one young Muslim man of cause. In his prize winning novel, *Kar* [Snow], which became a bestseller in the United States as well, the 2006 Nobel prize winner Orhan Pamuk also points out the ways in which the conflicting nature of falling in love can make everything much more complicated for Islamist young men and women, hence forcing them to take unusual steps in their lives both in political and personal terms, particularly within the limited cultural confines of a provincial town. Actually, in this town, Kars, which is located in northeastern Turkey and often cut off from the outside world by blizzards, neither Islamists nor atheists take a clear-cut side against anything, including belief in God, but lead their lives as being caught up in passions, politics, and groupings.

However, among those emerging voices of self-criticism and reflexivity, one has been particularly popular among various circles of Muslim youth. The novel entitled *Mızraksız İlmihal* [Book of Manners without a Lance] written by Mehmet Efe and usually considered autobiographical, is based on the story of the transformation of a young Islamist university student into a moderate young Muslim man by the power of love. Being a child of a small town with a modest family background, he is the first in his family who has access to higher education and urban life. In Istanbul, where he attends university, he does not only become an Islamic activist but also has the opportunity to mingle with the “opposite sex,” although he is careful not to lose his sobriety. He is convinced that a Muslim does not fall in love with a woman but only with Allah. Then, quite unexpectedly and immediately, he falls in love with a
covered girl—a fellow university student—who is critical toward the roles assigned to covered female university students not only by the secular authorities but also by the male Islamist students who seemed to support those girls mainly for their own political purposes. While she is quite strong in refusing the politicization of her subjectivity, her compliance with the prevailing patriarchal role of femininity is striking, for she considers herself first and foremost a “small” and “weak” girl who wants to lead her life in peace and harmony. Falling in love with such a girl, however, who is actually in perfect harmony with her Islamic fitrat (believed to be the innate characteristics attributed to men and women by God) is not surprising at all for an Islamist young man, despite her reluctance to participate in political matters. Thus, İrfan, the hero of the novel, also starts to yearn for “small things” as well, such as searching for a job, marrying this small yet strong girl, buying her some presents (such as a colorful dress and a silk headscarf), cooking together, reading, laughing, and the like. In other words, he starts to search for the road that can lead him to heaven on his own terms, as a challenge to militant Islamism. If not the whole story then the title of his novel attests to this. With it the author makes an allegory to one of the oldest and most popular Islamic books of manners, written by Muhammed İzni (d. 1480) and used as a standard elementary school book for centuries. The original meaning of the title of İzni’s book is “the key to heaven’s door” (Miftah-ul Cennet), although it is widely known and read as Mızraklı İlmihal [Book of Manners with a Lance].

The novel that was published in 2005 by Barış Müstecaplıoğlu, entitled Şakird [Disciple], a name which stands for a novice in the hierarchical ranks of the youth who rallied around the teachings of Fethullah Gülen, constitutes another good example for the trend of self-criticism and reflection that has started to find echoes among young Islamists of various kinds. This novel is a rather radical account about the way in which the material and moral comfort of communal life can turn out to be a cage for a young university student who is constantly exposed to the realities of everyday urban life, which entails the disenchantment of the comfort of a strictly disciplined brotherhood. Thus eventually, among those highly restrictive activities of this brotherhood, one starts to appear much more unrealistic: that is, the avoidance of any contact, including merely in a friendly manner, with the opposite sex. The hero of the novel, Murat, breaks with his old communal bonding and professional life when he leaves his successful position in a corporate marketing company and ventures onto the unpredictable paths of his own destiny. In doing so, he does not only find the true love of his life, Elif, but also manages to develop an unconditional, true friendship with a woman with whom he shares not only the details of his daily life but also the very existential questions that he contemplates. However, these relationships with two quite open-minded women were not the only reward of Murat’s freeing of himself from his communal ties and choosing the uncomfortable paths of independence of mind and of critical thinking. In tracking down his own destiny he finds the testament of his late best friend, who had inspired him to take a more critical stance toward the conformism of the brotherhood with which he had been affiliated throughout his university years. He also manages to
assure himself that there can be different answers to the questions of life and death, as well as different patterns of sacrifice and dignity for the human cause other than the ones that were once suggested to him by the religious community in which he had sought the meaning of life.

