

## The Ahıska Turks and Pious Turks in Tucson: Different Practices of the Same Religion

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### *Introduction*

This paper aims at analyzing two distinct Turkish groups in the US and their practice and discourse in relation to Sunni Islamic religious tradition as well as to each other. One of the groups consists of the religious/pious Turkish migrants of the Gülen Movement and the other is comprised of the Ahıska/Meskhetian Turk refugees. Both of these groups consider Islam to be a universal religion, meaning the core of Islamic tradition is the Quran and the *Sunna* (the exemplary precedents of the prophet Mohammed) and every Muslim should follow them. The differences in conduct between the two groups are recognized to take root from environmental influences, not emanating from Islamic tradition itself. Although many Muslims have different opinions of Islam, they do not necessarily see themselves as part of a heterogeneous Islamic tradition. They try to orient themselves within the canons of Islam and they recognize the authority of these canons. In order to explain this, I will utilize Alasdair McIntyre<sup>1</sup> and Talal Asad's<sup>2</sup> concept of "tradition," which refers to a line of thought that has a past, present and future, and is not simply a folk tradition. This research concludes that despite various existing differences of religious conduct between the two Turkish groups mainly due to historical and environmental reasons, they are both orienting themselves with Sunni Islamic religious tradition and the differences are not enough to claim that one group is diverging from this tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Among the Ahıska Turk refugees from the former Soviet republics and the religious Turks from Turkey, there is a certain level of self-constitution coming from the western European humanist tradition. While the focus for Ahıska Turks appears to be a certain level of group cohesion, for pious Turks it appears to be primarily the cultivation of certain religious practices in relation to group norms. Both groups are identified as Sunni Muslims, however pious Turks are more vigorous about learning Islamic tradition through textual practices. Ahıska Turks, on the other hand, place more emphasis on group practices of Islamic rituals.<sup>4</sup> Pious Turks from Turkey help Ahıska Turks learn about Islam and participate in Ahıska Turk Islamic rituals as well. While this help is very appreciated by Ahıska Turks, this also points to an unequal relationship that puts Ahıska people in a negative position by implying a lack of essential Islamic knowledge and practice. The Ahıska Turks come to their own defense in an effort to undermine pious Turk authority by referring to humanist tradition and showing some bad examples among the religious Turks, thus giving the message: "You are not even a good human being. How can I count you as a good Muslim?"

The pious Turks appear to be aiming to cultivate a "belief" oriented Islam, combined with educational institutions and supported by their own businessmen and local state resources.<sup>5</sup> Ahıska Turks in Tucson, who came from Russia and other former Soviet republics as refugees in 2004, established a relationship with the pious Turks. I describe this relationship as "cautious

friendliness” where an open harmony and implicit tension work together. For this paper, I will analyze the religious aspects of the interactions between the two groups in Tucson and their wider meanings. I will first give background information about the two groups. Then I will present a genealogy of the concept of religion in order to better elucidate the concept of tradition. Finally, I will present my argument with field data from the interviews and participant observation that I conducted from spring 2008 to spring 2009 in Tucson, Arizona.

### *A Brief History of the Ahıska Turks*

In 1944, Ahıska/Meskhetian Turks were deported from Meskhetia, now called Samtskhe-Javakheti, which is currently in modern Georgia. It is located at South Caucasia bordering Armenia and Turkey. The Caucasus accommodates a large ethno-linguistic variety, in addition to numerous military conflicts.<sup>6</sup> The region was under the Ottoman rule from 1578 to 1829.<sup>7</sup> From this era, it became part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union until 1990.<sup>8</sup> During World War II, the Stalin regime deported the Ahıska Turks along with many other groups to the Soviet Central Asia.<sup>9</sup>

During the late 1980s, the Soviet Union was marked with turmoil, rising nationalism and conflicts in many Soviet Republics, resulting in a declining economy and *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (restructuring) policies.<sup>10</sup> Resentment in Uzbekistan towards the Central Committee of the Soviet Union in Moscow had grown drastically in the 1980s with the long imposed cotton monoculture and Moscow’s attempt to regain party control in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).<sup>11</sup> By 1989, 109,000 Ahıska Turks were living in Uzbek SSR, yet most of them left after the Fergana events.<sup>12</sup> From May to June 1989, Uzbek mobs attacked Ahıska Turks in densely populated Fergana region on the border of Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs.<sup>13</sup> After the Fergana Events, 16,282 Ahıska Turks were evacuated by the Soviet army.<sup>14</sup> The remaining majority of Ahıska population left the Uzbek SSR soon afterwards by their own means.

