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Popular Islam in Modern Turkey: A Typological Approach

Mustafa Arslan*

Turkish people that have religious diversity in history have a multiple dimensional religious life today too. Scientific studies about actual religious life in Turkey emphasize different religiousness manners.¹ Among these, popular religiousness continues to exist prevalently among Turkish people. Therefore, popular religiousness is an important case to understand religious life of Turkish people.

In most of the social scientific literature, the term “popular religion” is used to refer to collection of non-institutional, common beliefs and rites and sacred products among people. Despite its name, it is not a religion in the normal sense of a religion. Instead it is fusion of a variety of traditional, pagan and superstitious beliefs with concepts and beliefs drawn from mainstream religion. The notion of popular religion has to do with the discovery of archaic forms. It is at this level meaning of popular religion forms a continuum with both primitive religions and peasant and folk cultures in all parts of the world. But popular religious beliefs and practices exist into the mainstream religions too (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity etc.). Universal or institutional religions have differences and alterations as other great social institutions. Normative religious beliefs and practices that are determined by religious scholars have taken shape or become defined according to comprehension and intelligence of the masses (Long, 1987: 443).

* Doç. Dr. İnönü Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi,

¹ cf. Arslan, 2003; Ocak, 1999; Mardin, 1993.

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Popular religion has characteristics of the popular culture that get rid of deficiencies by religious-mythological elements coming from different resources or origins, for private purposes at that moment. For some people, especially for folk people, to find a solution their troubles, distresses and depressions is very important. Popular religious beliefs and practices occur especially in these conditions. In this meaning popular religion has the pragmatic and *syncretic* characteristic.

Popular religion is the fact that has varieties and dimensions in its structure. Scientific and scholarly studies by anthropology, history of religions and sociology of knowledge about meaning of popular culture and religion indicate that popular religious forms have very different meanings and diversities. Long (1987) examining the studies about popular religion indicates these meanings under seven items. According to him, firstly popular religion is identical with the organic form a society. In this sense, popular religion is closely related to the meaning of primitive and folk religion. Secondly, popular religion exists as the religion of the laity in a religious community in contrast to that of the clergy. Thirdly, popular religion signifies the pervasive beliefs, rituals and values of a society. Fourthly, popular religion exists as an amalgam of esoteric beliefs and practices differing from the common or civil religion, but usually located in the lower strata of a society. Fifthly, popular religion appears as the religion of a subclass or minority group in a culture. Sixthly, popular religion shows oneself as the religion of the masses in opposition to the religion of the sophisticated, discriminating and learned within a society. Lastly, popular religion appears as the creation of an ideology of religion by the elite levels of a society. So it seems, popular religion occurs in the different forms.

This condition applies equally to Islam. In Muslim societies, there is a popular tradition, as well as a learned-official tradition. This popular tradition consists of social values, ideas and customs, which has different manners and become different according to the time and place. The religious way of living contains whole religious manners and forms, more or less related to Islam. Besides, it contains widely different beliefs and practices come from times before Islam, local customs and beliefs, religious beliefs and practices that was prohibited or wasn't prohibited clearly, popular Islamic movements too

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(Waardenburg, 1979: 362). This manner in Muslim societies possess mainly mass, in proportion to official or normative religiousness manner. Popular Islam exists without to reject normative Islamic principles but separately from normative Islam.

Consequently, to talk about popular religion in Muslim societies require discussing this issue in a wider frame. Firstly, popular religiousness manner in Muslim societies consists of beliefs and practices belonging to ancient cultures and some local practices. In this meaning popular religion performs different functions in individual and social life. Secondly popular religion states the interpretation of Islamic principles, according to comprehension of the masses. Many of popular religious manners are a concrete (social, political, medical etc.) using of private components of different symbols and meanings that is accepted as Islamic. In this context popular religion means a kind of living Islam (Waardenburg, 1979: 350, 370). Eventually, researchers about popular religion in Muslim societies should take care of this complexity and existence of different forms and manners.

