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A SURVIVING NEOPLATONISM: ON THE CREED OF THE BEKTASHI ORDER. CONVERSATIONS WITH A MURSIT

Bir Mürşit ile Görüşme: Bektaşılığın Temeli Üzerine Bazı Notlar

Erik CORNELL

ÖZET


Anahtar Kelimeler: Evrensel Kültür, Düşünce Sistemi, Hacı Bektaş Soyu

ABSTRACT

About 20 million men and women, a quarter of the population of Turkey, are Alevites, affiliated to the Bektashi rder, holding very liberal views related to those of the Mevlena Order.

They have no mosques in their villages but community houses, where men and women together take part in cult ceremonies. They do not pray five times a day, neither do they fast. Alcohol is consumed in connection with initiation, men and women are equal and women do not wear veils, etc. As a consequence they are persecuted by Sunni neighbours as heretics and have been victims of arson attacks. The author received four years of weekly instruction by a Bektashi elder on questions related to faith, but not on the origin and context of the beliefs, which were virtually inaccessible locally. Further study has shown that their origin is in liberal Sufi thought, going back to Neoplatonism, Plotinus and the hermetic tradition. This tradition survives in Anatolia.

1 Published in Islam and Christian Muslim Relations, Vol. 17, No. 1–2, January 2006
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Bektashism means to Bektashis different things. According to their capacity to understand the truths are given. The apprehension of truth in the individual Bektashi will, therefore, depend both on his own ability to see spiritual truth and on the quality of life and thinking of the one who has been his mu’rsit (Birge, 1965, p. 101).

The Outward Setting

Introduction

A considerable number of the inhabitants of both Turkey and Albania belong to a particular religious group, the Bektashis, also known as the Bektashi Order of dervishes. The name refers to the founder in the Middle Ages, Haji Bektashi Veli, and is mainly reserved for townspeople while the members of this group who belong to the formerly illiterate rank and file who have their roots in the Anatolian countryside are usually known as Alevis.

Considering their numbers—probably exceeding a quarter of the population of Turkey, implying a latent force of public opinion not to be neglected if mobilized—they have Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, remained remarkably unknown, the reason being that the great majority of them have for centuries been mainly located in rural areas and followed an oral tradition. They were and are frowned upon as heretics by the Sunni Muslim majority and have been isolated and persecuted, and consequently the Alevis have been both lacking in influence in society and of scant political importance. This isolation has contributed to the group’s anonymity as it has hidden its secrets from the world in order to be left in peace. For their protection the adherents have also strictly applied taqiyya, the right not to disclose their beliefs when living among other Muslims. For these reasons not much has been written about their E. Cornell customs and beliefs. They have kept the details of their faith to themselves and have been more or less intentionally misunderstood by other Muslims. Secular scholars, including foreigners, have shown a tendency to attach little importance to them because of their lack of influence. As a result, the details of their faith have been comparatively neglected and efforts to study them have concentrated more on treating them as a sociological group facing problems of cohabitation with other groups.
in society. The Alevis have kept a low profile but have nevertheless been persecuted as heretics.

The reason for this is probably the apparent differences between their beliefs and practices and those of the majority society. The Alevis represent a syncretistic and non-dogmatic religion, or rather ‘view of life’, which is essentially different from orthodox Islam.

They are not organized, and Alevism therefore virtually becomes a collective notion by which to refer to different groups of people scattered all over the country who have developed their own particularities. Most of them have in common the recognition of Haji Bektashi Veli as their religious master. Nominally they belong to Twelver Shi'ism, but they have developed their own characteristics which are quite different from Iranian Shi'ism, for which reason the Iranian government in its subversive activities against Turkey has not employed Alevis but preferred Sunnis.

The most important of the particular religious characteristics of Alevism are:

- to have no mosques (as was natural for nomads) but community houses, ce mevi;
- not to pray five times a day but rather when one feels so inclined;
- not to undertake pilgrimages to Mecca;
- not to apply rules regarding fasting and drinking alcohol;
- equal treatment of women and men, e.g. no requirement for women to wear the veil;
- joint participation of men and women in cult ceremonies;
- consumption of alcohol in connection with initiation rites (compare the Christian Eucharist);
- that Sharia is not strictly applied;
- that the Qur’an is not unreservedly recognized as God’s final divine revelation.

Shar'ia is in principle regarded as “the law” to be followed by everybody. However, through the initiation ceremony, which takes place when leaving childhood, the individual Alevi reaches a higher degree of knowledge, tarikat or ‘the way’, which takes precedence over the prescriptions of Sharia regarding, for example, forms for prayer and fasting.