In the first year after the Fergana events, the Ahıska Turks searched for a place to relocate. Many of them moved two to four times after the event to different parts of the Soviet Union and Turkey. Some Ahıska Turks settled in the Krasnodar *krai* (region) at the North Caucasus of Russia near the Black Sea, because it was close to their kin and close to the Caucasus. They also heard that Crimean Tatars in Krasnodar *krai* were moving to their own homeland, meaning that cheap housing would be available.<sup>15</sup>

Most Ahıska Turk refugees in the U.S. came from the Krasnodar *krai*. Those in Tucson said that things were fine in the first couple of years in the *krai*. After these initial years, xenophobia and racism escalated to the point of institutionalization. In some parts of the *krai*, they were not given passports despite the existing citizenship law granting them this right. Some of them were also not given *propiska* (residence permit), which eventually prevented them from accessing social services and kept the community open to police and *Cossack* harassments, which varied from beatings to regular bribing. Regional TV and newspaper reports were making blatant racist comments that furthered discrimination against the group.

After the mid 1990s, international Jewish organizations paid attention to the rising tone of racism and anti-Semitism in Krasnodar led by the governor Nikolai Kondratenko and eventually

persuaded the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to unofficially break ties with the *krai*.<sup>16</sup> The U.S. ambassador paid a visit in 2001 in order to investigate the human rights situation.<sup>17</sup> The following year, the U.S. embassy sent a mission to Krasnodar in consideration of resettling Ahıska Turks to the U.S. The resettlement began in 2004 under the “special humanitarian concern” of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1999.<sup>18</sup> Approximately 11,000 Ahıska Turks came to the U.S. as refugees. Currently, many have their Green Cards and are in preparation for citizenship.

### ***The Pious Turks***

The pious Turks are mostly recent migrants from Turkey and are part of an Islamic piety movement in Turkey. It is often referred as the Gülen or Nur movement whose leader is Fettullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher, imam and scholar currently residing in the U.S. The Gülen movement promotes tolerance, dialogue, education, reform, science and Islam, and asserts that these are all compatible with each other. The movement has hundreds of schools in more than a hundred countries. One of their schools in Arizona was chosen as the 103<sup>rd</sup> best high school in the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Islamic education is not part of the curriculum in their Arizona schools, while it is minimally part of their schools in other countries in compliance with the Turkish education system.<sup>20</sup> The focus is on science and mathematics, and most students in the charter schools in Arizona are not Muslims.<sup>21</sup> The group has significant economic and organizational power, and is widely recognized by many mainstream Westerners as promoting peaceful and moderate Islam. They are part of a piety movement trying to clean Islam from superstitions, promoting the rigorous study of Islam from central texts and aiming to show that Islam and modern life are perfectly compatible.<sup>22</sup> The movement appears to be perfectly content with modernity and profiting from it to a large extent. This, however, followed a long period of religious oppression and limitations placed by the secularist Turkish state, which was largely influenced by a secular Western utopia claiming that public and private are separable.

Their adherents are largely provincial middle class Turks from Turkey. According to Yavuz they are the most upwardly mobile group in Turkey.<sup>23</sup> The group in Tucson has recently come to the U.S. through higher education and/or business channels. Many pious Turks in Tucson are either university graduates or students. Core members in Arizona are organized around an education institute that has K-8, K-10 and K-12 level schools in Tucson and Phoenix without any specific statement regarding Turkish culture or Islam. Turkish is offered as a second language in addition to Spanish.

The leader of the movement, Fettullah Gülen, was chosen ‘number 1’ out of 100 “public intellectuals” by internet surfers on a poll organized by Foreign Policy and Prospect magazines. Noam Chomsky, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Al Gore, Samuel Huntington, Stephen Colbert, and Pope Benedict XVI are other popular intellectuals on the list. In 2008, the reprinted articles of the magazines about the poll were distributed at the dinner of Interfaith Dialogue organized by the Gülen movement in Tucson. This edition contains the details of the poll, the list, the ranking and an interview with Fettullah Gülen, as well as an article about the Gülen movement entitled “A Modern Ottoman.” At the interview, Gülen emphasized the existence of shared and ‘unchanging’ universal values, and stressed “humanity” as an important category. He also presented dialogue

and education as the “most effective means to surpass our differences and defeat our problems.”<sup>24</sup>