The struggle of the youth in acquiring a coherent subjectivity by freeing themselves from the dictates of restrictive religious ties does not always end with the acquisition of a confident self and a peaceful state of mind that also signifies a transformation into moderate Muslim practice. It is especially difficult for those who actually challenge the overall gender role that has been assigned to them as young Muslim women by society. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of freedom and equality among educated Muslim youth, covered female university students are severely criticized, especially by their male fellows, if they, for instance, insistently frequent newly established coffee houses that cater to Muslim youth and show “loose” behavior there, such as smoking, laughing and talking loudly, playing backgammon, using its jargon and cursing while playing it, and getting physically too close with male friends, as has been clearly indicated by a newspaper article published in a Turkish daily on the changing cultural meanings of coffee shops in Istanbul.\textsuperscript{45}

Much more sophisticated and philosophical sufferings can also be observed among some young Muslim women due to the social pressures they experienced in their family lives and close environments. The frustrations may have gone so far as to make them lose their faith in God and religion. A short 1995 documentary shot and produced by Jeanne C. Finley in Istanbul entitled \textit{Conversations Across the Bosphorus} is a rare example of an attempt to explore how women’s relationship to religion might influence their identities. Thus, it also focuses on the narrative of the radical transformation of a young woman who has decided to uncover her head in her late teens, although she has been brought up in a highly devout family.\textsuperscript{46} Her parents migrated to Istanbul at the beginning of the 1960s from a southeastern Turkish town and settled at Fatih, one of the oldest districts of Istanbul, which was populated mostly by highly devout, conservative families and Islamists, facilitating her father’s becoming an extreme religionist. The reasons behind her radical change were not unpredictable, but the action she takes to this end is not so common at all. At quite an early age she started to question the secondary role that was assigned to her not only by her family but also, according to her own conviction, by her religion. Although she did not stray from any code of modesty and became a mindful child and a successful student while attending an Imam Hatip school (schools for secondary education with a religious curriculum along with the compulsory one), her cravings never ceased because of the way she was treated as a young girl in her close environment. She kept asking herself, referring to the tradesmen and artisans of her childhood neighborhood: “Why do all these men continue to harass me even though I am a covered girl from head to toe and do not show me any respect at all?” Moreover, she eventually started to ask herself some further questions that could have been quite self-destructive, particularly for a devout Muslim young girl, such as: “Why does God punish me only because I am a woman although I love Him so much and obey Him with all my heart?”
Consequently, after suffering through a series of psychosomatic illnesses and receiving several medical treatments, her family set her free with her rebellious decision and allowed her to live on her own as an uncovered woman. At the time when this film was shot, she was an undergraduate student in the Department of Arabic Language at Istanbul University and continued to visit her brother and mother but not her father. The audience is not informed, however, about whether she earns a living on her own or receives financial aid from her family. However, what is shown throughout this documentary is a beautiful, modern, and self-confident but deeply sad and lonely young woman who thinks that she has no one to trust but herself, ever since losing her faith in God.

In his discussion of how the positioning of the self is central to the construction of the self-narrative, Michael Bamberg argues that whether fictional or biographical, narratives are not transparent windows into narrators’ minds, their subjectivities, or their lived experiences but are interactively accomplished situated actions. This partly reflects what Anthony Giddens suggests when he argues that self-identity is the extension of the “narrative of the self”; that is, the “story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood both by the individual concerned and by the others.” The stories of the self-narratives that are highlighted here are the reflections of how young men and women situated themselves or were situated by their narrators vis-à-vis their religious identities, which are in constant interaction with the social conditions, political ideals, cultural norms, and moral values that are available to them in the social context in which they have been living as young individuals. Thus, the critical discourse that they have created throughout that struggle of positioning themselves as interactive yet autonomous individuals by breaking with their religiously determined collective identities carries the potential of opening new avenues for other young Muslim men and women in their search for constructing independent self-identities.