Reservations regarding the Qur’an are due to a suspicion that the early Caliphs manipulated the text to the detriment of Muhammad’s son Ali, who plays a central role in Alevism and is called “the living Qur’an”—a way of indicating that Alevism is not literalistic but emphasizes the message rather than the text. Religious worship is a matter for the individual and his Creator. Alevis shun ea-
Erik CORNELL

ting hare, an old Anatolian prohibition applied as early as the Hittites and also listed in Leviticus. Apart from this, the observation of a cluster of cult formalities and different types of prohibiting regulations are frowned upon or openly despised. Instead, the importance of a pure heart, good intentions and especially the duty to love one’s fellow man are underlined. The Alevis see a difference between Sunnism, which is considered to bear the imprint of the literal meaning of the word Islam, i.e. “submission”, and their own religious hallmark of Love. The categorical imperative of Alevism is contained in the current expression eline—diline—beline, roughly meaning: ‘Control your hands, tongue and loins’; that is: ‘Do not steal, do not lie and slander, do not commit adultery.’ Credal variations are ignored but importance is attached to the conscious manifestation of faith in words and deeds. ‘Inherent within the very terms of their religion is the possibility of different forms of belief and practice’, as an authority on Alevism has expressed it. And he continues: ‘learning to live with the dominant tradition has resulted in a combination of mystical philosophy and a doctrine of peace and equality between the sexes which is remarkably attractive’ (Shankland, 1998, p. 22).

This article will give an introduction to the emergence and background of Alevism—Bektashism as well as a description of the main characteristics of its beliefs. Then follows a digest of the instruction received by the author, which indicates at least the partial origin of the creed in Hellenistic concepts.

Sources

Having taken up a position at the Ankara embassy in the beginning of 1990, my attention was almost immediately drawn to the Alevis, the reason being that life on the ground did not match my expectations. I had expected to meet a well-educated and secular, Western rather than Westernized establishment and a numerous, more tradition-bound Islamic majority with their roots in the Anatolian countryside. So I did, of course, but too many women, clearly not belonging to the establishment, wore neither traditional clothes, nor the ‘Islamic niform’, i.e. a wide cloak reaching to the feet and headscarf and, furthermore, did not turn away their faces when meeting strangers in general and men in particular. They also gave the impression of being Western rather than Westernized. To obtain information on this phenomenon, however, proved to require both patience and perseverance. In those days the numbers and role of the Alevis in Turkish society were paid little attention outside some academic circles, and even their existence was outrightly denied. By way of illustration, my question to the Dean of the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University regarding the presence of non-Sunni groupings in Turkey received a characteristic answer: “There aren’t any!” Numerous other attempts were as discouraging. But I found an interested and knowledgeable supporter in the Papal Nuncio (the Ambassador of the Vatican)
who organized valuable and instructive meetings with Ms M. Kashgarli, Professor of Religion in France, a specialist in early Christianity and herself a Bektashi, who, among other things, arranged our participation in the annual pilgrimage to the Order's shrine in the town of Hacibektash. It emerged furthermore that a member of the embassy's local staff was a Bektashi, initiated after marrying an Alevi, who could give me first hand information at a popular level. (One can be an Alevi only by birth; others have to seek initiation into the Bektashi Order.)

Later I happened to engage as a language teacher a retired senior civil servant who was a leading member of the Bektashi Order, and the language instruction became totally overshadowed by discussions on religious questions, mainly related to Alevism-Bektashism, continuing for four years until I left Turkey towards the end of 1995. The contents of our conversations form the background of the description below of the Bektashi outlook on life.

As regards literature on the topic, the situation in Turkey was unequivocally difficult. The establishment of the Turkish Republic was based on the need to create a strong and unified state out of the Ottoman Empire's residual tapestry of Anatolian peoples, languages and beliefs. Any counter-indication to the desired 'oneness' was for this reason more or less denied, as indicated by the comment of the above-mentioned dean. Scholars and literature dealing with different religious movements in Turkey were not mentioned. The Turkish press contained sporadic articles on Alevis, but older material was very difficult to trace and, because of the complexities of the subject, a translator was needed who was familiar with the topic. Generally speaking, most articles treated the role of the Alevis in society, reflecting their gradual emergence from traditional isolation and migration to the towns. On their creed there was virtually nothing, probably because of taqiyya, the right to hide one's real beliefs in a hostile environment, and in consequence it is totally unknown or misjudged by other Turks. This was the situation at the beginning of the 1990s, but it has markedly improved since then. A number of active publishing houses have been established which print a great number of pamphlets and instruction booklets for the adherents, who have left their traditional village societies and are eager to get a more systematized instruction in religious matters in order to establish their proper identity in the predominant Sunni environment of the cities.

