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Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater

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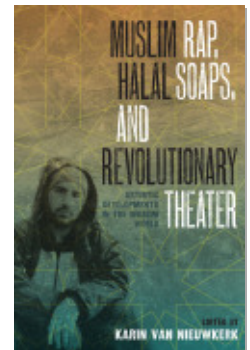
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**ISLAMIC MODERNITY AND THE
RE-ENCHANTING POWER OF SYMBOLS
IN ISLAMIC FANTASY SERIALS IN TURKEY**

AHU YİĞİT

THROUGHOUT THE TURKISH MODERNIZATION EXPERIENCE, one thing has remained the same: modernization has been defined with reference to the West. This frame of reference has either taken the form of admiration or distaste. Modern Turkey has been seeking the affirmative gaze of the West: whenever a major event, disaster, or success takes place in Turkey, newspapers devote a section to its echoes in Europe. This can concern a sports event, such as a football match, a natural catastrophe, or a social and political disaster, such as the assassination of a Turkish journalist of Armenian origin, Hrant Dink. If the European gaze approves of Turkish behavior, Turks are supposed to be proud. If poor infrastructure or corruption leads to a catastrophic end, newspaper headlines mourn that Turkey has been disgraced in the eyes of Europe. I remember writing an essay at the age of eight on the comments published in the international press following the death of the founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Even in the realm of political history, the European opinion on Turkey is important.

In the writings of the late Ottoman intellectuals, such as Ahmed Midhat or Mahmud Esat, there was either a fear of “the corrupt aspects of European civilization” or an admiration for the “spiritual aspects of Western civilization” (Berkes 1964, 285, 287). Ziya Gökalp combined the two approaches and argued that civilization is a transferable intergroup achievement, whereas culture is specific to specific national groups (in Berkes 1936, 243). According to Gökalp, it was legitimate to borrow from European civilization, as long as the authentic Ottoman culture was preserved.

With first the establishment of the republic in 1923, and then subsequent steps designed to make Turkey a Western-style state and society, it was already apparent that Turkey opted for the West. Yet the Turkish Republic would continue to rely on symbols as the sole measure of change. In the course of the modernization process, “secularism *à la turca*” emerged. Instead of withdrawing from religious affairs, the state put all religious activ-

ities under direct control. In 1924, the Directorate of Religious Affairs was established as a state branch. Currently, this institution is responsible for “regulating all work related to the practice of Islam, managing the conduct of places of worship, and enlightening society about the issue of religion.”¹ In 1928, the constitutional article proclaiming Islam the official religion was annulled, and in 1937, the concept of secularism was incorporated into the constitution (Sakallıoğlu 1996, 234).

As a result of this control over religion, two kinds of religious “reality” coexist in Turkey. On the one hand, there is the state, which, in theory, controls the religious behavior of people. On the other hand, in everyday life Islam constitutes an integral element of daily cultural practice—which does not always correspond to a fundamentalist mode of existence. While the state has mobilized certain symbols for its nation-building project and the republican cause, it has also tended to ignore or undermine the symbols that belong to the Ottoman past and traditional Islamic society. Whenever religious symbols become contentious, and gain “political” meaning, the state has shown itself to be alarmed that its own symbols and goals are threatened.

The headscarf issue has been one of the most notorious cases. Trouble began in 1969, when a student who wanted to wear her headscarf during lectures was expelled from university. The Council for Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurumu [YÖK]), banned the headscarf in universities in 1982. The Council lifted this ban in 1984. The headscarf was again banned in 1987, only to be officially allowed in 1990. In 1997, students with headscarves were banished once more.² On February 2008, the president of the republic, Abdullah Gül, approved a constitutional change allowing the headscarf in universities. Still, the legal status of the headscarf remains undecided.

Space is another tool used by the state for its nation-building goals. The new capital, Ankara, was established as the republican center and rebuilt in accordance with the new republic’s political agenda. The streets of Ankara were named after the republican elite and in accordance with nationalist concepts. Scenes from the Independence War of 1919–1922 were kept alive by the various monuments erected all over the city. Ankara was regarded as a blank canvas where the new Turkish state could paint its history and construct its future. Istanbul, on the contrary, was ignored during these early years because it was considered a symbol of the unfavorable and preferably distant imperial past. However, in 1994 Istanbul reentered the clash of symbols through the May 29 celebrations commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of Istanbul’s conquest by the Ottomans. Istanbul was appropriated by the Islamist majority and presented as one of the central constituents of Islamic culture (Çınar 2001, 383). The celebrations began after the

election of the Islamist city administration from the Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) in 1994. Prayers followed theatrical demonstrations of Istanbul's conquest (Çınar 2001, 366).

As the case of the headscarf and the existence of state institutions such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs clearly demonstrate, state behavior in the realm of religion can be defined as a regulation of practices and the control exercised over symbols. Yet the state has not always been successful in eradicating traditional symbols and replacing them with its own. The headscarf ban in the public sphere did not result in a decrease in the number of women wearing headscarves. On the contrary, the fashion industry created new styles of headscarves for women, using lively colors and designs, with the result that the headscarf became even more visible.

Just like colorful headscarves have become favorite with the new Islamic classes in the cities, authentic Islamic television series have underlain the presence and popularity of Islamic television channels. Television serials form a very important part of entertainment on the screen, and more than a hundred serials are produced per annum. Some of them become popular, whereas those lacking such popularity are often discontinued after a few episodes. During the last eight years, serials promoting an Islamist morality have been among the most popular programs on Turkish television. Islamist channels produce a kind of fantasy serials deeply influenced by some Western productions, although they give an Islamic interpretation of the originals. These fantasy serials adopt magical plots such as time travel, angels disguised as ordinary people, and appearing or disappearing objects and people. Several serials are set in the afterlife, from which the main character looks back on his or her life on earth. The producers refrain from naming a specific genre for these serials, and simply say that "these are original formats never tried before."³ However, I will refer to them as fantasy serials, because of the many magical and supernatural events that occur in them.

This chapter focuses on popular fantasy television serials produced by Islamic channels, in particular STV (Samanyolu TV). I explore plots and narrative styles, as well as the various meanings of the symbols that are used. Although the serials are apparently concerned with spreading Islamic morality, the question remains why they use "original formats never tried before" instead of the documentary genre. Also, is there really a contradiction involved in the Islamist adoption of Western genres and the reproduction of Western serials in terms of their own concepts? And what does this choice tell us about Turkish modernity in particular?