Banu Helvacıoğlu is critical of defining this and other Islamic movements under the title of “Islamic revival.”<sup>25</sup> She points out that Islamic oriented movement(s) had already existed after 1940s in Turkey. Hakan Yavuz also shows a certain degree of continuity from the Turko-Ottoman tradition that unified state and ulema (scholars of Islamic tradition).<sup>26</sup> According to Yavuz, different Sufi groups reacted differently to Kemalist repression and control of religion. While the Nakşibendi Sufi order was openly countering the Kemalist regime, Yavuz states, “the Nur [Gülen] movement, inwardly sought refuge in the ‘holistic’ nature of Islam to counter cognitive homogenization.”<sup>27</sup> The group is duty-oriented and highly values self-sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> They do not contradict the state; on the contrary the rise of the Gülen movement is very much related to state support given after the 1980 coup d’état that saw Islam as the glue of the nation.<sup>29</sup> While I aimed to give some background information on the two groups up until this point, it is necessary to analyze the concept of religion to better understand the concept of tradition.

### ***What is Religion?***

Religion is a frequently debated concept. It is a problematic category that is usually essentialized rather than historicized. According to Smith, the term was not widely used prior to the previous three centuries because of the strong domination of the Church. From the seventeenth century on, the concept of religion began to increase in circulation and to semantically include the system of beliefs and practices. The meaning of religion thus changed from personal to impersonal; from singular to plural.<sup>30</sup> Masuzawa points out that while in sixteenth century, European plurality in religion was seen as heresy, by the nineteenth century different sects and denominations of Christianity started to be seen as separate religions.<sup>31</sup> The change in the meaning and increased use of the term was immersed in colonialism thereby necessitating classification into hierarchies for the sake of analysis and comparison.<sup>32</sup> In 1870, Max Müller was promoting such a comparative method. Concepts of ‘world religions’ and ‘natural religion’ entered the literature in the same century.<sup>33</sup> The singular form ‘world religion’ meant Christianity specifically, and its plural form was not necessarily neutralizing categorization, but rather gave negative connotations to other belief systems.<sup>34</sup> ‘Natural religion’ on the other hand was a universalizing attempt to define an essential and inherent religion from which the others derived.<sup>35</sup> Asad warns:

For the entire phenomenon is to be seen in large measure in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained. My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.<sup>36</sup>

Asad understands religion not to be a universal concept, but a concept that is particular to a historical context. MacIntyre’s concept of tradition can additionally help to better situate

differences between the two Turkish groups. Macintyre presents religion as a tradition with a past, future and present.<sup>37</sup> For Macintyre morality cannot be secularized and it cannot be taken out of a *telos*.<sup>38</sup> Rationalization and secularization of morality undermines its authority.<sup>39</sup> Macintyre emphasizes the importance of a historical context for concepts. Present is continuation, reaction and response to the past and a possible future. Throughout time, traditions are established. Traditions that are formed historically change continuously and are not in isolation. There are certain authorities and standards in every tradition which are necessary to recognize and to submit the self for the sake of development.<sup>40</sup>

Asad uses “tradition” in a similar way and offers the study of Islam as a “discursive tradition.”<sup>41</sup> This view accepts an existence of authority and centrality but not a rigid one. This then excludes a possible postmodern view that “claims of every Muslim about Islam should be acceptable.” It is discursive but based on continuous reference to central texts. Asad in this sense protests an “anything goes” attitude.<sup>42</sup>

In this paper, I employ the concept of “tradition” to analyze differences between the Ahıska and pious Turks. Both groups take their reference from central texts of Islam, but they have different interpretations and emphasize different priorities due to their lifestyle, history, perspective, organizational and educational level.

### ***The Pious Turks and the Ahıska Turks***

The pious Turks and the Ahıska Turks in Tucson are both Sunni Muslims and share similar Islamic traditions with many other Sunni Muslims in the world. Nevertheless, the two groups have different sensitivities and habits due to their own histories and particular lifestyles in various countries, regions and regimes. Ahıska Turks were born and raised in the Soviet Union where the state gave no support for religion. Formal religious institutions were largely eradicated in the early stages of the Bolshevik Revolution. The majority of Ahıska Turks in Tucson and possibly the rest in the U.S. have never been to Turkey. The religious Turks, however, are from Turkey, where the majority of the population is Sunni Muslim. They have lived in Turkey at a time in which the religious institutions that were eradicated alongside the Bolshevik Revolution were recovering or being established in a new way. These environmental differences have created a tendency for each group to hold onto different parts of Islamic tradition and neglect other parts.