In these circumstances foreign literature on the topic could only be obtained through personal contacts. At a relatively early stage I came across Kehl-Bodrogi's important work, published in 1988, which contains a valuable survey of the literature. I also obtained J. K. Birge's (1965) basic description and analysis. He deserves to be mentioned first for having already published in 1937 The Bektashi Order of Dervishes, which also deals with the religious and philosophical aspects of Bektashism. He duly draws attention to the Neoplatonic
element, as did Professor Kashgarli in her conversations. But apart from this, the oral instruction I received made no mention of that historical relationship but rather sought to establish a direct link to ancient Egypt. It was symptomatic that, while in Turkey, I was never informed of such an early and important work as Altan Gökalp’s (1980) Teʿtes rouges et bouches noires. Only later, after returning to Sweden and having access to well established university libraries, was I able to make further and wider studies which clarified the relationship between the instruction received and Islamic mysticism, as well as with its classical forerunner, especially Neoplatonism. Dierl’s Geschichte und Lehre des anatolischen Alevismus–Bektaschismus (1985) clarifies and is more closely related to my muʿṣīt’s teachings than any other work. It is, however, more descriptive than scientific. A most comprehensive book is Bektachiyya (Poppovic & Veinstein, 1985), containing contributions from a Strasbourg conference held in 1985 and covering a wide range of topics by scholars such as the grand lady of Alevi studies Ire’ne Me`likoff, van Bruinessen and During, to mention only a few. It also contains a valuable bibliography. Another interesting collection of reports is to be found in Alevi Identity (Olsson et al., 1998), based on an Istanbul conference in 1996 with contributions not only by the likes of Ire’ne Me`likoff, but also from a younger generation of scholars such as, among others, David Shankland and Karin Vorhoff. The latter’s book contains a comprehensive bibliography (1995, pp. 218–263). Ire’ne Me`likoff’s indispensable grand’oeuvre, Hadji Bektach, un mythe et ses avatars, referred to in the text below, appeared only in 1998 (Me`likoff, 1998a). It is the most modern and comprehensive description and analysis of Alevism–Bektashism, based on a lifetime’s academic research.

During the conversations with my above-mentioned teacher, which took place in private, I regularly took notes. He became my muʿṣīt and, as pointed out above, these notes constitute the background for the text below. His tuition followed local traditions and had a quite personal and individual character. It contained virtually no references, and as a consequence I found it necessary to search for other in order to find the context to which its religious, philosophical and historical roots belonged. The A Surviving Neoplatonism 5 character of this article accordingly is that of a field report, reflecting his instruction and my subsequent efforts to find the schools of thought that inspired it. It seems expedient, however, to preface the presentation of the subject matter with a description of the emergence and early history of Alevism–Bektashism.

Origin and Background

During the migrations of the Turkic peoples westwards from Central Asia, their original religious concepts—too often simply referred to as worship of heaven, and shamanism—were influenced by the religions of the peoples they met: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam and Christianity. Their eventual Islami-
zation was thus preceded by obvious syncretistic tendencies, and took place in regions where, alongside regular orthodox Islam, Sufi mysticism had also grown strong. These tendencies had flourished from the beginning of the Arab conquest of the eastern Mediterranean where they were inspired by the multifarious expressions of Hellenistic thought that dominated the region during the first centuries of the Christian era. Individual mystics gathered pupils around them and in this way a number of religious brotherhoods or dervish orders appeared and spread. Of those active today, some have existed for centuries all over the Muslim world while others have appeared in living memory and have a limited field of operation.

The brotherhoods especially flourished in hard times when the people suffered from the violence of invaders such as Jenghis Khan and Tamerlane. Their creeds show evidence of considerable variation and represent a broad spectrum of directions and aims. Some orders are strictly Sunni orthodox with strong fundamentalist inclinations and often seek political influence, as, for example, the Naqshbendi, Nurcu and Sulemaniye. Others are primarily directed towards the pious life or mysticism, and several are heterodox, emphasizing religious experience as leading to direct knowledge of God or union with, or absorption into, God. These latter orders attach less importance to the fulfilment of external observances such as regular prayers, fasting and pilgrimage. In practice this means that their adherents regard themselves as following a tarikat, a religious 'way' and consequently as no longer strictly bound by Sharica, the Islamic law. Mystics may be initiated into higher degrees of experience—marifet or 'insight' and hakikat or 'truth'—ultimately leading to union with God. For this reason they are accused of heresy by formalistic, Sharia-keeping Sunni Muslims.

These movements seem to have found fertile soil in Persia, where Shia Islam enjoyed growing influence at the time of the Turkic migrations, and from there the teachings spread with the Turkic peoples into Anatolia. The best known of these liberal orders is probably the Mevleva, also known as 'the whirling dervishes'. The Bektashis, who constitute the intellectual superstructure, so to speak, of the illiterate Alevi, also belong to these liberal orders. The Mevleva and Bektashi Orders were more represented among the urban population while the Alevi, until the foundation of the Turkish Republic, were mainly to be found in the countryside. The origin of the Order is fairly obscure but according to tradition its future founder, Haji Bektashi Veli (d. 1270), was sent in the thirteenth century from Khorasan to Rum, where he attracted many followers.

The Seljuks and the Ottomans were founders of states and tried to gain control over other groups of Turkic nomads who followed their trail. The Turkic tribes dominating the border areas between the Persian and Ottoman empires belonged to a considerable extent to liberal and religiously heterodox communi-
ties, and the teachings of Haji Bektash were widespread. According to Me’likoff, however, the life and teachings of 6 E. Cornell Haji Bektash himself are elusive and more guidance can be found by studying the influence of Fazlullah al-Hurufi (1339/40–1394) (Me’likoff, 1998a, pp. 116ff., 126ff.). His teachings were very syncretistic, stressing, among other things, reincarnation and the idea that it is the task of man to arrive at union with God, Ali being the great example.