For some time now, variations of the original format have been produced by almost all secular and Islamist channels. The serials have been designed to appeal to both types of audience, and their popularity provides a good

opportunity to take a fresh look at the labels “secularist” and “Islamist” in the Turkish context. Islam, or Islamist, channels will not be treated as an isolated object of study, but as one of the constituent elements of contemporary Turkish political culture. Thus, one can investigate how the Islamic moral message delivered through TV serials and the idea of reproducing Western serials come together and, in this case, why the labels “Islamist” and “secular” do not have to be mutually exclusive.

In order to deal with these questions, the place Islam presently occupies in Turkish television will be studied. The Islamist channels broadcasting the serials will be introduced. Next, the fantasy serials will be explored by means of different examples, and an analysis of their plots and characters will be given. Different variations of the original serials will be described. Although the examples will mostly concern Islamist programs, their secular counterparts—which are not produced anymore—will also be mentioned, so as to compare secular and Islamist versions. In the final section, the concept of re-enchantment will be suggested as an alternative framework for studying the emergence and popularity of fantasy television serials. Also, an interpretation of Turkish modernity will be offered.

THE REAPPEARANCE OF ISLAM IN CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Islam has become a component of everyday cultural and also commercial consumption in Turkey. Until recently, the representation of Islam and religion on television hardly attracted any attention. Basically, there were two types of coverage concerning Islam. First were the fifteen-minute talks delivered on the state television channel TRT every Friday. A short speech by the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs covered the virtues of Islam and the qualities of a good Muslim. On religious holidays, scenes from mosques filled by praying crowds were shown, but other than that, mosques were simply considered part of the national cultural heritage, as if they only had architectural authenticity and were unrelated to Islamic belief itself (Öncü 1995, 56). The TRT channel still produces programs of this format. *Hayat ve Din (Life and Religion)*, on Thursday mornings at 6 a.m., and *İslamın Aydınlığında (In the Brightness of Islam)*, on Friday evenings before prime time at 6 p.m., are contemporary examples of religious programs. As their names suggest, these programs treat religion as part of life, amongst other things, and not as something that should predominate. In Turkish, the word *aydınlık*, translated here as brightness, also means enlightenment. The title of the latter program therefore implies that Islam brings enlightenment. In both of the programs, usually a professor of religion is interviewed on

the history of Islam, and the interaction of Islam with other religions is explored. It is emphasized that during the reign of the Prophet, people of different religions were all treated equally.

The second type of Islamic representation developed with the emergence of privately owned television channels in the 1990s. In the reality shows and news programs of these channels, ridiculous and traditional practices of Islam are exposed by means of hidden cameras. Fake *hodjas*, claiming to heal illness, are favorite targets. The fake *hodjas*, usually recorded by hidden cameras, try to persuade women to have sexual intercourse, or they write Arabic script on the women's naked bodies. They present these methods as a cure for illness or infertility, and they ask for a large fee in return for their services. The popularity of such programs reached a peak when an attractive young woman, Fadime Şahin, confessed on camera that she had been subjected to sexual assault by a *hodja* named Ali Kalkanlı. Soon a case was opened against Kalkanlı. As the trial proceeded in 1997, the media exploited the case to the limit and made several programs revolving around the themes of sex, money, religious sects, and *hodjas* (Dole 2006, 40–41). In this case, such representations of *hodjas* serve as figures of Islamication in the sense referred to by Marshall Hodgson, rather than symbols of Islam itself. Viewed from this perspective, the representations of Islam in Islamic popular culture do not have to be in accordance with the belief itself (Hodgson 1975).

The two ways of representation described so far have one thing in common. They make a distinction between “good Islam,” which corresponds to the enlightened and modern interpretation of religion, and “bad Islam,” which is associated with superstition and perceived as a source of backwardness. The *hodjas* and related scandals are presented as examples of “bad Islam.” After the hidden camera recordings are broadcast, university-trained theological scholars are consulted on the *hodjas*' methods. The experts interviewed always stress that none of the practices employed by the *hodjas* are Islamic, or consistent with the Koran. Giving the view of academics on religion underlines the definition of good Islam as compatible with contemporary science. Academics, rather than (fake) *hodjas*, are the authorities on Islam.

The types of coverage outlined have continued until today, although at present they are no longer the only representations of Islam, nor do they enjoy their earlier popularity. Things have changed with the start-up of other private television channels, such as Samanyolu TV (STV), Kanal 7, and TGRT, which together I will refer to in this chapter as the Islamist channels. These channels, which target a more conservative audience, represent Islam in a different manner. Of the channels mentioned, TGRT has moved closer to central politics, by recruiting popular television stars, but until it was

taken over by the American Fox Broadcasting Company and transformed into Fox TV, “it was positioned somewhere between central and peripheral politics” (Binark and Celikcan 2000). Kanal 7, one of the Islamic channels that used to produce serials, has been going through some trouble recently. It has been claimed that this channel was established with the charity money collected from Islamist Euroturs. The channel has close links with the charity foundation Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse), which faces several corruption charges in a German court. A similar case is also about to be opened in Turkey against the executives of the channel and the foundation. Probably due to financial difficulties, Kanal 7 does not produce these serials anymore and concentrates on broadcasting repeats. STV, which broadcasts the fantasy serials that are explored here, was launched in 1993. It is owned by the Gülen community, which is a branch of the Nurcu movement, a religious order based on the teachings of Said Nursi (1878–1960), and which is headed by the religious scholar Fethullah Gülen. The Gülen community has extensive networks in education. It owns one hundred schools in Turkey and over two hundred schools worldwide. In addition, it owns a media network of television channels, radio, newspapers, and journals (Aras and Caha 2000, 34). STV also broadcasts in the USA, where it is called Ebru TV.