The Ahıska and pious Turks in Tucson have an ambivalent relationship. The relationship appears to be closer and more positive between the women. They regularly visit each other. Ahıska women hold weekly Qur'an recitation meetings with food often in one of their own homes. While my interaction with Ahıska women was rather limited, I found them to speak highly of the pious Turks and their relationship. They say their relationship helps them to learn about Islam. Ahıska men with whom I spent most of my fieldwork have different views about it. While they also appreciate the ceremonial help of the pious Turks at the Qur'an recitations and their effort to teach them Islam, these very interactions have also created a little irritation among some Ahıska men. Ahıska men at times even ridicule and criticize the position of “Islamic authority” maintained by the pious Turks.

What the pious Turks are trying to teach is often the basic Islamic doctrine that these Ahıska men claim to already know. This conflictual relationship, however, continues harmoniously through Islamic activities such as the Qur'an recitations. In my observation, some pious Turks briefly showed their annoyance regarding the protest of the few outspoken Ahıska men. When Ahıska men refer to pious Turks in a rather "neutral" way, they call them *Türkiyeliler* ("those from Turkey"). When they are speaking more "negatively," they call the pious Turks *Fettullahçılar* or *Nurcular*, slightly derogatory terms used in Turkey towards the group.<sup>43</sup>

During an Ahıska men's barbecue party, İlham (early 40s) an outspoken Ahıska said, "*Fettullahçılar* do not like our religion. They are teaching how to do ablutions, or the five pillars of Islam (*İslam'ın beş şartı*). I already know these. This is an offense to us. Do not teach me what I already know."<sup>44</sup> After the barbecue party, I had an appointment with Nusret (mid 20s) who worked in a pizzeria at the time and speaks very good English. After the interview he offered me pizza he made and emphasized that there was no pork in it which was a very unusual remark. While we sat, he asked me to pray before eating. After that he explained the reason why he emphasized that there was no pork. He had brought pizza he made to a Qur'an recitation where the pious Turks had politely refused to eat it on the basis that they only liked pizza with cheese toppings. He did not believe them and was sure that they had suspected pork was in the pizza. He was offended by the treatment even though he continues to participate in some of the Islamic activities organized or led by pious Turks. He also added that during Ahıska weddings, the pious Turks bring their own food and do not eat the Ahıska food present.

When his father-in-law heard we were talking about Turks, he came over and tried to explain another situation. While Ahıska women were visiting the house of a pious Turk, American men (I do not know whether they were Muslim or not) were also guests in the house, visiting the husband. The wife did not have on a full headscarf and overcoat. As soon as the Ahıska men knocked on the door and the husband checked who they were, he warned his wife and she went out of living room and did not show herself to the Ahıska men even though she apparently was willing to show herself to the Americans. The father-in-law was angry at the pious Turks. Nusret said, "we are clean (pure) Ottoman Turks, Altay<sup>45</sup> Turks. They are afraid of us."<sup>46</sup> Nusret and his father-in-law were ridiculing the pious Turks for their strict religious observance on the surface with double standard towards Ahıska Turks. Nusret used the term "Ottoman Turk" as a powerful and prideful category in opposition to the image of the pious Turks in Tucson that Nusret and his father-in-law present as hypocritical. This however is not a uniform and monolithic image of the pious Turks. During the interview, Nusret also presented helpful pious Turks in Tucson and Phoenix. Thus, ambiguous images of "others" were often present during my fieldwork.

The Ahıska Turks and the pious Turks emphasize different parts of Islamic tradition. While the pious Turks advise Ahıska Turks to eat *halal* (lawful according to Islamic tradition) meat, which is prepared according to Islamic rules, this is not as great concern for Ahıska men as it is to the pious Turks. Because many of them were born and grew up in the Soviet Union and Russia, they did not have many opportunities to choose between *halal* meat and *haram* [unlawful according to Islamic tradition] meat. Some Ahıska men explained that the food bought with *halal* money is more important than how the meat is prepared. And secondly, they can justify eating non-*halal* meat, because it is God who makes it *halal*, a somewhat unorthodox explanation.<sup>47</sup> I

know a few Ahıska Turks who have a closer relationship with pious Turks, and have intentions to regularly sacrifice cattle on their own by going to a rancharia; however, the rest of the Ahıska people have no intention to do so. It should also be noted that Ahıska Turks in general do ~~not~~ strictly avoid buying pork which is only one of Islamic food taboos.