There is an important place of popular religion in Turkish life too. According Babinger, most important matter about Anatolia's religious history is "Anatolia popular religion" (Babinger & Köprülü, 1996). Because in first periods, among nomad components and villagers and middle and sub stratums, even sometimes among upper layers, Turkish Islam in Anatolia is "a kind of *popular religiousness*". This kind of religiousness separates from "learned" and "official" *madrassa* Islam (Günay & Güngör, 1998).

In Anatolia, popular Islam had existed both heterodox and orthodox forms. The first reveals as an oral cultural element. In Anatolia this group was represented by *Kalenderilik*, *Bektaşilik* (the Bektashi order) and *Alevilik* (the Alaouite sect) beginning from XVI. Century. In the second are important ancient traditional cultural elements too, beside official principles of *Sunni* Islam (Günay, 1999; Ocak, 1999).

In Turkish popular Islam exists "change" as well as "continuity". We can study these changes by processes. To explain the change in a society is used different scientific methods, as indexical, typological and evolutionary

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approaches. But according Geertz, they describe the results of change, not the mechanisms of it. Consequently “to do this is to raise questions, not to answer them. What we want to know is, by what mechanisms and from what causes these extraordinary transformations have taken place. And for this we need to train our primary attention neither on indices, stages, traits, nor trends, but on *processes*, on the way in which things stop being what they are and become instead something else” (Geertz, 1968).

According this, when we look at the Turkish society we can observe some processes that cause new beginnings. These are processes, which end old order in country, and influence on classic culture fundamentally, and consequently help to observe changes between old and new period. In this meaning, we can determine three important processes in Turkish society. These,

(i) Modernization politics that was adopted an official manner by *Tanzimat* (*Tanzimat-ı Hayriye*, the political reforms made in the Ottoman state in 1839), and continue to this time;

(ii) The establishment of an active nation state;

(iii) Religious reform movements, which develop by education, literacy and increasing the communication and enlightenment minded ideas.

These three processes that have influence on Turkish society affect religious-popular cultural structure too. In classic period, “religious endowments and taxes, learning and bureaucracy, law and state legitimacy were powerful elements in the position of a religious establishment. Religion appeared as the cultural-legal framework of the social order, enforced by the political and military powers of the state. The *‘ulema* played a fundamental part in many dimensions of the empire and were essential to its maintenance in its traditional, that is to say pre-capitalist and pre-European–domination, forms. Yet this very centrality and dependence on the ruling dynasty for office and privilege might make them very vulnerable in the event of any major shift in nature of the political and economic system. And such a shift was occurring” (Gilsenan, 1993).

In Turkish modernization process, ruling class (*Saray*) put a secularisation plan into practice as be impressed by Europe. According them, tradition means

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backwardness. Therefore ruling class wanted to remove (following Gilson) the “irrational” barrier to progress. No longer the ‘ulema were allowed to become popular. Consequently, it was diminished the autonomy of the ‘ulema. This means diminishing of the ‘ulema’s effect on people. Thus, religious symbolism was abandoned to the crowd of people that is to say, that oppose the ruling class’s reforms.

So, balance location between “official and popular” religious manners slid in popular religion’s favour in Turkish society. In other words, with Ottoman-Turkish modernization politics, it became narrow structural and central location of *ilmiye* class that is to say, one of three bases of Ottoman social structure (*ilmiye-kalemiye-askeriye*) and it expanded influence and weight area of popular Islam. In conclusion of this politics, diversity between “folk or popular culture” and “high culture” became deeper. So, sociological base of popular Islam got stronger and expanded its influence area too. We can call this condition as a “peripheralization process of religion”.

With modernization mass media, increasing in education etc. circumstances expanded influence area of popular Islam. So, popular Islam reached the level to able to influence on high culture (*havas*). To definite this condition as a getting strong of popular religion is a mistake, but in popular religious culture that exists outside *madrassa*, we can say that an animation completely exists (see. Türköne, 1996).

In the Republic period, it was passed to nation-state and modernization and secularisation politics was developed any more. In this period, popular culture was put to “national purification” (Zubaida, 1994). According this, popular culture must be register again as a part of national inheritance and new national identity. For this aim, components of high culture, for instance law, politics, history, literature etc. beside popular elements of everyday life, for instance language, dress, music, oral literature, folk beliefs and practices etc. was purified too. Popular religious elements like the tradition of pilgrimage (*ziyaret*), the way of clothing, mastic life, religious hierarchical structure of traditional society (for example, *şeyh-mürüt, üstat-talebe*) –all of them is very important in everyday life of traditional society- was fundamentally put to purify from above.