Conclusion

To be both young and Muslim has never been an easy condition in the Turkish context, whether these two states of being taken together have been politicized or not. Furthermore, Turkish youth have always had some difficulties in sharing their experiences with youth from other parts of the Muslim world at the global level due to Turkey’s highly secularized background. However, following the emergence of a global youth culture, which has enabled youth to share their experiences in many different ways regardless of their national origins, this situation has started to change. It seems particularly so for the Muslim youth who started to be exposed to similar kinds of social and political pressures all over the world, particularly after September 11, in spite of the differences they carry in their cultural baggage. In this context, further elaboration needs to be made regarding the extent to which not the national but the subjective identities that have been pieced together from various sources of communalities, ideals, and worldviews will overlap with the subjectivities of the Muslim youth at the global level, compared to the ones who, in spite of
living in the same society, may have completely different experiences as young Muslims. So far, the cultural dilemma faced by Muslim youth in the Turkish context mainly stems from the ways in which secularism has been handled in this society, through which the relationship between the two has been seen as if they were inevitably irreconcilable. This situation seems to have started to change, however, as secularism and democracy are open to public discussion more efficiently than ever before and are proliferating through the participation of various social actors coming from different ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds with different political affiliations. What has to be asked now is to what extent the new experiences of Muslim youth will contribute to the development of individual freedoms, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Only that enhancement can help solve the youth’s cultural dilemma, which stems from the tension between the imperatives of communal identity and the urge felt for reflexive self-expression. Although the shifting of Muslim identity from the highly politicized “Universal Muslims” to mainstream Muslims of various lifestyles seems to be the growing trend among Muslim youth in Turkey, the fact that new generations may tend towards new forms of religiosity distinct from that of their parents and religious authorities as well as from their earlier generations should not be disregarded. Thus, they are constantly open to producing new forms of cultural dilemmas. After all, trying to understand the problems, expectations, and aspirations of youth at one moment in history means no more than to suggest making social and political investments to develop a further understanding of the cultural dilemmas of future generations of youth.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop on “The Making of Muslim Youths: Youth Cultures and Politics in Muslim Societies and Communities,” International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden University, Leiden, February 18–19, 2005.
2. According to the 2000 census data, out of a total population of 67,803,927, the median age in Turkish society is 24.83. That is, half the population is younger and half the population is older than this age. See Turkey’s Statistical Year Book 2004, p.37, available at http://www.die.gov.tr/yillik/03-Nüfus.pdf.
3. During the International Year of the Youth, in 1985, the United Nations defined youth as those between 15 and 25 years of age. However, Vappu Tyyskä argues that worldwide there is a distinct lack of consistency in defining the category “youth,” and an increasing number of researchers of youth try to avoid a homogenizing Western bias in defining youth as a specific age category. Thus, youth is not defined as a particular age range but as a social status characterized by a period of life in which a person is either partially or fully dependent on others, usually members of one’s family, for material support. See Vappu Tyyskä, “Conceptualizing and Theorizing Youth: Global Perspectives,” in Helena Helva and Gunilla Holm (eds.), Contemporary Youth Research: Local Expressions and Global Connections (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), pp.3–4. Some others suggest that age is socially constructed, institutionalized, and controlled in historically and culturally specific ways. See Johanna G. Wyn and Rob White, Rethinking Youth (London: Sage, 2003). For example, Leyla Neyzi argues that “[i]n Turkey, age, including relationship between elders and juniors, is a core cultural construct within kinship and nationalist discourses.” Leyla Neyzi, “Object or Subject? The Paradox of the ‘Youth’ in Turkey,” International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol.33, No.3 (August 2001), pp.411–32.
4. In the Turkish social context, although there is another paradoxical situation inherent to the common usage of the term Muslim, which actually refers to Sunni Muslims—excluding the Alevis and the Shi’as—this situation does not invoke an additional question about the religious identity of youth when such a paradoxical association is made between the young and the Muslim. However, like the term Muslim, Alevi can also be counted as an emic term in Turkey; in spite of the existence of different ethnic and religious Alevi identifications, they are all referred to as Alevis. For how the political, social, ethnic, and religious identifications of Alevi are differentiated according to different vantage points, see Aykan Erdemir, “Tradition and Modernity: Alevi’s Ambiguous Terms and Turkey’s Ambivalent Subjects,” Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.41, No.6 (November 2005), pp.937–95. Thus, in this article, regardless of whether it is an emic term or not, when the author refers to Muslim youth, it is Sunni Muslim youth that are being referenced, for Alevis do not refer to themselves as Muslims but as Alevis, whereas Sunni Muslims call themselves just Muslims. In addition to this, when the term Islamist is used, it is always Sunni Muslims who are referenced, never Alevis.