At present, popular television serials form the backbone of STV. Besides serials, it broadcasts documentaries, movies, and children’s programs during the morning hours, as well as news and a discussion program on religious issues. STV is notorious for dubbing documentaries and movies from English into Turkish in a rather freely interpretative way. In the dubbed versions of documentaries, comments are given on the role of God in the creation process, even though in the originals this subject is not mentioned at all. More recently, in the channel’s cooking program, *Yeşil Elma* (*The Green Apple*), the cook suggested replacing the names of some dishes with less “dirty” ones, because he thought the originals were “morally inconvenient.” He proposed to change *kadımbudu* (woman’s buttock) into rice meatball and *dilber dudağı* (lips of the belle) into moon dessert. Although these “clean,” inoffensive terms became popular with the program’s audience, they raised huge criticism in other circles, including women’s organizations and academia. The head of the prominent Turkish feminist organization Uçan Süpürge (Flying Broom), Halime Güner, protested against the alternative names by saying that women love their bodies and enjoy eating food inspired by it. Murat Belge, a political scientist who is also famous for his work on culture, derided the inventors of “clean” terms for their ignorance. In return, Filiz Aydoğan, the female producer of the cooking program, responded by saying that the original words were slang, and one of

the concerns of the program was to use proper Turkish. Besides, she said, why was the dish called “woman’s buttock,” and not a man’s?⁴ By the way, the STV channel does not seem to have a problem with working women: women with and without headscarves are employed at various posts by the organization.

The example of the cooking program sheds light on an interesting moment of convergence between modern and traditional ways of life, where women can go out working but, at the same time, allow themselves to be offended by “dirty names” referring to femininity. It is impossible to miss the creative approach the channel and its employees take in replacing the culturally rooted improper with the proper, and the way they adopt the modern way of life whilst taking a conservative view. As will be elaborated on in the next section, the case described is characteristic of “Turkish modernism,” where modern ways of life coexist with conservative attitudes within the same entities.

The fantasy serials with which this chapter is concerned have become extremely popular since 2000. The success of the original serials resulted in an overflow of variations and imitations by both secular and Islamist channels. A study conducted in the Konya province of Turkey revealed that 75 percent of the participants in the survey regularly watched at least one of these programs (Koçak, Çakır, and Gülnar 2006, 353).

The initial serial was *Sırlar Dünyası* (*World of Mysteries*) on STV. It has been described as “a legendary production based on true stories, which has left the high-budget productions behind on the rating scale.”⁵

In the course of time, other, similar serials in content with different formats joined the bandwagon. *Büyük Buluşma* (*Final Glance*) and *Beşinci Boyut* (*Fifth Dimension*) are broadcast by STV, and *Kalp Gözü* (*Eye of the Hearth*) by Kanal 7. For some time, similar productions were also shown on more secular popular channels. The main examples are: *Gizli Dünyalar* (*Mysterious Worlds*) on Show TV, *Cüneyt Arkın’la Yaşanmış Hikayeler* (*True Stories with Cüneyt Arkın*) on Star TV, *Aşkın Mucizeleri* (*Miracles of Love*) on ATV, and *Sırlar Alemi* (*The Kingdom of Secrets*) on Flash TV. The secular versions are no longer in production, probably due to the rising popularity of competing programs based on dancing or singing contestants and the newly gained popularity of different types of series. As mentioned above, Kanal 7 also abandoned the productions, but continues to broadcast repeats. STV, however, still follows the same format for all serials and movies that they produce.

In the following section, examples from the different serials will be provided in order to explore the plots, narrative, and functions of this specific

genre. The examples described, in sequence, are: *Sırlar Dünyası* (*World of Mysteries*), *Büyük Buluşma* (*Final Glance*), and *Beşinci Boyut* (*Fifth Dimension*), which are all broadcast by STV.

FANTASTIC VERSIONS OF ISLAMIC MORALITY

In the initial serial that started the trend eight years ago, *Sırlar Dünyası* (*World of Mysteries*), supernatural occurrences were not yet common. Of the three examples explored in this section, *Sırlar Dünyası* lies farthest from the fantasy genre. Miracles do take place, but although spiritual beings in human form appear, we do not see them in a special light or in unearthly places. Most of the time, the spiritual characters do favors or give advice to people before disappearing again, but they rarely constitute protagonists. A male narrator elaborates on the episodes shown, which are claimed to be based on true stories, inspired by letters from the audience. The narrator is the equivalent of the wise old storyteller in ancient Turkish myths, with a deep voice and a talent for eloquent expression (Tunç 2005, 28). In contrast to the mythical storyteller, however, the narrator of *World of Mysteries* is a young man. He explains the moral lesson of the episode: “No one can intervene in God’s judgment, so people should not complain at all. It is our duty to work hard, and God will reward us for this. People should refrain from saying their rights are violated. If they behave according to this principle, they will find a solution or, more correctly, a solution will find them in even the most difficult circumstances.” The narrator’s role is limited to this brief introduction.

In one of the episodes of *World of Mysteries*, the main character is a primary-school teacher, who pursues his university studies to become a lecturer. Despite his low income, he supports his parents financially and is always nice and helpful to his fellow students. This conduct qualifies him as “the good person.” One day he attends a meeting, where one of his professors gives a lecture on the negative role of religion in the development of science and literature. The teacher/student criticizes this argument, and in return the provoked professor replies, “I shall never allow you to become a lecturer in our department.” The professor also despises the student because he has lost his left arm in an accident. “A cripple cannot work at our university.” Soon it appears that in order to obtain his MA degree, the student has to give a presentation on a topic chosen by “the mean professor,” who selects an irrelevant subject on which hardly any sources are available. The student turns for help to another professor, who promises to provide him with some material. However, he gives the material to “the mean professor,” because he is leaving for a conference in another city and is in a hurry. As a re-

sult, the student never gets the necessary sources for his presentation. Whilst he is in the department's corridors, not knowing what to do, an old man responsible for cleaning the building asks why he looks so sad. This old man is reminiscent of one of the most respected spiritual figures in Turkey, Saint Hızır. Saint Hızır always appears to humans in the shape of an aged dervish with a long, white beard. He is the last-minute rescuer when everything else fails. Although the cult of Hızır is originally pre-Islamic, eventually he came to be considered a part of the Islamic heritage (Walker and Uysal 1973). The old man takes the student to a third professor, who lends him some books and articles, and also gives a long lecture on the topic in question. He asks the student to bring back the books after his presentation. In the end, the student is able to deliver a good talk and is accepted as a lecturer at the university. When he wants to return the books, he finds the door of his benefactor's office locked. He asks the university security guards about the professor and the cleaner. To his surprise, there have never been any such people employed by the university. Following the last scene, the narrator explains that God helps the one who studies and struggles without complaining about the situation. If the teacher-student had complained and not pursued his studies because of the obstacles imposed upon him by "the mean professor," he would not have succeeded. He realized what his responsibilities were and performed his task. And, in the most desperate of moments, God helped him.