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However popular religious culture continues the existence. Because, even under modernity, a necessary part of popular culture always exist as “a opened door to the conscious” (de Oliveira, 1994).

Though some changes under secularisation process, popular religion protects its social place. Thus, popular religion continues its existence and dominance in religious institutions and sub stratum of society. Concurrently popular religion functions as a civil area for religious in periods of pressure on official religion.

A Typological Approach on Turkish Popular Religiousness

In studies of the sociology of religion, to characterize and classify the subject around similar qualities, it is important to do typologies. According to Max Weber, first job of sociology is to understand the “typical” (Weber, 1947). Although his typology has some private characteristics, the typological method is used in many social studies, because of some useful aspects.²

Within changing and differencing social structure, popular religion shows itself in different forms and manners. When we glance at these forms and manners, we see it within diversity, from negative to positive pole. Although popular religiousness is a type within general religiousness, it contains a *syncretic* characteristic and this diversity and complexity enable to determination some typological variety.

1. Turkish Popular Islam in Point of Its Structural Elements

Because the popular religion contains different, even opposite elements, Turkish popular religion have same characteristics too. For example, in this religiousness manner there are Muslim principles, which are determined in the *Koran* and the *Sunna*, as well as sufistic elements, beliefs of ancient Turkish religion (shamanism) or beliefs from other foreign cultures and civilizations. All

² See for some studies using the typological method to understand the different aspects of actual Turkish religious life: Günay, 1999b; Taplamacıoğlu, 1962; Günay ve diğerleri, 1996; Çelik, 2001.

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of these different elements continue their existences in a way joining together. Today in Turkish society, joining together different structural elements of Turkish popular religion can assign as below.

a. Official-normative Religious Elements: In this category there are official- learned religious elements have textual features and determined by religious scholars and educated men. There is an interaction theoretical consideration of the religious scholars and the practical activities in Muslim societies. Popular Islam appears as a kind of practiced Islam among people. Here religiousness means formalism, ritualism, keeping away from deep theological issues. People attach importance formal elements of worships, rituals. To take care of these is more important than subjects about theology and ethics. For religious people, religion is very important but when they live religious life formalism and utilitarianism get ahead generally. For example, considering some behaviour and forms in rituals, visiting tombs for different aims and making a wish, amulets, reading religious texts for healing etc.

Some popular beliefs and practices arise from Muslim principles. For examples, the cult of *Hidrellez* and the phenomenon of pilgrimage the tombs (*ziyaret*) are very prevalent among Turkish people (Arslan, 2004). It is clear that there are Islamic and other folkloric elements in these facts. The personages of *Hızır* and *Ilyas* taking part in *Hidrellez* cult take part in the *Koran* and the *Sunna*. This gives to the *Hidrellez* cult an Islamic quality. Because of the hadiths about pilgrimage the graves and belief in *keramet* (God-given power of working miracles), the ritual of pilgrimage the tombs (*ziyaret*) became more widespread among people. It can be said that popular Islam has some orthodox foundations.

Popular religion is not a religion terminologically, despite its name. Because, it deprived of usual characteristics of a religion as faith, prayer studied by community and rituals, religious scholar. On the contrary it is a fusion of a variety of traditional, pagan and superstitious belief with concepts and beliefs drawn from mainstream religion. Besides, some popular religious forms occur as a result of understanding of common people the beliefs and principles of mainstream religion. So, popular religion appears as a fusion of mainstream religious beliefs and concepts with cultural and traditional beliefs.

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b. Sufistic elements: Into the popular religious structure, sufistic elements appear any more. Popular religion among Muslims is related to the history of Sufism very closely (Gibb, 1955). Sufism is very popular among Turkish society. This type of Turkish popular religion can appear concepts as *dede, baba, veli, evliya, eren, ermiş, sofi, şeyh, seyyid* etc. These are very important among people. Common people attribute to these concepts mystic and mythological meanings. Popular tombs of *evliya* among people and their mythological stories (*keramet*) are fed Sufism.