When Ahıska men were doing their obligatory military service in the Soviet Army, there were thick soups with pork meat in it. Some Ahıska Turks admit that they were eating the soup but not the pork meat. They justified it on the basis that there was no other option to eat; one could starve otherwise. They were not angry about it, and they do not think it was a sin because there was no other choice. It is also important to point out that they automatically give explanations and these explanations are not simply folk beliefs. There are exceptions in Islamic tradition that one can consume unlawful things if it is a necessity:

He has forbidden you to eat dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which any name other than Allah has been invoked; but if someone is compelled by absolute necessity, intending neither to sin nor to transgress, they shall incur no sin. Surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful (Quran 2:173).<sup>48</sup>

Some Ahıska men also said they invoke the name of *Allah* to make it lawful before they eat, which is also mentioned in the Qur'an: "Do not eat of that meat on which Allah's name has not been pronounced, since that is most surely a transgression" (Qur'an 6:121).<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Baldauf shows that in early twentieth century the mufti Mahmud Khoja Behbudi from Samarkand wrote an article addressing the food problem of Muslim students living in Russian towns.<sup>50</sup> According to Baldauf, "Behbudi interpreted the *hadith*<sup>51</sup> as implying that food which might otherwise not be permissible for Muslim consumption could be eaten without any problem if the meal was preceded by the *basmala* formula."<sup>52</sup> This, however, was not a unanimous view. It has been criticized by the more traditional circles.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, both Ahıska Turks and pious Turks can interpret circumstances and Islamic laws differently in the same manner that various Islamic schools of law do.<sup>54</sup>

During a *sohbet*<sup>55</sup> (discussion, lesson) at an apartment rented by the pious Turks, Mahir (30s), a pious Turk *ilahiyatçı* (graduate of an Islamic theology department in a Turkish university), emphasized over and over at the end of the *sohbet* to get *halal* meat as often as possible (*mümkün mertebe*). This is, however, not a large concern for Ahıska Turks. Some of them consider the *halal* meat at Middle Eastern or World markets not to be as good or as fresh as in usual grocery stores.<sup>56</sup> Ahıska Turks prefer to buy from a common grocery chain where they can also use their food stamps as opposed to the middle class pious Turks who can afford more expensive meat. Consumption of *halal* meat in this sense is not only a simple religious choice but has economic and aesthetic dimensions. Tucson has approximately five Middle Eastern and World markets that sell frozen *halal* meat whose prices can be more expensive than grocery meat. These groceries usually do not have discounts and one cannot use food stamps. A Muslim in Tucson does not have many options in this sense. Economics, class and the aesthetic dimension of buying and consuming *halal* meat directly impacts Ahıska religiosity as well as ethnic identity.

At the end of the *sohbet*, Rasim picked up a candy on the table with a little smirk on his

face and extended it out to Mahir's face and said, "Look, they cannot make this candy without pork fat, even though they do not say it on the ingredient list." This is remarkably similar to a conspiracy theory that I witnessed in Turkey about processed food companies using pork products.

Different approaches to religion can easily be noticed between the Ahıska and pious Turks. It appears that this is not just an ethno-cultural difference but also an urban-rural oriented class difference. It is also related to the degree of studying Islam from canonical sources instead of simply focusing on the skills of Qur'anic recitation, which is the ultimate religious activity among Ahıska Turks. For example, urban pious women's headscarf rules are stricter and usually have multiple layers that are accompanied by a robe that covers the body to fully ensure the body figure is not noticed. This is in accord with widely debated Islamic traditions based on interpretations of the Quran and *Sunna*. Many pious Turkish women cover their heads and dress in loose-fitting overgarments that are also fashionable in the modern, urban Turkish context.

On the other hand, not all Ahıska women wear headscarves, and they are not strict about it. Those who wear headscarves usually wear them in a single layer and their heads are not fully covered. At a wedding ceremony it is even more difficult to see an Ahıska woman with a covered head; many of them have their hair done up. No Ahıska woman that I have seen wears a loose outer garment. Their dress and headscarf are usually more similar to a mix of Turkish-Russian and rural-urban tradition rather than a strictly observed Islamic one, especially for those over 40. While Nusret pointed out the prejudice in Turkey towards Ahıska Turks, he gave a comparison between both groups of Turkish women in Tucson:

Our women do not cover themselves, you know what I mean, how, our women are, everything is rightful thanks to God. These Turkish people of Turkey are covering differently, their head and eyes looks like this, right? [gesturing the form of a headscarf]

After a two-hour conversation with five Ahıska Turks in the parking lot of Los Milagros, Rasim insisted that we go to his house to drink tea. Only Abdullah joined us. They both claimed exaggeratedly that all Turks from and in Turkey in general were corrupt and not very respectful to one another. Then Abdullah complained about two different pious Turks asking for sacrifice money to be used in Africa at the *Kurban Bayramı* (Sacrifice Feast or *eid al-Adha*) in comparison to Ahıska Turks buying and sacrificing their own cattle in Arizona. He was convinced that there was some cheating going on and this had nothing to do with a religious oriented charity. He said, "They turned this into a business. These people would not even take care of their own parents if they were dying from hunger, but they are trying to send aid to Africa."<sup>57</sup> İlham (40s), on the other hand, objected to the criticism from a pious Turk that using a popular Turkish-Islamic phrase-prayer for a deceased non-Muslim was not appropriate:

Koreans [back in the Soviet Union] saved us from hunger. Our people say "*Allah rahmet eylesin* [may *Allah* bestow mercy]" for their deceased. These *Türkiyeliler* [those from Turkey] say, "*Allah rahmet eylesin*" cannot be said for non-Muslims.' Koreans are the most *halal*, one of the most hard-working people. They work very hard. They taught us how to grow rice [back in Uzbekistan]. ... Uygun, Korean, Greek, Iranian people were all

living around us... There was no discrimination among us such as Muslim vs. non-Muslim.<sup>58</sup>

Abdullah supported this attitude. He and İlham did not cite any Islamic text to support their use of this phrase-prayer, however, they also did not have a claim about the non-Muslim Koreans and the otherworld. They only insisted on showing their gratitude through this phrase-prayer. However, notice İlham's use of Islamic term *halal* (lawful) for Koreans. It is not only an Arabic-Islamic concept, but it is often used in the Turkish of both Ahıska and Turkey to mean that something is done rightfully. Moreover, considering that the context of the conversation was based on the connection between being a good Muslim and being a good person, İlham and Abdullah's critique was going into the gray area between a "good Muslim" and a "good person." They were undermining the religiosity of some pious Turks via a humanist argument that "they were not even good people," which is also acceptable in Islamic tradition. Here is an excerpt from Mahir the pious Turk theology instructor about the relationship between the characteristics of a "good Muslim" and a "good person:"

...If we ask people to count the qualities of a good Muslim, everyone would be able to count more or less. Everyone would say "a Muslim does not lie, a Muslim loves people, a Muslim works for both his/her world and afterworld, a Muslim does not harm other people, does not cheat" ...etc. Everyone would be able to count these [qualities]. Real Muslimness is real humanity/humanism. When we look around us, [we can see] people we really love. Whether they are Muslim or not, we [can] see "Muslim qualities" [in those we love], for example, tolerance towards other people and understanding. There are people among Christians who have these qualities. They are not Muslim, but they have good nature, beautiful nature. S/he does not lie. S/he hates cheating people. S/he helps them. S/he has a good family life. These are qualities of being a good person. It is not just qualities of being good Muslim, but being a good person. Do these qualities benefit these people? That only God knows. It is between God and them. However, if Muslims do materialize these qualities, like not lying, praying, respecting our prophet, having good family relation, treating his/her children good, helping his/her Muslim brothers and sisters etc. When a Muslim does these, s/he gains *sevap* [award for good deed]. Nothing for the others [non-Muslims].<sup>59</sup>

Mahir also was wandering in the grey zone for a while and left things to be decided by God; however, he concluded in a sentence later there is no reward for non-Muslims who do good deeds. This quotation shows a difference between the textual oriented and well informed pious Turk "religiosity," and less textual and less rule oriented Ahıska attitude, which has been molded in a multinational environment of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan and Russia without rigorous Islamic education. We cannot simply declare the Ahıska attitude towards non-Muslims as "un-Islamic." Islamic tradition encourages showing mercy and helping others without considering people's belief.<sup>60</sup> Nor are Ahıska Turks merely ignorant about Islam, but in their daily relationships like many Muslims I know in Turkey, being a good person appears to have primacy over being good Muslim. Andrew Shryock observed among Jordanians that being a good host

almost appears to be better than being religiously devout.<sup>61</sup> This is also similar among Ahıska Turks where the most important attribute is being a good family member responsible of duties to the family.

### **Conclusion**

Despite general doctrinal agreements, practices, discourses and perceptions can be very different. Throughout this paper, instead of declaring a doctrinal difference, I aimed to show that the difference between Ahıska and pious Turks is less based on doctrine, but more on environmental and historical influences that impact their various lifestyles, subjectivities and religiosities.

States have major impact on environmental and historical differences, and the states in which these two groups lived had immense effect on these people. Neither the Socialist Soviet Union, nor the Christian Orthodox Post-Socialist Russia was conducive for a traditional Sunni Muslim lifestyle where Ahıska Turks lived. Turkey, on the other hand, with a pro-secularist and modernist state ideology, and with relative peace with Sunni Islam, provided a favorable living context for the pious Turks.