7. For a discussion about how new the “new thinking” of the AKP is compared to that other Islamist movements in the Middle East, see, for example, Gamze Çakır, “Islamist New Thinking in Turkey: A Model for Political Learning?” Political Science Quarterly, Vol.121, No.3 (2006), pp.477–97. For the political conditions that prepared for the accession of the AKP to power in general, and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in particular, see Metin Heper, “The Victory of Justice and Development Party in Turkey,” Mediterranean Politics, Vol.8, No.1 (Spring 2003), pp.127–34. Şerif Mardin evaluates the overall situation within the framework of what he calls “Turkish Islamic exceptionalism.” Through this framework the positions of the AKP and Tayyip Erdoğan should be understood as one moment in a process of change and adaptation through the forces of political power as structuring elements of an operacional code of behavior, the roots of which can partly be connected to the history of Naşibend change over two centuries. Şerif Mardin, “Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rapture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes,” Turkish Studies, Vol.6, No.2 (June 2005), pp.145–65.

8. The ways in which a group of the young intellectuals who became known as “Muslim intellectuals” during the 1980s and particularly during the first half of the 1990s, how they set the stage both for fellow intellectuals and Muslim youth in Turkey, and the characteristics of their works, as well as their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, were extensively discussed by Michael Meeker. See Michael Meeker, “The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey,” in Richard L. Tapper (ed.), Islam in Modern Turkey (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991) and “Muslim Individual and His Audience: A New Configuration of Writer and Reader among Believers in the Republic of Turkey,” in Şerif Mardin (ed.), Cultural Transitions in the Middle East (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). Meeker focuses only on male Muslim intellectuals and hence omits the importance of their female counterparts. For a different account see Ayşe Saktanber, “‘We Pray Like You Have Fun’: New Islamic Youth between Popular Culture and Intellectualism in Turkey,” in Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber (eds.), Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp.261–2.


10. An interesting development regarding this subject is that at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, one of the most developed universities in Turkey, a new, alternative alumni organization was established in 2004 by some graduates who in their own terms “feel and call themselves dindar” and who at the same time define themselves as “people with religious moral sensibilities.” This association registered 1,000 members in four months. They dropped the expression of “Alumni” from their title, for they also accept members who attended university for a while but quit their education at some point. See the interview with the head of this association: Nilüfer Kas, “Boğaziçi Üniversiteliler Derneğİ” [Boğaziçi University Reunion Association, BURA]. Tempo, June 21, 2004, available at http://
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www[tempodergisi.com.tr/toplum_politika/05772/]. A similar organization was also established by a group of conservative Sunni Muslim METU graduates in 1995. These students mostly came from provincial towns. Their organization is called ODTÜ Mezunlar Birliği Vakfı (MEBVA, METU Foundation of Alumni Union), the founder of which, Hilmi Güler, later on became the minister of energy in the AKP government; its current president, Volkan Öztürk, is the vice president of the Directorate of the Computer Center at the Turkish Grand National Assembly. However, although this foundation seems like the prototype of the BURA, it has never become as active and widespread. MEBVA does not even have a separate office of its own but shares space with Başkent Kadın Platformu (the Capital City Women’s Platform), which was initially established by covered Sunni Muslim women who were critical towards both secular and religious patriarchal oppressions.