First reason of prevalent existence of Sufism in Turkish popular religion is mystic characteristic of ancient Turkish religion. This attribute of ancient Turkish religion had continued by means of Sufism and tariqats among people. "Tariqats", and especially "folk Sufism" are very effective in formation of religious beliefs and practices of mass. Thus, popular religiousness among Turkish people is related to the Sufism very closely. Sufism and dervish orders (*tarikats*) function both source feeding popular beliefs and practices and institution maintaining them.

c. The Elements of Ancient Turkish Beliefs: The effects of ancient Turkish religion on current belief and attitudes of Turkish people are very important. The primary beliefs have diagnostic important on attitudes of humans. Manifestations of sacred have a variable morphology during history. But beyond this variable, "archetypical" basis is unchangeable never (Eliade, 2003). Thus, some ancient beliefs and practices concerning a nation continue their existences and effects.

Today many popular religious beliefs and practices among Turkish society are related to ancient Turkish mystic beliefs. Ancient Turkish religion has a mystic attribute and these mystic attributes (For example, mystic elements coming from Shamanism) become popular among Turkish people today. These beliefs form some of popular religious beliefs. The beliefs like tying rag to tree and tombs to vow, the tradition of puerperal fever (*albastı*), *dede-veli* cult are remnants from Shamanism (İnan, 1991; Güngör, 1997). The motifs of famous *veli* among people exist in ancient shaman rumours too (Güngör, 1997).

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As well as Shamanism, many beliefs and practices of ancient Turkish religion continue their effects today. These can be collected in “a certain system of cults”. These cults, in spite of Islam or with It, influence Turkish people today. These cults can be arranged as *Gök-Tanrı* cult, ancestors’ cult, healing cults, nature cults (consist of “sky, place-water / *yer-su*, mountain, forest-tree, stone-rock and fire” cults). These cults contain many different beliefs in it. Cosmological, cosmogonical and eschatological beliefs exist too. These primary beliefs and practices continue their existences in different forms and manners today.

d. The Elements of Other Cultures: One of the effective elements in Turkish popular beliefs and practices are the inheritances of other cultures (neighbour or remote). These are the beliefs belonging to ancient civilizations (Babylon, Assyria, Hittite etc.) living in Anatolia and Mesopotamia in history and disappearing later. Besides, the beliefs belonging to Christianity and other religions play a part in formation of folk and popular beliefs of Anatolia people, and these beliefs continue their existence among people more or less. For example, the going on the pilgrimage of tombs of Christian saints by Muslims, or accepting these saints as a Muslim *veli*. To wish children, some Muslims present the toy baby to tombs. This was a practice used to old Christian saints. The *hudrellez* cult with Islamic motif contains the traces of the Mesopotamia pagan beliefs too. In *hudrellez* ceremonies people make a wish by using the drawings or models of house, baby, automobile etc. When visiting the tombs, people put some foods and drinks (water, milks etc.) and eat and drink them later for healing. We can see here an animist practice easily. The beliefs as “becoming *aydaş*” of the children and to melt lead and pour it into cold water over the head of a sick person in order to break an evil spell are beliefs coming from ancient cultures and civilizations.

e. The Magical Elements. There is a relation between religion and magic always. Especially, the effect of magic goes to the fore in popular religion any more. Magic, spell, enchantment, prophecy is practised by divine, *cinci hoca* (soothsayer who invokes jinn), writer of charms, fortune-teller, *üfürükçü* (quack who claims to cure by breathing), *kocakarı* (old woman) among people. These are in demand some people. Writing charm, fortune-telling, reading and breathing

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to person, water or object, magical practices, calling the *jinn*, spiting on wounds etc., all of these appear as common magical elements of Turkish popular religion. Religious texts, verses of the Koran and Hadiths are used for magic too.

f. Legendary, Mythical Elements: Religious mythologies are very common elements. Many mythological rumours and tales about *evliya* (saints) are told or wrote. It is told their *keramet* (the God-given power of working miracles). Many tombs of *evliya* and *sahabe* (the companions of the Prophet Muhammad) exist in every place of Anatolia. Mythological rumours, tales and *keramets* of these *ashâb* are told frequently, despite against history. There are common mythological rumours and tales about persons as *gazi*, *ermiş*, *derviş*.