The roots of al-Hurufi’s thinking can be traced back to Ibn ali Arabi (1165–1240) and to the Neo-Pythagoreans. These religious tendencies were adapted by the people in the border areas of eastern Anatolia and western Persia, taking on an aggressive and expansive character towards the end of the fifteenth century, especially under the leadership of Shah Ismail, who was fighting for political influence. The adherents in these areas were called Kizilbash, i.e. Redheads, after their headgear, a designation nowadays replaced by Alevis or Alevites (not to be confounded with the Alawites, the Arabic-speaking adherents of related beliefs who live in Syria).

In 1502 Shah Ismail decided that this both liberal and militant form of Shi’ism should be the state religion in Persia. He was involved in a struggle with Sultan Selim over the drawing of the borders between the two empires, and the Shah enjoyed the support of his fellow-believers so, before war broke out, the Sultan had tens of thousands of Anatolian Kizilbash–Alevis killed. The survivors retreated to their villages in the mountains and from then on avoided contact with the Sunni environment and state. Shortly afterwards, the Sultan conquered Egypt and thereby assumed the office of the Abbasid Caliph, who had his seat in Cairo. In this way the Sultan virtually became the leader of all Sunni believers, a position of influence whose preservation required a break with the Shi‘ite heresy. In Persia it was not long before a new Shah proclaimed a more strict Sharia to be the state religion, and by the middle of the eighteenth century the Kizilbash are considered to have been assimilated by Persian/Iranian Shicism.

Governed by the Sultan and the Caliph, the identity of the Ottoman Empire became Sunni Muslim rather than nationalistic. As distinguished from the British, French, Russian (later Soviet) and Austrian empires, the Ottoman realm lacked a national kernel. Its form of government also took on a particular character as the Sultan did not entrust the leading positions to his kinsmen but had the Empire administered by his serfs. According to the so-called Devshirme system, they were recruited by force mainly in the Balkans where young boys were levied, converted to Islam and trained or educated as both soldiers—the Janissaries—and civil servants. Consequently, with the exception of the religiously dominated legal and educational sector, the Empire was not governed by Turks or even Anatolians. Another consequence was that there never existed any fertile ground where ethnic solidarity or identity could take root, a feature
that would prove to be fatal when nationalism spread later in the Empire’s Euro­
pean and Arab territories. The Sultans usually distrusted the orders or brother­
hoods and organized instead a religious hierarchy, the ulama’, who represented
a normative Sunnism and were also responsible for education and the judicial
system. They were not recruited from among the serfs, but constituted a body of
free civil servants, unique to the Ottoman Empire. First controlling the Caliphs
and later holding the title themselves, the Sultans were also the Heads of Islam
and the religious and temporal powers were thus as United and indistinguishable
in the minds of the people of the Ottoman Empire as they had been during the
Byzantine era. Bearing in mind the concept of umma, the Islamic community
and the oneness of Islam, this must have been perceived as the natural state of
affairs. The Ottoman—or Turkish, as they were called in the West—civil serv­
ants and officers saw themselves redominantly as Muslims.

Alevi and Bektashi

In Anatolia the Kızılbash survived in spite of persecutions and discriminati­
on, and their religious ties to the Bektashi Order are thought to have helped
protect them. But an ambiguity existed in the relationship. On the one hand
the Bektashis were religiously militant, especially during the earlier centuries, and
the Sultan had entrusted them with the conversion and education of the yo­
ung boys who, as mentioned, according to the Devshirme system were forcibly
recruited in the Empire’s Christian areas to become both Janissaries and civil
servants. As initiates in the Bektashi tarikat the dervishes were not bound by
the Qur’an’s Shari'a prohibition of both conversion by force and the ownership
of Muslim serfs.1 The Order simultaneously exerted a strong influence on the
state authority through its influence on the corps of Janissaries, and developed
its inclination to mysticism into a tolerant version of Islam with obvious influen­
ces from earlier religious beliefs in the region, not least the command to ‘love
thy neighbour’. On the other hand these very Janissaries had been ordered by
Sultan Selim to crush the Kızılbash before the war with the Shah. The role of
the Bektashis in this context is complicated and difficult to analyse. According
to one explanation, the Janissaries were first and foremost the Sultan’s slavish
and most obedient soldiers, ready to follow any orders, while others suggest that
they were ordered to undertake a swift punitive expedition and were quickly
recalled before realizing that they were killing fellow-believers. According to a
third version, the Janissaries were elite soldiers fighting external enemies on
the Empire’s frontiers, the expedition against the inland Kızılbash constituting a
singular exception of short duration.

A combination of all three explanations seems most likely and may be sum­
mORIZED as follows. First, we must remember that at the outset, say before the
year 1500, there certainly existed a mutual distrust between Sunnis and Shıcıs
but it was far from the level of mutual condemnation and persecution which arose in consequence of an Ottoman fatwa in 1511/12 condemning the Kizilbash heresy that led to war between Sultan Selim and Shah Isma'il (Me'likoff, 1998a, p. 138). Furthermore heterodoxy was the predominant religious attitude in the border areas and was shared by most of the active participants. The killing was thus primarily seen not in religious but in political terms as an element in the Sultan’s and the Shah’s fight for power. For this reason it was natural for the Sultan’s subjects, whether Bektashis or not, to obey his orders to crush his enemies, the followers of the Shah. For the Alevites, being the victims, it became natural to withdraw as far as possible from all contact with the Sultan’s administration, a state of affairs which was to last until the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The mutual distrust between the government and its Kizilbash subordinates was inherited by the Republic, and even if its establishment meant the gradual liberation and integration of its Alevite citizens, it has not yet been totally overcome. The Sunni quest for the oneness of Islam constitutes an obstacle to the recognition of heretics.