Endurance and patience are among the central themes of Islamic belief. The Koran and the words of the Prophet praise such behavior. In the Al-Baqara sura of the Koran, people are advised to seek Allah's help with patience and prayer, and ask God for the wisdom to have patience.⁶ The same message is repeated several times in the text. The *hadith*, the sayings of Prophet Muhammed, also praise patience on various occasions. Patience is admired by the Prophet as "the first stroke of a calamity," and as the greatest blessing that God can give to a person.⁷ Submission is also a central theme: patience brings submission to God. In Sura Al-Naml, submission is seen as the opposite of arrogance, and the faithful should come to God in submission.⁸

Similar moral lessons of patience and submission are also present in the following example taken from an episode of *Büyük Buluşma* (*Final Glance*; see Figure 7.1). A woman is sitting up in her hospital bed. A modest smile is fixed on her face as she ties her headscarf. The door opens and she is shot dead. When she wakes up on a platform floating in the sky, a man dressed in white gowns, Amil, tells her that she is dead. She initially refuses to believe this, until she sees her own funeral. Amil introduces himself as the mirror of consciousness, and describes the platform as the gate to the afterlife. He ex-

plains the reason for her presence in this place with the following verses: “As time goes by, suddenly everything stops: all lights fade away. The bright side of life turns pale. It is now time to confront the greatest reality.” Her life on earth was a dream from which she has woken up, yet her earthly life still has to complete its mission. Following this brief opening, the generic message is shown on the screen. In the generics, people are shown at the moment of their deaths. When they die, they are transformed into light. In the background, we hear a combination of the spiritual sounds of the *nay*, a kind of flute characteristic of Middle Eastern music, and modern rock. The music is accompanied by the lyrics “You cannot escape from the final judgment, turn back and watch your life.”

Then we watch the deceased woman’s life story. She was engaged to a man from her village, whom she loved. She was happy and waiting for her wedding day, until her sister’s husband raped her. She lost the zest for life and attempted suicide, but failed. She prayed to God, “God please help me to stay sane, show me the light.” She did not take legal action against the brother-in-law, or inform anyone about what had happened. She saw herself as unfit to get married because she had been “stained.” However, under the pressure exerted by her family, who considered an engagement not followed by marriage a threat to the family honor, she had to marry her fiancé. As soon as her husband found out that she was not a virgin, he dragged her back to her parents’ house. Her father, thinking the woman had sullied the family name through a dishonorable act, told her brother to kill her. As a result of the brother’s first attempt, her spine was severely wounded, and she was unable to walk for the rest of her life. When she lost all hope, her husband rushed to the hospital to apologize. They promised not to leave each other again; however, just when everything seemed to have ended well, the brother found her again, and this time, truly killed her.

The second part of the story, in which her life is judged, is basically a long conversation among Amil, the deceased woman, and other people who formed part of her life. Amil interrogates her about the motivations behind her actions. Once, while chatting with her fiancé, she spoke ill of another girl who committed suicide after being raped. She said that if the girl had not behaved in an inviting manner toward her attacker, such a thing would not have taken place. Amil asks her if she still thinks she was correct in blaming the other girl, now that she has experienced a similar tragedy herself. Her husband, the brother-in-law, and the brother enter the scene, to be questioned by Amil. They cannot lie because “burning scissors will appear if the tongue resorts to lies here.” After they have left again, the woman anxiously asks what will happen to her. “First they will ask you whether you have performed your daily worship duties.” She confirms she did this, but

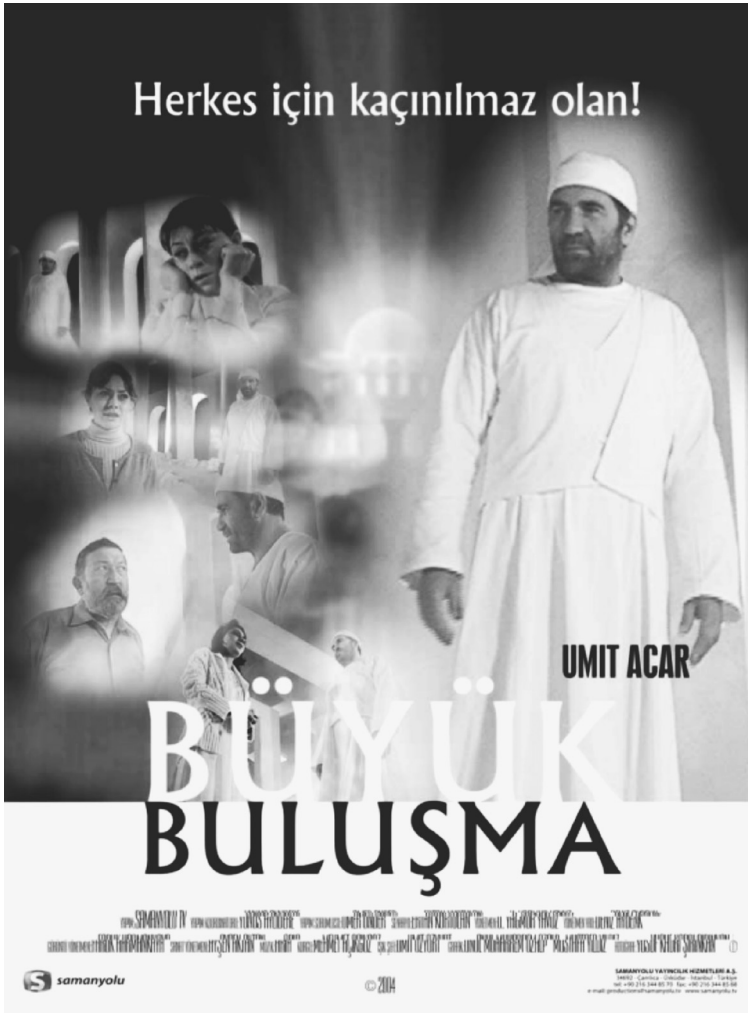


FIGURE 7.1. Poster for *Final Glance* (*Büyük Buluşma*) on STV

what will happen to her if she failed to carry out her duties properly? “Then the good deeds you did will save you.” When the moment of final judgment arrives, a book of light falls from the sky into her hands, and drops of light encircle her. She is walking toward a glowing door with an expression of peace on her face, and professes her thankfulness to God.

Büyük Buluşma (*Final Glance*) can be considered a first variation on the theme of the original format. The main character is awarded in the afterlife, but her mortal life has been full of agony. Other episodes of *Büyük Buluşma*

feature similar stories, with victims in mortal life being awarded in the here-after. The bad characters, who are usually well off during life on earth, are punished by hell in the afterlife. The moral message is obvious. Although the moments of eternal justice and repayment are not always obvious and immediate, they are inevitable.