Besides, In Anatolia another religious mythological character is *Hızır*. His place in the Book and tradition is indefinite. *Hızır* is savior, merciful and distributor of *bereket*. He helps persons with problem, difficulty and into danger. In Anatolia is believed that *Hızır* is a mythological person helping people in their difficult conditions, coming homes in certain (hidrellez) or uncertain days and nights. Likewise, expressions like “*Hızır* came, *Hızır* stop off” are used commonly among people.

2. Typology of Turkish Popular Religion in Point of Formation

a. Individual Elements: These are types of popular religiousness forming because of individual and psychological needs generally. People have different problems or needs sometimes. Because of individual feelings and needs like difficulty of realization the desires, anxieties against illness, trouble and disasters, fear instinct, distrustfulness, worldly ease and happiness etc., people go towards popular religious beliefs and practices. This feelings and needs direct people to vow and to make an offering, visiting the tombs, attaching amulet, application to *cinci* or mediums, etc.

b. Social Elements: The people sometimes direct to popular religious beliefs and practices by effect of other people. The traditional habits, cares of many people to these beliefs attract people. Thus, people are accustomed to these beliefs and practices. In this way people accept straightness of these beliefs.

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Some popular beliefs and practices, especially among traditional women, cause to go out from house. Thus, these beliefs and practices function as a socialisation means for women. For example, women practice some popular beliefs as a group or festival. They go to the tombs, read *mevlid* (poem by Süleyman Çelebi celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad) etc. as a group. So, traditional women living in their houses can go outside without permission from their husbands generally. The environments of many tombs are suitable for picnic, and people both visit tombs and have a picnic as a group. We can see this condition in *Hidrellez* celebrations. *Hidrellez* is celebrated like a festival as a whole, many people take part in celebrations as heterogeneous, both man and woman. In this celebrates, engaged (to be married) youths can come together, the single youths is introduced to each other. Even, in many places of Anatolia, in marriage ceremonies bride and bridegroom get the tombs visit. All of these set an example the types of social character.

3. Typology of Turkish Popular Religion in Point of Its Closeness Official-Normative Religion

a. The Contrary Types to Official-Normative Religion: These are popular beliefs and practices not agreeing with normative religious principles, even against to it. For example, magical practices, attaching amulet, visiting tombs for different aims and making a wish there, application to *cinci* or mediums, the tying cloths and rags to tombs and bushes, drinking the blood of sacrificial animal for leaving drink (Enginer, 1997), the firing incense (*buhur*) for coming back the ancestor souls, etc. All of them are agreeing with normative Islamic principles never. These elements of Turkish popular religion, coming from different cultures and religions, continue existences to be used for diverse aims.

b. The Close Types to Official-Normative Religion: These are not contrary to general normative Islamic principles “directly”. These types appear as popular interpretations among people. When performed the religious responsibilities, among public the formation of religious life appear as formalism, ritualism and attaching importance to some symbols. Beside the formalism and ritualism, enthusiastic elements are very important. Thus, beliefs

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and practices increasing religious excitement get ahead mainly. For example, *zikir* and *ilahi's* meetings, *mevlid* and *hatim* (reading of the Koran from beginning to end) rituals, the congratulating *kandil* (one of five Islamic holy nights when the minarets are illuminated) nights.

4. Typology of Turkish Popular Religion in Point of History

a. Traditional Types: Traditional beliefs are more common. Popular beliefs have “continuity” and challenge historical and religious processes. Many popular beliefs among people have traditional characteristics. Beliefs coming from ancient Turkish religion and other pagan or high religions and Sufism have very common among Turkish people today. Folk and popular beliefs are not national. They are prevalent in many cultures and religions and continue their existences along whole times. Popular religion is traditional and historical fundamentally.

b. Modern Types: Owing to the effects of urbanization, migration and seeking identity, popular religion becomes different. In the process of modernization, some forms of solidarity begin to be demolished. Thus, for example, folk *tariqats* (Sufi path) as a traditional popular religious foundation altered. *Tariqats* function as mystic, pedagogic in traditional times have had new functions and roles in public area. Today *tariqats* function as economic and political mainly in comparison with traditional times.

