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Sacralizing the City

Religious disciplining of Istanbul's publics through memorialization and display

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Abstract

Politically activist and socially committed interpretations of Islam continue to spur heated debate and academic discussion. Yet, analysis remains largely confined to the doctrinal ideas and organizational strategies of Islamist movements (such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbullah and Jamaat-i-Islami) and the function of religion in formal, state-based, political discourse, legislation and practice. All too often, discussions remain predicated on simplified and sometimes normative binaries, such as sacred/secular, theocratic/democratic, traditional/modern, and public/private.

Less attention has been devoted to the *informal*, yet crucially important aspects of Islamism, transcending traditional structures, programs and institutions, while forging new and inventive venues for mobilization and legitimization. Not least, the *urban cultural sphere* has assumed an important role for orchestrating religious norms and sentiments, beyond any formulation of theocratic goals or opposition to secular provisions. To the contrary, institutions rooted in the secular state apparatus (such as cultural venues and education) are commonly appropriated by religiously oriented discourse and practice, in tacit yet efficient *sacralizations of the publics*.

This paper explores the emergence of such sacralized publics in Turkey, by focusing on the *memorialization* of the Islamic and Ottoman past in cultural and innovative *pedagogical practices*, by the current AKP government. It builds on ethnography, document- and visual analysis of the religious disciplining of the display of 'sacred' artefacts at the Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul. The paper also draws on data collected from the newly established, national celebration of 'Holy Birth Week', the commemoration of the birth of Prophet Muhammed. Cloaked as 'pedagogic' or 'cultural' events in urban public space, such appropriation of religious discourse and symbolism efficiently convey an anti-secularist rhetoric, while strategically by-passing Turkish secular, constitutional provisions. They provide innovative, populist, politicized venues, appealing to an increasingly urbanized pious constituency, while in fact efficiently appropriating institutions rooted in the secular Turkish Republic.