Both groups are spread around the U.S. and interacting with each other significantly. Commonality of language, ethnicity and religion are important factors that bring these groups together, although, friction does occur. For this study, my focus was more on Ahıska Turks. For further analysis, it will be beneficial to do an in-depth study of both groups and compare them across the U.S.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> A. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> T. Asad. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> The interviews included throughout the remainder of this paper were conducted from June 2008 to June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> This is not a quantitative claim that pious Turks are doing less group ritual practices. From my previous experiences in Turkey, pious Turks are doing more religious oriented social gatherings than what I observed in Tucson, Arizona among pious Turks. What I am simply claiming here is where the emphasis is.

<sup>5</sup> See Yavuz and Esposito (2003), Agai (2002), Başkan (2004).

<sup>6</sup> B. Comrie. "Linguistic Diversity in the Caucasus," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (2008): 131–43.

<sup>7</sup> JF Baddeley, and M. Gammer, *The Russian conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Curzon Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> J. O. Pohl, *Shallow Roots: The Exile Experiences of the Russian-Germans, Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks in Comparative Perspective*. PhD Dissertation. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> A. M. Khazanov, *After the USSR: ethnicity, nationalism and politics*. (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> J. Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: a Soviet republic's road to sovereignty*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Pohl, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews, 2008-2009.

<sup>16</sup> Koriouchkina, E & S. Swerdlow, "The Third Migration: Meskhetian Turks' Resettlement and Integration in the United States," in *The Meskhetian Turks at a crossroads: Integration, repatriation or resettlement?*, edited by Trier and Khanzhin (Munster: Lit., 2007), 378-432.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “The Top of the Class,” *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/id/201160/?q=2009/rank/101>, June 8, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Agai claims that Gülen movement’s activities on education are not ideological and only consist of an hour of religious education at these schools (2002). Balcı however compares these schools to Jesuit ones, where education is continuous outside of the classroom (2003:160).

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> For more information about the Gülen movement, see the official website [www.en.fgulen.com](http://www.en.fgulen.com).

<sup>23</sup> H. Yavuz & J. L. Esposito, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> E. Masood, “A Modern Ottoman,” *Prospect* (2008), 148.

<sup>25</sup> B. Helvacıoğlu, “‘Allahu Ekber’, We are Turks: Yearning for a Different Homecoming at the Periphery of Europe,” *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1996): 503-23.

<sup>26</sup> Yavuz, H. & Esposito, J. L. (2003). *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*. NY: Syracuse University Press.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> B. Agai, “Fethullah Gülen and his Movement’s Islamic Ethics of Education,” *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 11 no.1 (2002): 27-47.

<sup>29</sup> F. Başkan, “The Political Economy of Islamic Finance in Turkey: The Role of Fethullah Gülen and Asya,” In *The Politics of Islamic Finance*, edited by Trier and Khanzhin (Münster: Lit., 2004), 378-432.

<sup>30</sup> W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (London: University Of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>37</sup> A. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Asad, 1993.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Suffixes -cı and -cu “produce a noun of profession or habitude”(Watson 2002:193) as I had previously explained about slurs Turks use for Ahıska Turks in Turkey. When used like in *Fettullahçılar*, which is not a profession or an habitude, it can create a meaning like follower or adherents or partisan of Fettullah or person who promotes Fettullah's philosophy. Many people in my high school would be considered as part of the movement but they would actually consider Fettullah Gülen simply as a clever, respected leader, and they would not consider themselves as an adherent of him.

<sup>44</sup> “Fettullahçılar abdest almayı, dinin şartlarını öğretiyorlar, ha bu bize hakarettir bu. Bildiğim şeyi bana öğretme!” (Field note).

<sup>45</sup> Nusret was referring to a “pure” Central Asian Turkic identity. The Altay is a chain of mountains in Central Asia and it also gave the name of the Turkic language groups, Altaic.

<sup>46</sup> “M: Bizim bunlar evlerine gidiyirki bakıyır misafiri Anglıçanlar gelmişler. Bunların yanında şalvar saç bırakılıy yanlarında geziyir. Bizim oğlanlar ki geliyir misafirliğe, bakıyır Müslüman Türkler geldi Ahıska Türkleri karısı kaçırıy içeri çıkmıyır. Öbürlerin yanında öyle geziyir bizim yanımızda örtünüyür. Niye bizim yanımızda...?”

<sup>47</sup> “Bu ekmeği yapan Amerikalı ama bunu helal yapan Allah'tır”

<sup>48</sup> Based on the translation of F. Malik

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> I. Baldauf, “Jadidism in Central Asia within Reformism and Modernism in the Muslim World,” *Die Welt des Islams, New Series* 41 no.1 (2001): 72-88.