The second variation on the original format can be found in *Beşinci Boyut* (*Fifth Dimension*; see Figure 7.2). The plots are the same as in the previously discussed serial; however, the characters are different. While similar events take place, two “beings” help people. Although they have the appearance of humans during the episodes, they are transformed into doves and light in the generic. One of them, the master, is an elderly man; his younger apprentice is called Salih. As described on the STV website: “Salih guides people in order to help them make the right choices. When he is in doubt, his master opens the doors for him. Salih is one of those responsible for sowing hope into people’s hearts and manifesting God’s compassion for people.”⁹ In the first episode, Salih’s background is described at length. He was a soldier during Turkey’s involvement in Cyprus in 1974, where he was shot in the back by a Greek soldier. Salih was a virtuous man when he was still alive, and always expressed his yearning to serve God. This prayer was answered when he was chosen to work as an angel.

The similarities with the popular American serial *Touched by an Angel* are striking. *Touched by an Angel* enjoyed popularity on American television between 1994 and 2003. It tells the story of three angels, one of whom is a loving supervisor, whilst the other two are interns, who deliver the message of hope. The story is heavily dominated by Christian teaching, and the message throughout the serial is the presence of God as a source of hope.¹⁰

In a similar manner, Salih and his master also deliver the message of hope to the audience; and likewise, they refrain from bringing dramatic solutions to the problems raised: if people listen to their own conscience, they will make the right choices. Salih and his master just help people to do this. Sometimes, they perform small acts that make people’s life easier, but they do not really interfere. For example, in one episode, Salih is a shepherd in a village. A woman whose husband is paralyzed suffers from sexual abuse by her neighbor. This neighbor, who intends to rape her, waits for the moment that she will have to go into the forest to gather wood. He even steals some wood from her wood repository, so that she will need to go there sooner. However, the woman’s wood supply does not shrink at all, because Salih discreetly brings her wood at night. Whenever the woman complains about the hardships of carrying the responsibility for a paralyzed husband and little children, Salih advises her to think of those who are suffering from worse conditions. In another episode, which has almost the same plot, with

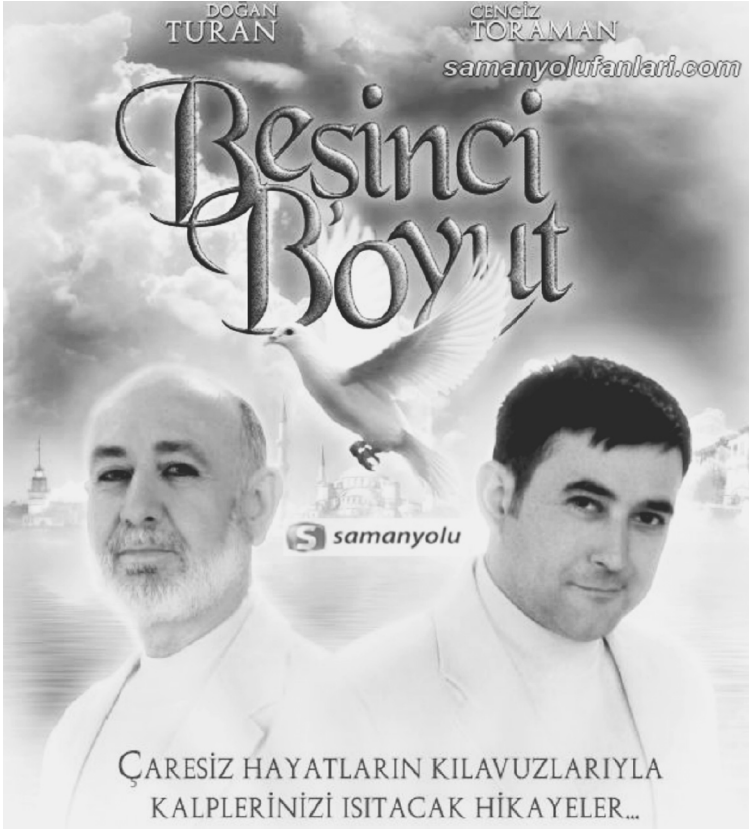


FIGURE 7.2. Poster for *Fifth Dimension (Beşinci Boyut)* on STV

a woman, a paralyzed husband, an abusive landlord, and a shepherd named Salih, the woman asks how much worse things could get. She has definitely surpassed the legitimate limits of complaint. And worse things do happen: she falls ill and is unable to work any longer.

The episodes of *Beşinci Boyut* are always opened by a dialogue between Salih and the master. Similar to the opening of *Sırlar Dünyası*, these dialogues contain short moral lessons. They revolve around the questions asked by the pupil, Salih, and answers given by the master. Salih asks the master, “My lord, what should be our attitude when faced with oppression?” His master answers with a quotation from the Prophet, “Oh God, I take shelter with you, in the face of all oppression.” Salih finds these words virtuous, but still needs more instruction, and asks, “If oppression is the source of all destruction, then why do oppressors succeed?” According to the master, Salih is questioning eternal justice with his comment, and he replies, “Eter-

nal justice is always active. Only there is an appropriate time for everything, and the merits of the people who seek justice also determine the extent to which that justice is implemented.” Salih is still confused. “But if the people fail to practice some of the virtues commanded by God, then should they feel insecure?” The master confirms, but states, “Oppression is annihilated by oppression, so people can always refresh their belief.” But what about the appropriate timing? According to the master, it is only when oppression reaches its highest limits that eternal justice can become effective. By now Salih has grasped the whole argument, and he understands that eternal justice is the best consolation. The master’s last sentence summarizes the entire logical idea behind the serial: “If people complain at moments of grief and agony, they will commit further sins and eternal justice will not bring relief.”

