

Re-enchanting Turkey Religious Stories on TV

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In the “journey of modernization,” starting from the last days of the Ottoman Empire and heading towards an unknown and indefinite future, Turkey has had to re-sketch the place of religion in different spheres. After declaring the Turkish Republic in 1923, the state elites gained some success in establishing secularism *à la turca*. In contrast to Western style secularism, which requires the total withdrawal of the state from religious affairs, the Turkish elites asserted that all religious activity would be controlled by the state alone. Another side to this success story occurred precisely as a result of these very interventions to regulate individual private religious spheres. For such interventions, aimed at transforming the daily practice of Islam within the public sphere, have rarely left any room for negotiation. Eventually, transformations in the daily religion occurred, but these were not in accordance with the original aims of the state elite. Due to the interventions, daily religion has found new and “modern” ways of expression far removed from the expectations and wishful thinking of those so determined to remove the remains of the past.

Modernization is associated with the loss of enchantment because the most significant indications of religion—such as heavenly miracles or devastating catastrophes caused by sinfulness—are now appreciated as natural and more important, explicable phenomenon. This article explores one of the instances in which the failed transformation proposed above, has been occurring and has, in some points, resulted in a process of re-enchantment. The re-enchantment is presented in new visual settings while employing the original religious plots—which are no longer visible to us—mainly as media representations of religious miracles. Television series in focus narrate little stories that make us believe in the (im)possibility of worldly justice and inject our sense of our own beings as a part of a greater whole in which good is rewarded and evil is punished. The following example, taken from *Büyük Buluşma* on Samanyolu TV, helps the reader to imagine the re-enchanting power of the media.

Islamic science fiction

A woman (called Yildiz) is about to wake up on a platform floating in the middle of the sky. A man dressed in white, called Amil, informs her that she is dead. In the background, there is rock music; some notes are highlighted by *ney*, a traditional (and spiritually symbolic) flute prominent in Middle Eastern music. The verses remind us “you cannot escape from the final judgement; turn back and watch your life.” Amil starts to interrogate Yildiz about the life she has lived, while the audience is shown fragments from her past: She has a sick son, who is in need of constant care, but Yildiz is bored of being at home and asks her husband to buy her a computer. Initially dismissing her request and complaining at the vices of computers, her husband eventually gives in. It proves to be a turning point in Yildiz’s life. Subsequently, she starts to neglect her duties at home and becomes increasingly engrossed in the Internet. The treacherous qualities of the net soon reveal themselves. Her net contacts deceive and swindle her, and Yildiz dies while trying to trace them back.

Focusing on the increasing popularity of Turkish TV programmes in which miracles, morality, and virtue play prominent roles the author describes the re-enchantment of modern media in Turkey. Moreover, while in Turkey divides between the “religious” and the “secular” are assumed to be particularly stark, the TV programmes reveal a vibrant cross-fertilization between Islamists and secularists.

of light,” an indication that her soul will go to heaven. The episode ends showing Yildiz with a modest and devout smile walking towards a green-lit door.

For the last six years, Turkish television channels have been flooded by series such as this one, all heavily influenced by Islamic ideas of justice. The trend first started with *Sır Kapısı* and *Büyük Buluşma*¹ on Samanyolu tv, followed by Kanal 7’s *Kalp Gözü*. These series were produced and broadcasted by Islamist channels.² Interestingly, secular television channels also joined to benefit from this trend. As a result, in 2005, the same show was broadcast on five different Turkish channels: two Islamist and three secular ones. Secular channels changed the content to some extent, but the framework remained virtually identical.

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Secular counterparts

Though secular television channels are known for their harsh criticism of the Islamists they did not hesitate to start their own versions of this kind of series. They show miniseries which are the replicas of *Sır Kapısı* or *Kalp Gözü*, even if they have refrained from copying the “science fiction” shows such as *Büyük Buluşma*, described above. The example below, taken from the programme *Gizli Dünyalar* shown on Show TV, serves to illustrate the links, similarities, as well as differences between the two types of channel.

In one series, a girl named Aygul from the provinces arrives in Istanbul to start living with her sister’s family. Soon she takes up a job as a secretary in an unnamed company. Aygul starts flirting with a young man from her office and, before long, the two are living together. This is problematic: extra-marital relations violate established norms concerning what is legitimate in Turkish society. The man had managed to persuade her to agree to this arrangement only after promising that he would marry her within a few months; unsurprisingly, he does not keep his promise. Rather, he starts gambling and courting other women, and paying less attention to Aygul. The series reaches its climax when Aygul tells her lover that she is pregnant, after which he kicks her out of the house. Even her sister does not accept to take Aygul back into her house. Aygul is homeless until an old couple takes her into their home, and they end up becoming her new parents. When the couple dies, she and her son inherit their restaurant business. In the final scene, the boy’s father, physically disabled and looking miserable, comes to the restaurant and asks for a bowl of soup. The moral message is obvious: as a result of gambling or drinking, he has lost everything while Aygul has redeemed herself.