<sup>51</sup> “The body of traditions relating to Muhammad, which now form a supplement to the Koran, called the Sunna.” OED 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989.

<sup>52</sup> Baldauf, 72-88.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> O. Taştan, "Law," In *Islam and the Muslim World online* (nd), Retrieved February 5, 2009, from <http://www.galegroup.com>.

<sup>55</sup> Sohbet means conversation, talk and chat in Turkish. In this context it is a type of "religious" meeting that starts with common daily conversations and continues with an Islamic lecture. Sometimes there are questions posed after the lecture.

<sup>56</sup> Naci said, "The meat in the Arabic grocery taste like wood [*Arap marketindeki et tahta gibi*]"

<sup>57</sup> "İşi biznısa[business] çevirmişler. Bunlar anası babası açından ölse ona bakmaz Afrika'ya yardım gönderecek".

<sup>58</sup> "Koreliler bizi açlıktan kurtarmışlar. Bizimkiler "Allah rahmet eylesin" diyor ölenlerine, bu Türkiyeliler "Müslüman olmayana Allah rahmet eylesin denmez" diyor. Koreliler en helal! En helal, hard job, en çetin milletlerden. Çok çalışırlar, bize pirinç ekmeyi onlar öğretti. Uygur, Kore, Greek, İran milleti hep etrafımızda yaşıyorlardı ... Müslüman-Gavur yok bizde". I should also point out that just after İlham finished his sentence, Abdullah said, "I worked five years with Greeks[in Central Asia]. I never saw any treachery, but I saw from Armenians" [Beş sene Yunanlarla çalıştım, bir tane hıyanetliğini görmemişim. Ermenilerden gördüm ama]. İlham did not say anything about it. However, several weeks ago İlham was telling me a story. Some mafia was harassing him about his land back in Russia after the 1990s and he went to another mafia to get help whose leader was Armenian. He was very helpful to İlham. İlham even sanctified this relation on the basis that they had eaten at the same table. Ahıska Turks assume if you eat food of someone, you can not and should not betray or gossip about the person. For a similar account see Tomlinson 2004 :84.3

<sup>59</sup> "Aslında herkes şöyle saysın desek Müslüman özellikleri hemen hemen sayar yani herkes. Derki işte "Müslüman yalan konuşmaz", "Müslüman insanları sever", "Müslüman hem dünyası için hem ayeti için çalışır", "Müslüman diğer insanlara zarar vermez, aldatmaz"... Bunları hemen hemen herkes sayar yani. Bir yerde aslında hakiki Müslümanlık gerçek insanlıktır yani. Eeeee böyle çevremizde baktığımız zaman gerçek insan böyle hakkaten sevdiğimiz insanlara baktığımız zaman onların üzerlerinde Müslüman olsun veya olması Müslüman vasıflarını görürüz biz. Ne bilim diğer insanlara karşı hoş görülüdür, anlayışlıdır, mesela Hristiyanlar içinde özellikle böyle insanlar var. Müslüman değil ama işte iyi huyları var güzel huyları var. Ondan sonra yalan konuşmaz mesela yalandan nefret eder insana insanı aldatmaktan eeee nefret eder bunlardan hoşlanmaz. Ne biliyim komşusu açken ona yardımda bulunur gene aynı şekilde. Onların ihtiyaçlarını giderir çoluk çocuklarına iyi davranır. Güzel bir aile hayatı vardır. Bunlar iyi bir insan olmanın vasıflarıdır, sadece Müslüman olmanın değil. İyi bir insan olmanın vasıflarıdır özellikleridir. Bu özellikler işte onlara fayda sayla sağlar mı orasını Allah bilir yani. Orası Allah ile kendi aralarında bişey. Ama Müslümanlar bu özelliklerin yerine getirdikleri zaman yani hani az önce saydığım özellikler: yalan konuşmaması, Allah'a ibadet etmesi, peygamber efendimize saygı duyması, aile ilişkilerinin güzel olması, çocuklarına iyi davranması, Müslüman kardeşlerine yardım etmesi bunları Müslüman yaptığı zaman da ona n'apıyor sevap kazandırıyor yani. Diğer insanlara birşey yok ama Müslüman yaptığı zaman bunu n'apıyor sevap kazanıyor

<sup>60</sup> "Serve Allah and do not commit shirk (*associate any partner*) with Him, and be good to your parents, kinfolks, orphans, the helpless, near and far neighbors who keep company with you, the travelers in need, and the slaves you own. Allah does not love those who are arrogant and boastful" (Qur'an 4:36)

<sup>61</sup> Talk at the University of Arizona, 2009.

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