The examples described above are all shown on STV, the most popular of the Islamist channels. The secular counterparts of these serials were also broadcast for a while. *Gizli Dünyalar* (*Mysterious Worlds*) on Show TV is an example of the latter. The productions broadcast by the secular channels were praised by the Islamist conservative press. One of the Islamist newspapers, *Yeni Şafak*, wrote that the serials “have attracted great attention from the audience. Despite being a popular channel, dominated by commercial concerns, Show TV has started its own series and profited greatly from it. The program has managed to reach fifth place in the rating scale. It seems that this series will continue to leave lots of programs standing.”¹¹

Gizli Dünyalar has the same structure and plot as *Sırlar Dünyası*; even the titles of the serials are almost identical. The narrator in *Gizli Dünyalar* is even more reminiscent of the traditional storyteller, being older. He is filmed in the historic setting of Basilica Cistern, a 1,500-year-old underground waterworks built during the reign of the Byzantine Empire in Istanbul. After a brief moral lecture, the story starts. In one of the episodes, a young man and a woman are sitting in a restaurant. The man is a promising businessman, who is about to propose marriage to the woman. He gives her a diamond ring. She accepts, saying, “Even death cannot separate me from this ring.” In the next scene, we see the couple after they have been married for five years. However, the man is cheating on his wife with another woman, the latter being presented as selfish and greedy. Although the man’s friends warn him that he puts all his wealth at risk for this woman, he does not listen. Soon, his wife dies in a traffic accident; shortly afterwards, the man finds out that he has been deceived by the other woman, and is left penniless. To pay his debts to the bank, he decides to take the ring from his buried wife’s finger. He digs up the grave but cannot pry off the ring and ends up cutting off the finger itself. From that moment on, the ghost of his

wife haunts him in his life and his dreams. His troubles are exacerbated by his constant abuse of alcohol, and he ends up in a mental hospital.

In this episode, as well as in the other episodes of *Gizli Dünyalar*, the symbols of good and bad are the same as in the Islamist versions; however, the reference to religion is mostly lacking. Again, supernatural events occur, such as the appearance of a ghost. The most commonly shown supernatural event in the secular serials is people foreseeing the future in their dreams. Dreams act as early warning mechanisms.

THE ABSOLUTE REALITY OF REPRESENTATIONS

Despite the differences in format among the various serials, they share the same message. All describe a chain of events in which caricaturized representatives of “the good” and “the bad” play a role. The good party is rewarded, and bad people are punished, either on earth or in the afterlife. There is a clear message that everyone will be held accountable for their own deeds. In *Sırlar Dünyası* (*World of Mysteries*), the payoff takes place in this world: the guilty parties and their beloved find themselves in quandary similar to the one they have created for other people. In *Büyük Buluşma* (*Final Glance*), we see a reproduction of the religious theme of *ahiret* (the afterlife), with deceased people being subjected to an interrogation about their lives on earth. In *Beşinci Boyut* (*Fifth Dimension*), the events take place in this world, but two angels disguised as ordinary people assist the main characters.

It is also worth mentioning another serial, broadcast by Samanyolu TV. Entitled *Hakkını Helal Et* (*Redemption*), it employs a comedy format, but still deals with the question of people’s accountability. It shows striking similarities to the popular American TV serial *My Name Is Earl*. After a prologue describing certain circumstances that have resulted in his being imprisoned, the former thief Murat becomes aware of the Islamic concept *kul hakkı*—that is to say, one is not only responsible to God for his sins, but also to other people. Murat wants to make up for his crimes, and prepares a list of people from his past to whom he should make amends—just like Earl in the American serial, who adopts the Karma philosophy and prepares a similar list.

The question of justice and repayment is also a central theme of Islam. Writing on the relation between law and religion, Turner places the concept of law at the center of ritual and religious practices in Islam. Justice is at the core of Islamic spirituality (Turner 2006, 453). The focus of the television serials on the realization of justice can be understood in light of the penetration of the Islamic concept of justice into public and private life. In contemporary Turkey, Islamic law does not have a role in the legal practice, and

the Islamic concepts of justice and repayment are excluded from the public sphere because it is a secular system. The serials explore the realization of eternal justice in the private lives of people. The extent to which the private sphere and the public sphere can be analyzed as disconnected is presented as questionable. However, it is not the serials' intention to extend the central message to the functioning of the public sphere: everything takes place at the personal level. If someone is subject to oppression or injustice in the public sphere, or people face injustice in a state institution such as a courthouse or hospital, this is not the fault of the political system. Rather, the people working there as employees are to blame, and, in the end, they will be punished by God's eternal justice.

A most prominent characteristic of the serials is that they validate and promote a sharply defined set of morals. Most of the time, these are Islamic rules, overlapping with generally accepted good morals. A professor of Islam acts as advisor for the scripts of the serials. Not only Islamic values are promoted; other norms generally regarded as good in society are also touched upon. One of these is nationalism. As described above, Salih, one of the angels in *Beşinci Boyut (Fifth Dimension)*, was killed by a Greek soldier in Cyprus. This soldier is presented as bad because he shot Salih in the back, even though earlier Salih had shared his supply of water with him. A general distaste toward the Greeks in Turkish nationalist discourse is voiced here. Also, when Salih was asked to fight as a soldier in the Cyprus war, he was proud to serve the national cause—which underlines one of the most prominent features of Turkish society, i.e., its military culture.

Stealing, lying, greed, and adultery are considered “bad morals” and sinful, whereas, amongst other things, generosity, praying, and obeying one's elders are regarded as “good.” In drawing the map of good and bad, the representations in the serials do not leave any room for interpretation or flexibility. First, everything is considered to have a certain moral value. Every item or action has a symbolic meaning, and these symbolic meanings are not dependent upon the context—in other words, they are not relative. For instance, in the series drinking alcohol is always bad, and it does not matter if the person consuming alcohol is good in other respects. Even if he is good, drinking alcohol will corrupt him. Second, people or their actions are, symbolically speaking, either extremely bad or naïvely good. Everything is black or white, and never gray. For instance, “the mean professor” in the episode of *Sırlar Dünyası* we discussed earlier looks down on Islam, which is one of the gravest sins one can commit in the serials. However, this is not the only bad thing about him. He despises the student for his physical disability, which is not something to be expected from a person of his rank.

In general, the message is that if someone has “flawed” political views,

then he or she cannot possibly be a good person. Even if the main characters change their views at one point, and accept the morals promoted in the serials, they do not necessarily end up good. For example, in one *Sırlar Dünyası* episode, an active feminist considers Islam an impediment to women's participation in social life. In the end, she recognizes her "mistake" of judging Islam negatively, but she still has to die for her past error.