11. For a recent study about the ways in which the relationship among democratization, religiosity, and secularism can be mapped by focusing on the perceptions and mentalities of people who identify themselves predominantly as “religious” or “secular,” see Ali Bayramoğlu and Ferda Bolancar, “Çağdaşlık Hurafe Kaldırmaz”: Demokratikleşme Sürecinde Dindar ve Laikler [Modernity Does Not Tolerate Superstition: Secular and Pious in the Process of Democratization] (Istanbul: TESEV, 2006). This study was conducted in eight different cities through 40 in-depth and 50 short and thematic interviews. It displays many highly interesting accounts showing how a considerably positive change of perception has occurred in both Islamists and secularists towards one another, as well as their own positions, which attest to the emergence of a reconciliation between religiosity and secularism.


17. This survey was conducted in 11 provinces of the country in 1998. Its sample size was set at 2,200 and was distributed among selected provinces according to population size. These provinces were also clustered on the basis of a series of economic, social, and cultural variables. Consequently, in addition to the three largest metropolitan areas—İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir—two provinces were selected from each of four clusters. These were Denizli and Trabzon, Sivas and Diyarbakır, Antalya and Edirne, and Gaziantep and Tokat. Among these 2,200 respondents, 48.9 percent were female, 51.1 male, 75 percent single, 20.2 percent married, and 4.5 percent engaged. About 51.3 percent of all the respondents were in the age group of 15 to 20, and 48.7 percent of them between the ages of 21 to 27. The survey employed face-to-face interviews of respondents in their home environments, in addition to some focus group discussions conducted in Istanbul. For further information about how this survey was carried out, and particularly on the basis of which economic, social, and cultural variables the clusters were selected, see Konrad Adanauer Foundation, Turkish Youth 98: The Silent Majority Highlighted (Ankara: Ofset Fotomat, 1999), pp.2–4.

18. Ibid., p.74.

19. Ibid., p.80.

20. Ibid., pp.82–3.

21. Ibid., p.83.
22. Ibid., p.75.
23. Ibid., p.76.
24. Ibid., p.77.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p.105.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p.114.
30. Ibid., p.45.
31. Ibid., p.52.
32. Turkish novelist Elif Şafak is a graduate of METU, where she received her PhD in political science. She signs her name as Sha'afak in this novel, which was originally written in English and published in the United States. Elif Sha'afak, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004). This novel is published in Turkish under the name of *Arafi*. Elif Sha'afak, *Arafi* (Istanbul: Metis, 2004). Translated by Aslı Bilici.
33. Saktanber, “‘We Pray Like You Have Fun’,” pp.262–9.
38. A rare exception to this situation is Hidayet Sevkatlı Tuksal, a female Muslim intellectual with a PhD in philosophy of religion, who does not hesitate to question Islamic patriarchy and its impacts on the secondary position of Muslim women. See, for example, Ruşen Çakır’s interview with her, Ruşen Çakır, “İslam ve Kadın: İtaatin Meşruaştırılması” [Islam and Woman: Legitimization of Obedience], in *Direniş ve İtaat: İki İktidar Arasında İslami Kadın* [Resistance and Obedience: Islamist Woman between Two Powers] (Istanbul: Metis, 2000), pp.13–38, and also his discussion in the same volume on the debate over feminism in the Islamic movement, Çakır, *Direniş ve İtaat: İki İktidar Arasında İslami Kadın* [Resistance and Obedience: Islamist Woman between Two Powers], pp.39–56.
39. Leyla Neyzi evaluates the paradoxical situation of youth in Turkey through certain political periods of the republic while handling the question in the framework of youth’s becoming both the subject and the object of the problems of youth in Turkey. Neyzi, “Object or Subject?” pp.411–32.
42. Mehmet Efe, *Mizraksız İlmihal* [Book of Manners without a Lance] (Istanbul: Yerli Yayınları, 1993). For example, Nilüfer Göle is one of those who evaluates this novel as an autobiographical account. Göle also sees this novel as an indication of the prevalence of multiple modernities through
which changing Muslim subjectivities are usually evaluated as an outcome of a mutually productive relationship between Islam and modernity, placing the following question into the core of her arguments: how do Muslims situate themselves vis-à-vis modernity? However, here, as a subtext, she also assumes that in epistemological terms Muslims actually experience an entirely different lifeworld than Westernized secular people. Nevertheless, within the framework of this specific novel, Göle traces such a relation of compatibility between Islam and modernity within the resistant attitude of young Islamists towards the de-individualizing effects of Islamist political ideology when they come to terms with love and intimacy, with which the author agrees. Nilüfer Göle, “Snapshots of Islamic Modernities,” *Deadalus*, Vol.129, No.1 (Winter 2000), pp.91–117. See particularly pp.103–8.