In the sixteenth century and as time passed, the Bektashis were to be found in educated urban circles, while the Kizilbash constituted the bulk of the generally more illiterate Alevi remaining in the countryside of inner Anatolia. Governed by weak Sultans, the Janissaries became more and more unruly and in the late seventeenth century secured the right to have families and to make their positions hereditary. This meant that their devotion to the qualities attached to being the most fierce and austere ‘warrior-monks’ of the Sultan and the Faith evaporated. They became ever more demanding and time and again threatened rebellion if not placated with gifts. In 1826 they were mercilessly crushed by the Sultan because of their resistance to the modernization of the armed forces along Western lines. As a consequence, the Bektashi Order lost all its influence on the civilian side of the administration too. This was taken over by the orthodox, conservative and power-conscious Naqshbendi Order. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Bektashis slowly recovered and supported the reformist ‘Young Turks’. They retained their liberal attitudes and as a result orthodox Muslims continued to suspect them for their heretical deviations, such as support for Freemasonry (Me’likoff, 1995, p. 12; idem, 1998b, pp. 242ff.), which was regarded as wielding Western political influence towards rebellion.

**The Modern Context**

With the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic a religious, cultural, intellectual and political revolution took place. The collapse of the old order was so complete, both materially and psychologically, that the people were prepared to accept any change if it held the prospect of returning society to peace and order. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led this transfor-
mation guided by the vision of creating a modern Western, secular nation-state. The Sultanate and Caliphate were abolished. Sharica was abrogated and replaced with imported Western European laws, translated from German, Italian and Swiss originals. The Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic, and Persian and Arabic words were purged from the language in order to break links with the Ottoman past. A reformed and pure Turkish language was introduced as compulsory and under the slogan of ‘happy is he who calls himself a Turk’ all ethnic distinctions were suppressed and Turkish family names were imposed on all. The Christian calendar replaced the Islamic and women were forbidden to wear the veil and men the fez. Religion was relegated to the private sphere and was permitted to have no influence on politics. All religious orders were closed. A religious office, the Diyanet, was established to direct Muslim clergy and mosques and a Faculty of Divinity to supervise modernized religious education.

 Atatürk succeeded to an astonishing extent in imposing his reform policy (known as Kemalism). The Alevis were among his staunchest supporters. In the Ottoman Caliphate they had been despised and ostracized heretics and the exchange of Sultan and Caliph for a secular state and the recognition of equal rights for women suited them perfectly. With the creation of the Republic the Alevis were freed from external threat, but at the same time the pressure that had held them together disappeared. In a sense they were lured into believing that they no longer needed state protection. After originally being scattered in middle Anatolia among cattle breeders in the mountains and wood-cutters in the forests, they started to migrate to the towns. As we have seen, the Alevis lacked a central organization and lived in local communities where religious leadership (dede) was hereditary in certain families. When people moved to the towns this religious responsibility seems to have remained with the village dede in question and was not taken over by somebody else. As a consequence, the migrating Alevis easily lost contact with their spiritual leaders and became rootless. In many places the traditions lost hold as there was no Alevi parallel to the Sunni establishment which was receiving migrating Sunnis. One could say that the emancipation of the Alevis in the secular Republic was in a way comparable to the emancipation of women. In practice, the physical walls were pulled down while the mental walls remained if not intact, at least overwhelmingly strong. By introducing his reforms over a short period, Atatürk had swung the pendulum to one extreme and sooner or later it was bound to swing back.

 Atatürk’s policy was autocratic but his long term goal was the establishment of a democratic nation-state on the pattern of Western Europe. He prevented Turkey from following in the tracks of the contemporary Communist, Nazi and Fascist dictatorships in Europe and laid out the course towards parliamentary democracy, entrusting the army with the double task of prohibiting dictators from usurping power and preventing a relapse into religious domination. The
golden opportunity came after the Second World War when Stalin’s ambitions to control the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles enticed the West to grant Turkey membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The condition was democratic reforms, and Atatürk’s unitary Republican People’s Party (CHP) split into two. General elections were held in 1950 and the new, more conservative Democratic Party (DP) won a landslide victory. The pendulum began to swing back. The new party’s electoral base was mainly rural Turkey and its promises of agricultural subsidies and increased respect for traditional religious values were fulfilled. The restrictions on religious practices were relaxed, including, for example, the lifting of the ban on religious orders. This might seem to be a modest reform but its consequences were to prove ominous. When the multi-party system reopened the door to religious formations, it was in fact only the Sunni religious majority, among them the Naqshbendi Order, that was able to benefit. The need for the protection of religious minorities was not attended to, and this applied not only to various Muslim ‘heretics’ but also to the various Christians churches who undoubtedly fared better under the Sultanate than its successor, the secular republic. As a symbol of the changing religious climate it should also be mentioned that, while Atatürk had decided that the call to prayer from the minarets should be made in Turkish, the DP government changed it back to Arabic. Excessive subsidies to agriculture ruined the economy and this development, combined with the government’s manifest religious leanings, inspired the military to stage a coup d’etat in 1960.