The effectiveness of the symbols applied becomes clear in the representation of women. Women should obey their husbands or, if they are single, obey their fathers and brothers. In their turn, husbands and fathers are responsible for the welfare and conduct of women. Salih summarizes this guideline in the following sentence: "Everyone is a shepherd in his own sense; we are responsible for those we pasture." In some cases, women might reject the "shepherd's" orders, but only if these orders conflict with the idealized morals. However, women rarely become rebellious, or refuse instructions in order to go follow their own will: one's own wishes have to fall within the limits of good morals. When women go beyond these strictly defined borders, they enter the sphere of culpability and thus deserve to be punished. In the example given above, the feminist character decides to live her life according to her own wishes. Choosing her own husband despite her parents' warning is an example of such an independent decision. She has to pay a very high price, though, because she soon finds out that her husband is addicted to gambling. She once claimed that women should continue to work after marriage, even if they have children, yet she herself finds it very hard to continue working after giving birth to her son. However, she is forced to, because her husband has been sacked due to his gambling habit. She takes refuge in the house of a woman whom she used to despise for her headscarf and Islamic beliefs. The feminist woman is in deep trouble, and in the end her husband kills her when she refuses to give him the money he asks for.

Excess is also invariably considered to be bad in the serials. Heavy makeup or loud laughter is a sign of a woman's poor moral qualities. For example, in an episode of *Büyük Buluşma*, the women who go to hell wear heavy makeup, whereas the other women, who wear headscarves, use barely any makeup at all. Remarriage of a widow with children is considered bad, and in most cases such a remarriage creates problems. If a woman complains about her husband's or father's financial status, she is wrong and deserves to be punished. In another episode of *Büyük Buluşma*, entitled "Women Who Go to Hell," a woman finds fault with her husband because he does not notice her new hairdo and has failed to remember their wedding anniversary. She makes an issue out of this and decides to participate in a television program in which lower-class women discuss their marital problems. The talk

show host, a young and attractive female, encourages her guests to criticize husbands who neglect their wives. The wife tells the host about when she was chatting online with another man and her husband thought she was cheating on him. The host suggests that married women can have male friends, as well as female ones, with whom they can share their problems. The husband sits watching all this at home, feeling extremely offended by the two women's comments. He breaks into the studio and kills them both. At the gate to the afterlife, Amil blames the wife for "making an assassin out of her husband." The issue between the husband and wife is presented in such a manner that it leads the audience to the conclusion women should submit to the will of men, or at least to the established norms of good conduct. If they fail to do this, and make their own choices, they will end up in trouble. In "Women Who Go to Hell," both the wife and the talk show host go, of course, to hell.

In the narratives of this and other episodes, every form of behavior becomes a symbolic action, because it has greater meaning than is immediately apparent. Behaving respectfully toward one's elders and avoiding sexual intimacy before marriage are symbolic of good behavior. Such symbols differ from state symbols; examples of state symbols could be the flag, Republican monuments, the headscarf as a sign of disliked political Islam, or the Latin alphabet that was introduced in 1928 to replace the Ottoman alphabet. However, in both cases symbols are instrumental in promoting the visions and morals of the parties involved. Most symbols of good behavior in the examples from the Islamist TV serials described refer to the Islamic concepts of submission and justice. Unfortunate events on earth are presented as tests set by God. Instead of complaining, people should try and pass these tests. Justice need not be meted out immediately, but sooner (on earth as in *Sırlar Dünyası* and *Beşinci Boyut*) or later (in the afterlife, such as in *Büyük Buluşma*), God's final judgment will come. Unlike temporal justice on earth, which is open to abuse by the powerful, God's judgment is accurate. As stressed several times, the reality on earth is not the reality of life. Interestingly enough, one can see a similar association between actions and symbols in some other Islamic societies—for instance, in Iran. Zeinab Stellar (this volume) shows how the meanings and representations of dance as a symbol have changed over the years, and through successive political regimes, in Iran, but in each of the episodes, dance could not be perceived as a neutral aesthetic form of art. It had always to be contained or rejected.

I have mentioned the secular counterparts of the Islamist fantasy serials, which are not produced anymore. These secular programs employed similar sets of symbols and morals. However, in their case, the moral messages were not necessarily presented as the teaching of Islam: they were simply good morals. Aytaç Yörükaslan, the narrator of *Gizli Dünyalar* (*Mysterious*

Worlds), hints in an interview with the *Yeni Şafak* newspaper at an understanding of morality based on traditional norms and values. He does not refer to Islam or religion at all, but, according to him, people struggle and have to make huge efforts to stay honest and kind. Incentives for doing bad abound, which is why there should be television programs aimed at guiding people toward good morals. All television channels, he says, should realize this duty and make programs based on this principle.¹²

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the word “modern” has been used as the reverse of “traditional,” in particular with regard to lifestyles. However, the concept “modern” might be viewed in a different sense, which provides an opportunity to look at the Islamic fantasy serials from another perspective. Weber defines modernity as the loss of incalculable and mysterious forces from the face of the earth. In the phase of modernity, everything can be explained by calculations, formulas, or in more general scientific terms (Weber 1918). With the disenchantment process, the legitimacy of magic erodes as well, and any knowledge or insight related to the magical realm becomes irrational and will retreat from public life (Lee 2008, 749). What was once considered God’s wrath is now an explicable phenomenon, explicable through formulas, which create understanding of means and ends as breeding one another. It is not sins that cause hurricanes and earthquakes anymore, but global warming with its consequences or earthquake faults which can be seen all over the world. Even religions have been rationalized and bureaucratized, and lost their mystical appeal (Greisman 1973, 497). Modernity through disenchantment means a reinterpretation of human experience and knowledge through different lenses that are “less mysterious, knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans.” Of course this reinterpretation of knowledge is not the only aspect of Weberian modernity; it is incorporated into a system of science and rational government. On the political level, secularization is the flip side of disenchantment (Jenkins 2000, 12).

However, Weber’s notion of disenchantment has been challenged from different corners. One criticism is that the “enchanted world” was never as unified as Weber presumed. Skepticism, heresy, and pluralism were never absent. Also, the disenchanted world and the break with magic have never been as absolute as Weber professed. Jenkins mentions several challenges posed to orthodox science as signs of a growing re-enchantment. Popular distrust in modern medicine matched by an increased interest in alternative therapies, and the decline of Newtonian physics and the need for further interpretations, are two examples of, not necessarily a distrust of science, but new room for epistemological pluralism. New and modern ways of re-

enchantment such as religious fundamentalism, alternative lifestyles geared at a return to nature, neopaganism, and even psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have come to coexist with established rational and disenchanted practices (Jenkins 2000, 17–18). Jane Bennett’s two varieties of re-enchantment are “techno-chantment,” which transforms typewriters into PCs, or alcoholism into an addiction rather than a sign of weak will and self-control, and, second, the “miracle of co-ordination,” which refers to the miraculous realization of creative and harmonized thinking in an age where the grounds for doing so are “non-harmonious, non-designed and unnecessary,” making creative and innovative thinking almost impossible (Bennett 2001, 17–20).