These series were broadcast on Show TV, Star TV, and ATV. However, ATV’s interpretation was different. Here, the main focus was not justice, but love. Thus, whereas the others were concerned with showing how the unjust and immoral will eventually be punished, this one told the audience that lovers would always re-unite. The basic format of these

series, however, did not differ at all. In all of them, a male announcer, filmed in a mysterious, historical setting swirling with mist, gives a short outline of the coming episode, and when this ends, he explains the story's moral message. The plots are not original, but variations of main themes: a woman cheated on by a man, or a man trapped by alcohol or gambling. In the background, we invariably find figures of pity—such as a penniless old man or woman, denied the respect their age deserves.

Symbols, judgement, and endurance

In both the secular and Islamist versions, the narration relies on overt and often very similar symbols, yet the symbols correspond to different sets of values. Whether the images show styles of dress, manners of speaking and behaviour, or even new technological devices, these are all placed on a moral continuum and valued either as good or bad. As a result of the pressing concern with morality, the characters in the series become caricatures acting within an "ideal" reality offering one-dimensional, therefore very familiar, answers and guidelines.

Drinking alcohol and smoking are obviously bad, whereas praying and obeying the elders are valorized practices. Symbols related to ideas of proper femininity centre on obedience to a husband or a father. In the Islamist broadcast, a woman is either veiled or moderately dressed. If she has a job, this is usually the result of poor economic conditions, and she is likely to face problems at the workplace. In secular interpretations, women can work and this is not necessarily degrading. They may dress in a more liberal manner, but they are still responsible to their husbands. Symbols that signal moral deprivation include the excessive use of make up, consumption of alcohol, or loud laughter. The portrayal of a daughter typically includes complaints about her father's poor financial status. In all cases, morally deprived women corrupt men around them. On the other hand, men are corruptible beings.

Submission is another key symbol. In both types of series, the characters suffer from the cruelty of other people. Their misfortunes are presented as opportunities to pass God's test on earth. Rather than complaining, the unfortunate pray to God for salvation and forgiveness. It may take many years, even generations for eternal justice to take place, but in the end, God's justice *will* prevail. This ultimate divine justice is contrasted with the justice of men or the state, which is open to abuse by the powerful.

Symbols are also important for laying out the variables for the concept of justice. While in Islamist series, the characters are judged according to their compliance to the Quran and religious requirements, in secular counterparts, we do not see explicit references to religion. Instead they aim to present "controversial issues, with a mission to make conscience and reason meet."³ Accordingly, the judgement is reached through a set of established moral rules derived from reason and conscience. Yet, we know that the final judgement is identical in both, whether derived from moral or religious rules, which in effect overlap and construct each other.

Islamists vs. secularists/reality vs. fiction?

The original series shown on the Islamist channels are efforts to create Islamic mythologies. Whether they reached their aim or not, they certainly succeeded in attracting public attention, and even triggered another section of society to create similar mythologies. Although usually stressing the virtues of secularism, the secular channels have found it appropriate to model their own series on those of the Islamist channels. They have softened the religious flavouring but preserved the underlying morality of the original. This interaction was not one sided. The Islamists were also influenced by the modernist approaches, which we tend to associate only with the secular public.⁴



SOURCE: WWW.SAMANYOLU.COM.TR

One conclusion to be derived from the content explored is the extent to which the religious and secular circles were able to influence each other under a system that is, to a very large degree, prone to polarization between the two. However, in this article another broader argument has been raised on the role the Turkish media plays in re-enchanting by means of religious and/or moral appeal. Until these series, the appearance of Islam in the Turkish media was either through instructive and mostly unpopular documentaries or through news broadcasts that ridiculed most traditional practices and stressed their vices. Now, by contrast, religion has become popular in a modern sense. Yet, this article also asserts that this popularity, although relating to religion, does not solely concern religion. Rather, it concerns how the ability of symbols to appeal to our imagination has shrunk, so to speak, due to disenchantment caused by modernization. Thus, when the spiritual phenomenon becomes visible to our eyes, even in the television series, the audience enjoys some form of catharsis by identifying himself/herself with the plot and the characters displayed. Accordingly, some sort of enchantment occurs. This is not the direct result of an actual religious experience—as used to be the case before modernity—but as a result of the reproduction and visualization of the virtual miracles of religion.

**From the series
Büyük Buluşma
on Samanyolu
TV**

Notes

1. The names chosen for these series also have religious or mysterious tones. *Sır Kapısı* is "Door of Secrets" and *Kalp Gözü* means "The Eye of the Heart."
2. In this article, the channels established by Islamic capital are considered Islamic. The secular channels dealt with here are the ones that rely on other kinds of capital and those that define themselves as secular.
3. <http://www.showtv.net>.
4. For an account of the relation between modernity and Islam, see: Nilüfer Göle, *Forbidden Mahrem: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

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