The coup led to a leftward turn. A few leading DP politicians were executed. A new constitution permitted trade unions and radical parties. The new pluralism opened up the way for latent antagonisms, and leftist advances provoked rightist reactions. Political life deteriorated into street violence and the government had difficulties in controlling the situation. With the object of checking the violence, the military took the initiative and in 1971 gave an ultimatum, threatening to intervene again if the politicians did not control the anarchic situation and return to Kemalist reform policies. This led to a rightward turn and attempts to curb the pluralist character of political life, which failed. Instead new extremist parties emerged on the right, one religious and one nationalist. The consequence was protracted government crises and aggravated left-right antagonism. Turkey entered a period of social and then economic crisis. Towards the end of the 1970s street violence claimed twenty lives a day. The stage was set for the next military coup of 1980.

The Alevi support for Atatürk and his party meant that they found themselves on the political left when the DP opened the gates to a Sunni renaissance. During the anarchic years that followed they became the target of not only the religious activists but also the nationalistic extremist ‘Grey Wolves’. The leftist activists, including groups of Maoists and Leninists, were considered to have
been recruited mainly from among Alevi town youth. They had grown up in an environment where for centuries they had been the victims of oppressive state power, and in later years to a great extent had been uprooted from their own ideological traditions. It would have been natural for the military, as the guarantor of the Republic’s Kemalist order, to seek the support of the Alevis, but the risk of the subversive influence of the Soviet Union on the leftist activists was seen as a greater danger and their integration was not promoted. The arson attacks against Alevi committed in the late 1970s by their adversaries in the central Anatolian towns of Malatiya and Sivas, Corum and Karaman, were among the reasons for the military takeover in 1980, but nevertheless the suppression of extremists that then took place is considered to have been more firmly enforced against leftist than against rightist groups. In order to create a counterweight to the revolutionary communist ideology among the youth, the military furthermore introduced compulsory religious education in schools. The practical consequence was that Alevi children became the object of compulsory Sunni education.

After the return of civilian rule in 1983 the government was led by Turgut Özal. He had failed as a candidate for the religious party but was appointed to a ministerial post in the DP’s successor party, the AP (Justice Party). In the interim government after the 1980 coup the military had refused to hold any posts and Özal was a successful minister of economic affairs. In the 1983 elections he was permitted to run for his own party (the Motherland Party, ANAP). He became prime minister in 1983 and was elected President of the Republic in 1989. He introduced a successful policy of economic recovery but we may say he applied taqiyya as far as his religious programme was concerned. He apparently had close connections with the conservative Naqshbendi Order and, outside the circle of public discussions and parliamentary decisions, launched a boom in mosque building and religious education without parallel in the history of the Republic, probably financed by Saudi Arabian foundations. The budget of the religious office (Diyanet) increased to surpass that of many ministries and its number of employees rose to 80,000. Alevi villages were forced to have mosques and not allowed to build their own community houses. The policy of appointments led to Sunni infiltration, especially of the sectors of internal (including the police) and educational affairs. Fresh arson attacks against Alevi took place in 1993, this time again in Sivas on the occasion of a Bektashi cultural conference. It was revealed that the mayor, who belonged to the religious party, was not ignorant of the preparations for the persecutions and that the police had orders not to intervene. Later the court proceedings and the sentences on the guilty were the object of heavy criticism in the press for bias in favour of the fire-raisers and against the victims. The measures taken by a notorious security prosecutor in Ankara must be characterized as scandalous. One of the victims who narrowly escaped being burnt alive was prosecuted for having provoked the
arson. He was an elderly author, an atheist and translator of Salmon Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Such a reaction from a high official of the judiciary, one of the strongholds of secular Kemalism, seems indeed unexpected. Apparently this secular but at the same time ultra-conservative civil servant was influenced by the prevailing vulgar prejudices against the Alevis as incorrigible adversaries of state, law and order, as well as potentially violent leftist extremists.

The religious party made gains in the local elections of 1994, fundamentalist-oriented mayors were elected in a number of townships, and social pressure against the Alevis was officially sanctioned. The destruction of the Alevi community house in Taksim Square in central Istanbul was ordered, but this created such an uproar that the action was prohibited by the government. Against this background the religious disturbances in Istanbul in

March 1995 came as no surprise. The consistent neglect of Alevi interests at the same time as Sunnism was achieving real positions of power was sooner or later bound to result in an explosion. The disturbances took place in a poor part of the city mainly populated by immigrants from the southeast, both Alevis and Sunnis, who so far had lived peacefully together. A few terrorists drove in a stolen taxi through the area and fired A Surviving Neoplatonism 11 shots into coffee shops, which resulted in several deaths. Some Alevis marched to the local police station and in the ensuing confrontation a number of marchers were killed. It was later revealed that the Alevi had for some time had strained relations with the local police who were considered to look down upon the despised heretics, and that the police officer appointed as inspector was known for imposing violent measures. All police personnel were changed. In agreement with the local people, calm was re-established by army units which were welcomed because the military was guaranteed to be secular. The event gave rise to similar disturbances in other parts of Istanbul and in Ankara. Conservative religious newspapers called for calm and reason and the government undertook to abolish the Sunni monopoly on religious education. It then met with the problem that the Alevis do not ask for the right to their own special education but simply for a confirmation of the secular state’s commitment to freedom from obligatory religious education.