The worldwide popularity of television serials such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and movies such as *Star Wars*, *X-Men*, and *Lord of the Rings*, the last an interpretation of J. R. R. Tolkien’s trilogy of novels, also shows an interest in the enchanted side of storytelling. Jenkins treats this interest under the umbrella of romanticism, which yearns for a mythical premodern and unrationalized past. This feeling is effectively translated into commercial success (Jenkins 2000, 19). According to Saler, though, the popularity of these productions is owing to the greater acceptance and freer use of imagination, and is one of the signs of a reconciliation between modernity and enchantment. This does not necessarily mean more enchantment in a modern world inhabited by demons (Saler 2004, 146). It is just a function of mass culture.

The TV serials discussed in this article are not as fantastical as the examples just given. However, in these Islamic serials too, we see a strange combination of religion, magic, and unnatural occurrences in an age of modernity. Underlining the presence as well as the superiority of religion and religious morality is the ultimate aim of the scripts used. The supernatural incidents are tools to prove the reality of religion, rather than a legitimate part of the text. Although the Western fantasy products can also be inspired by biblical stories or creatures, this influence is limited: myths and characters have been borrowed from other sources and incorporated. For instance, in the *Superman* series, the father sends his son Kal-El to earth not only to save him, but also to make him guide people toward the good and virtuous. In the *Star Wars* series, Anakin Skywalker, who is expected to bring balance to the Force, is not born from a father. Both cases echo the story of Jesus Christ.

In the TV serials, Islam is praised as the most rational religion extant. Sorcery and magic are condemned throughout them. Yet, as shown in the examples discussed above, magical events do take place, and this kind of magic or miracles is presented as a reward for being a good Muslim. There is a strange parallel between the presentation of early science fiction in the West and Islamic fantasy series. Toward the end of the nineteenth century,

imagination found its legitimate place in Western children's literature, which was formerly highly didactic. With authors observing this popularity and acceptance of science fiction themes, similar novels started to appear for adults too. However, the narratives of the latter were constructed in such a manner that scientific value, and at least the possibility of truth, could be attributed to the text. Writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells wrote fantastical tales under a scientific guise; new printing techniques allowed them to use maps, realistic illustrations, and even footnotes to underline the reality, or rather the possibility of reality, of their texts (Saler 2004, 141). We see a very similar effort being made in the Islamic fantasy serials. The reality and rationality of the script and its contents are constantly emphasized, although what the audience witnesses on the screen is undoubtedly of a supernatural nature. As already mentioned, the scriptwriters are assisted by university scholars. Time and again Islam is mentioned as the religion of science and rationality, and practicing magic is depicted as an evil act to be punished by hell. Yet, despite all this background emphasis on science, the series do not refute the reality of practicing magic, most probably because the Koran itself professes magic to be evil, but still recognizes its reality.

The study conducted in the province of Konya revealed the basic motive for watching the serials as one of "experiencing or reinforcing religious beliefs [feelings]." It is connected to the "wish to see justice done and experience religious feelings" (Koçak, Çakır, and Gülnar 2006, 353). It can be claimed that the serials are alternative and modern ways of experiencing religion. They can be viewed as moments of re-enchantment, since they make the teachings of Islam a visual experience. Although they present the miracles that occur as the will of God, from another perspective these miracles are magic, and the characters in the serials are supernatural beings.

If the coexistence of modernity and (re-)enchantment is possible, then there exists room for religion. Rather than analyzing religion as a remnant of the traditional and antimodern past, it might be seen to fall within the confines of modernity and as partially constituting modernity. Disassociating the concepts "secular" and "modern" shows the possibility that modern culture has not necessarily cut all ties with religion (Bracke 2008, 58–59).

Besides those about the effect of re-enchantment, some final questions can be asked about the fantasy serials discussed. What does this network of symbols correspond to, and what do they tell us about Turkish politics and society? For one, it shows a great deal of interaction between Islamists and secularists in cultural terms. These two seemingly distinct positions influence and sometimes shape each other. In the present case, the Islamists have used the fantasy genre, which is unexpected, as fantasy stories are associated with Western culture. On the other hand, the secular channels did not hes-

itate to start their own serials inspired by the Islamic originals. Commodification, as a concept and activity, is shared by Islamists and secularists, rather than being something that divides the two parties (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 222). Television channels are part of the commodification, so interaction can be expected. The popular television serials try to attract the greatest number of people with their programs. The fantasy serials have helped secular media owners pursue their goal, and by avoiding the religious tone of the Islamic originals, they can still claim to have followed a secularist broadcasting policy. Conservative Islamist channels may also have a commercial interest, but they also intend to promote Islamic morality. By employing the fantasy genre, they have been able to gain wide popularity. If the ends justify the means, in this case the end being popularity, but popularity for the sake of religion, and the means the originally Western genre of fantasy, then the interaction between the modernist and religious methodologies and symbols does not really create a conflict for the Islamist channels. The same conclusion applies to the secularist channels.

NOTES

1. <http://www.diyabet.gov.tr/turkish/dy/Diyabet-Isleri-Baskanligi-Duyuru-8222.aspx> (accessed February 26, 2008).
2. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/ayse-hur/makale-turbanin-60-yillik-seruveni.htm> (accessed January 3, 2011).
3. <http://www.stv.com.tr/ShowProgram.aspx?ContentId=11> (accessed January 3, 2008).
4. <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/438206.asp>.
5. <http://www.stv.com.tr> (accessed January 3, 2008).
6. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/007.qmt.html#007.087> (accessed April 9, 2008).
7. <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/023.sbt.html#002.023.372> (accessed April 9, 2008).
8. <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/027.qmt.html> (accessed April 9, 2008).
9. <http://www.stv.com.tr/ShowProgram.aspx?ContentId=11> (accessed April 9, 2008).
10. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108968/plotsummary> (accessed June 6, 2009).
11. <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2004/agustos/06/televizyon.html> (accessed April 9, 2008).
12. <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2004/temmuz/17/televizyon.html> (accessed April 9, 2008).

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