43. İzniçi’s ancient book of manners was anonymously called the “book of manners with a lance” among the people of Anatolia, for it is believed that there was a figure of a lance on the cover of the original book. For a contemporary Turkish version of this book, see Ismal Kara, *Mizraklı İmihal* [Book of Manners with a Lance] (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1989).

44. Barış Müstecaplıoğlu, *Şakird* [Disciple] (İstanbul: Metis, 2005). In the novel, although there is no overt reference to Fetullah Gülen’s community, it has been widely discussed in the media that the author himself was a şakırd during his university years at Boğaziçi University in the second half of the 1990s. He also published a seven-day-long series in the daily *Aksam* in order to share with a wider audience his knowledge about and experience with the Fethullah Gülen community. At the end of the series, readers’ critical feedback was also included. Barış Müstecaplıoğlu, “Bir Cemaat Binlerce Hayat” [One Community, Thousands of Lives], *Aksam*, October 16–22, 2006. For the Fethullah Gülen movement, see the special issue of the *Muslim World* devoted to explore this civic movement, *Muslim World*, Vol.95, No.3 (2005). Especially see the interview with Fetullah Gülen, translated from Turkish by Zeki Sarıtoprak, ibid., pp.447–67.

45. Şüle Çizmeci, “ Kahve Bahane” [Coffee is the Excuse], *Radikal Cumartesi Eki* [Radikal Saturday Supplement], January 19, 2005.


49. See, for example, a highly sensible discussion about how Muslim students have navigated their own and others’ sense of them at a college campus in northern California, dealing with being seen as a potential threat and with negative stereotypes about Islam, such as “Muslim terrorist” or “oppressed woman.” Na’ila Suad Nasir and Jasiyah Al-Amin, “Creating Identity-Safe Spaces on College Campus for Muslim Students,” *Change* (March/April 2006), pp.23–7. For a prolific discussion on how transnational identities of young Muslims are constantly “localized,” formulated, and lived according to the context in which Muslims actually live and how certain themes and conditions such as visibility and aesthetics, individual choice, transnationalism, and social ethics become so important in the formation of young Muslims’ identities in the northern European context and in the United States, see Garbi Schmidt, “Islamic Identity Formation of Young Muslims: The Case of Denmark, Sweden and the United States,” *Journal of Muslim Affairs*, Vol.24, No.1 (April 2004), pp.31–45. In addition to these discussions, in the context of transnationalism, it would be very interesting to look at the experiences of the Turkish Muslim youth who rally around some associations that are quite active in transnational Islamic networks such as Milli Gençlik Vakfı [National Youth Association] and Anadolu Gençlik Vakfı [Anatolia Youth Association].