Today traditional popular beliefs acquire some modern characteristics. Beside, new popular trends combining old beliefs with modern methods have occurred. For example, trends like spiritualism, astrology and professions like medium occur under new styles and discourses and are followed by some people desirously. Today these popular and paranormal beliefs take part in mass media mainly. However having been condemned traditional types like *cinci*, magician, witch etc., modern types like medium, fortune-teller, astrologer are tolerated, even continue their activities by giving the state their taxes freely. But these occupations are ways of expressing or repetition of old traditional types under new manners and discourses. In modern times some new cults make an effort to find supporters by combining *esoterism* and *occultism* by individualism in a religious discourse. Modern cults like “scientology” can find a lot of

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followers by means of Internet and mass media and by combining old religious or spiritualist concepts with new scientific developments. Consequently, in a parallel manner to social tendency popular beliefs and practices can show oneself under new discourses and manners and they are in demand by people.

5. Typology of Turkish Popular Religion in Point of Social Surrounding

a. The country Type: It is popular religiousness type in life of rural environment. In the village and town life dependent to nature is more important. Folk beliefs occupy a important place. We can see different ways like the celebrations of *rites de passage*; communal celebrations of the sequence of the seasons of nature, and of the weeks, months and years; the venerations of dead, leading also to the saint-veneration; vulgar forms of some Islamic rituals, religious-musical performances, vulgar forms of *dhikr* (mentioning the name of Allah), forms of magical action; ways of life in religious groups (*tariqats* etc.) in this type.

The pilgrimage to tombs is popular fairly. Generally, in every village and town or in their surroundings exist the diverse tombs of *evliya*. By means of these tombs, these locations attract other people in their surroundings. For a certain number of sicknesses it can be go to the definite tombs, which become famous at some villages and towns. The collected prayer of rain is done in definite seasons periodically. In these places "the traditional" is within "the religious". In this religious type, popular beliefs and practices of "rite de passage" as "birth, marriage and death" are more evident and rich.

b. The City Type: In this type the different religiousness manners are one within the other. With the religiousness of people immigrating to city the religiousness of people of city are side by side. The city contains very different religiousness manners. Because of industrialization and modernization, the individuality and free from communality are formed. Nevertheless popular religiousness continues its existence in the city differently. In rural communities folk and popular beliefs have more intensive, homogeneous and natural forms. On the contrary this, popular beliefs in city are more diversity. There are both popular beliefs of settlers, suburbs, sub and middle stratum, and popular beliefs

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of upper layers, educated, literate peoples in the city, which have differences. This diversity causes to relations and interactions between different beliefs and practices among people in cities. This condition brings about some shared and similar forms, beside differences. For example, the celebrations of *rite de passage*, the celebrations of *Hidrellez* and celebrations of sacred days and nights, visiting the tombs, forms of religious behaviour that arise in response to unforeseen events, troubles and crises.

The settlers coming to city have more refined and more open outside beliefs according to the former conditions. For example, interactions between *Alevis* and *Sunnis* in city causes to changing and softening of the former beliefs and attitudes. In rural places each *Alevi* and *Sunni* visits their tombs separately. But for example *Alevis* living in the city have begun visiting *Sunnis'* tombs too. Besides, *Alevis* who sacrifice in their tombs merely in rural areas sacrifice in *Sunnis'* tombs with urbanization process. This condition can be seen in the celebrations of *Hidrellez*. In the city the celebrations of *Hidrellez* is made *Alevis* and *Sunnis* all together. The people of different groups celebrate the *Hidrellez* in the shared places.

Consequently, popular religiousness as a manner of religiousness in religious life of Anatolia people have very different and diversity, very dimension and rich qualities, which contain different piles of beliefs and practices. Popular religion include both traditional qualities that unchanged and continue in historical process, and new and crossbred, hybrid types coming into existence in the changing social circumstances of modern and post modern times. By means of some social communication channels, popular religion continues to give shape the everyday religious life of contemporary people.

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