The process of cultivating equal rights for adherents of various beliefs in Turkey will, it can be concluded, take some time. In later years the situation has remained calm and, in this respect, the desire for closer relations with the European Union has already proved useful as it motivates most parties to avoid conflicts and to cultivate mutual respect.

**Alevis in Modern Society**

The anti-dogmatic character of Alevism–Bektashism should again be underli-
ned. This means that it is neither able, nor has the intention, to formulate an established dogma. The foreign visitor to the yearly pilgrims’ meeting in the small town of Haci Bektash in Cappadocia is welcomed by all men—and women because they take part on equal terms—with a striking sincerity and warmth, because he or she by being present demonstrates a like-minded outlook on life.

**Internal groups**

A Turkish scholar working in France has distinguished four main groups among contemporary Alevis, which cautiously show their distinctive features in modern Turkey (Biliş, 1998, pp. 51–62).

The first is mainly represented by the urban population and emerged during the Republic. It has constituted the recruitment basis for the above-mentioned political extreme left, and regards Alevism as an outlook on life more than a religion. The followers hold ritual meetings of a religious character and have also established cultural associations named after the sixteenth-century poet Pir Sultan Abdal. According to their beliefs, Man enjoys a central role as illustrated by the concept ‘God is Man’ (see below in the discussion about the ‘Trinity’). To a considerable extent old concepts have here, however, received the imprint of Marxist materialism and forced interpretations based on the principle of class struggle.

The second group is more directed towards heterodox mysticism and stands closer to the Haji Bektashi Brotherhood. They consider St Francis of Assisi and Mahatma Gandhi to be better believers than many a Muslim. The tuition given by my mürsit below belongs to this category.

The third group regard themselves as true Muslims and are prepared to cooperate with the state. They follow the way of Ja’far al-Sä dig, the sixth Imam. Their concept of God is closer to orthodox Islam but, like the two groups already mentioned, they consider the Qur’an to have been distorted by the early Caliphs in order to eliminate Ali.

The fourth group are said to be under the active influence of official Iranian Shiism, to be confirmed adherents of Twelver Shicism and to reject Bektashism. They follow Shari’a and oppose secular state power. Information about their numbers and location is not available.

**The new challenge**

It was at one time thought that Alevism was on the verge of disappearing in the new atmosphere of migration to the towns and secular society. But this never happened, because as its existence faced new challenges, a reaction was provoked. For the liberal-minded Alevis, orthodox Sunnism is not a viable al-
ternative and the experiences of experimenting with extremist socialism were even more negative so that it lost its attraction. In these circumstances, the oral traditions and beliefs had to find new forms not only to be kept alive but to be revitalized. It is no longer possible to flee to the mountains in order to escape persecution; on the contrary it has become necessary to define and defend held convictions and be prepared to fight for recognition and respect in the Sunni environment. Alevi now live in a modern society for which their traditional isolation in secluded villages offers no guidance.

The challenge they now face is predominantly religious and inspires them to return to their roots. As a consequence, Alevism finds itself in the difficult process of adaptation from oral to written modes of expression and from protection by isolation to exposed participation in society.

The resistance the Alevi encounter from the side of Sunni orthodoxy must not be underestimated because it does not shun bloodshed and arson, as referred to above (Bumke, 1995, p. 115). The signs of growth and lively activity are now manifold, as are those of organizing and trying to establish a common ground and identity for all the various dispersed groups of Alevis. But this is not easily compatible with the tolerant and anti-doctrinal spirit of their beliefs. The Alevi face a double challenge: they must simultaneously organize themselves for their own protection and survival by the building up of a religious association and they must not in this process lose their soul and special character by establishing a hierarchy of their own, claiming a ‘true’ faith with its own infallible dogmas and doctrines.

**The Inward Concepts**

**Tuition of a Mürsit**

The account below aims to show how the creed was introduced in an individual case, and adapted to the pupil’s religious background and experience of life. The intention is to limit it, as far as possible, to conveying the words of my mürsit (teacher), and to avoid references to different authors. It is furthermore an attempt to systematize the instruction received and concentrates mainly on reincarnation in the form of the ‘emanation chain’. This means in practice a focus on the elements inherited from the Neoplatonic world of ideas. This context was, however, never mentioned by my mürsit who suggested an origin ‘in the Egyptian temples’, where Jesus also allegedly received his instruction. On the other hand the manifold references to the prevalence of historical and cultural influences from other, not least shamanism, are not included, as they apparently were accorded only secondary importance. Neither is the interpretation and substitution of words according to the numerical values of their letters referred to because the A Surviving Neoplatonism 13 method is comprehensible only
when applied to the spelling of words in Arabic. Without any doubt the method of instruction aimed at gradual enlightenment, and that only to a certain level. For this reason the following annotations can hardly avoid being both incomplete and sometimes contradictory.

