

The Alevis

The Alevis are the largest non-Sunni religious group in Turkey. Their numbers are impossible to ascertain with any accuracy, as they are not recognised in official census data, but it can be assumed that there are between 15-20 million Alevis across the country, out of a population of about 80 million. Alevism is not an ethnic designation, and there exist communities of Turkish as well as Kurdish Alevis.*

In Ottoman times, the majority of Alevis lived in rural and often remote parts of central and eastern Anatolia, far from the centre of power in imperial Constantinople. They had an uneasy relationship with the Ottoman regime, and during the wars with the neighbouring Iranian Safavid Empire in the 16th-17th centuries many Alevis supported the Safavid Shah rather than the Sultan, earning them the pejorative epithet *kızılbaş* (red head). Rebellious associations are still attached to Alevis today, and inform their still difficult relationship with Sunni Muslim Turkish society.

Membership of the Alevi community is mediated through birth, rather than adult initiation, and each Alevi is born into either a 'leader' (*dede*) or a 'follower' (*talep*) lineage. Alevi leaders preside over the *cem* ceremony, the central ritual of Alevism in which religious instruction is given through the medium of didactic poetry, sung to the accompaniment of a long-necked Anatolian lute. Alevi teachings are characterised by the motifs of Sufism (Islamic mysticism), and Alevis strongly revere the Twelve Imams of the Shi'i tradition, although they do not consider themselves to be Shi'i.

Under the Republic, life has changed considerably for most Alevis. From the 1960s onwards, Alevis took part in a wave of mass migration from their villages to the mega-cities of Turkey's west as well as to Germany. In the 1960s and 70s, many became politically active and were aligned with left-wing groups. From the 1980s onwards, reflecting a burgeoning religious impulse that swept Turkish society more broadly at that time, the Alevis have sought to revive their religious identity and practices and reform it to suit its new, urban surroundings (see image below).

The great majority of Alevis are strong supporters of secularism and voting proclivities tend towards the party established by Atatürk, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP). In 2007, during its second term in power, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) launched an initiative called the Alevi Opening, which was designed to address the community's major grievances and demands – namely, the quest for official recognition as a non-Sunni group. The Opening ended with the Alevis unsatisfied and their principal demands unmet, and since that time there have been no major efforts at rapprochement between the AKP and the Alevis.

Listen to this edition of Heart and Soul for the BBC, focusing on the Alevis:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03sqwkw>

* Approximately 15-20% of Turkey's population is Kurdish. Since the 1980s, factions within the Kurdish community have agitated – both peacefully and violently – for basic civil rights and in some cases for separation from Turkey.



Questions:

1. What are the major obstacles to Alevi *cemevîs* (places of worship) being recognised as legitimate places of worship? Why is this an important issue?
2. How should we approach the question of syncretism in religious practices?
3. What does Turkey's Alevi question show about its particular conception of secularism?

You may also find these sources useful for the consideration of the questions:

Read this interview with Markus Dressler, author of *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013):

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12302/new-texts-out-now_markus-dressler-writing-religion

Watch this extract from a rural *cem* ceremony:

<https://vimeo.com/92767508>