**God**

The concept of God is a natural starting point. To begin with it was difficult to grasp but experiences from non-Western civilizations facilitated the comprehension. Already in the Iliad it is obvious that the gods are not almighty. When Achilles and Hector are fighting their last battle, Zeus holds up his golden balance and learns that his favourite Hector will die—obviously a higher level of decision making exists (Iliad, XX, 212) (Homer, 1946). The Confucian societies of the Far East are considered to lack a god, but the changes of dynasties were taken as manifestations of the Will of Heaven, which man could only follow; and Chairman Mao is quoted as having said before his death ‘when in due time I shall meet God’. The old Turks also had a concept of the God of Heaven.

In African societies, pejoratively called animist, there exists a clear concept of God, who is not personal, however, and is no more concerned with the fate of individual men than with that of individual beasts. These types of beliefs contain the concept of God at various levels, a supreme God beyond the reach of man, and lesser gods/idols whom man can reach by prayers, sacrifices and rituals, which often degenerate into superstitious practices. The Bektashism I learned about seems to contain a concept of God at various levels, but none of them to be considered as idols. It seems doubtful that man can influence any level. The higher level is beyond comprehension and reach. The lower level is an emanation of the high-level God and man in his turn is an emanation of that emanation. Man’s influence seems doubtful but he can be guided by inspiration from the lower-level God.

**Reincarnation**

Reincarnation is only vaguely referred to by both Birge (1965, p. 131) and Dierl (1985, p. 69) and then mainly on a prophetic level as, for example, ‘Ali being present in Haji Bektashi Veli. On the other hand both Me’likoff (1998a, p. 198) and Kehl-Bodrogi (1988, pp. 19, 142ff.) mention the theory of 1001 reincarnations. In the teachings of my mu’rsit reincarnation played an important role as the principal mechanism for man’s improvement, which is the task and goal of mankind. He insisted that reincarnations took place at intervals of 2000 years. The notion of 1001 reincarnations at intervals of 2000 years yields the information that the lifespan of an ‘era’ should amount to 2 million years.
Emanations

The different levels of emanation from God are described by Birge (1965, p. 116) and Dierl (1985, pp. 65-72; cf. Bumke, 1995, p. 114). I received similar instruction, but gradually, and with references to the philosophy behind the Vedic sacred writings, the Old and New Testaments, the Qur'an and Buddhism. It was underlined that there only exists one and the same religion and that each cult usually degenerates into establishing a priesthood and a hierarchy, which use their real or presumed and, with the passing of time, invariably degraded knowledge to control fellow men and societies in order to obtain privileges.

Consequently new prophets emerge to preach the original message, which briefly can be summarized as 'love thy neighbour'. The tuition I received mixed vocabularies and names from several religions and thus, at least initially, gave a rather bewildering and sometimes contradictory impression. This was probably intentional, first as part of a probationary period of teaching, and later because the stages of instruction should be given in a certain order, in order that new elements could overrule those given earlier. However, it depicted a clear chain of emanation from Universe and God to spiritual man, man on earth, animals, plants and minerals (cf. Me’likoff, 1998a, p. 121).

Angels

But somewhere between God and man there existed different categories of angels—arche, archangels and angels—whom I had great difficulty in integrating into the chain. Apparently they had originally constituted ‘mankind’ in earlier ‘worlds’, ‘eras’ or civilizations, possibly connected to other planets. As spiritual beings they belonged to a higher level than man but on the other hand they represented failed ‘worlds’ and are for this reason used as God’s messengers to man or as helpers to mankind. By ‘failed’ is meant that these creatures/men from earlier ‘worlds’ did not succeed in carrying out God’s command to develop their ‘world’ to perfection. Angels on different levels may thus have been ‘Perfect Men’ (see below) in earlier ‘worlds’. Spirits from ordinary beings in these ‘worlds’ may, in accordance with their qualities, also exist either as helpers, or as tempters, leading men astray. (Compare Lucifer’s refusal to obey God’s command to the angels to worship man.) In any case it seems difficult to classify these different angels as parts of the direct chain of emanation from God to minerals in our present world. Both Birge (1965, p. 117) and Dierl (1985, p. 71) mention angels in connection with the chain of emanation. A hypothetical interpretation will be given below.
The chain of emanation

The instruction of my mursit regarding the chain of emanation and the place of man in it can be summarized in the following levels. This is related to the schemes of Birge and Dierl, but much simpler:

1. God/Universe
2. God/Truth
2b/3a. Perfect man
3b. Spiritual man


The levels will be commented upon in reverse order.

7, 6 and 5 require no special explanation. A movement upward by way of reincarnation, so to speak, belongs to the system. Animals at least were said to be guided by 'spiritual selves' (see 3b below), not individually but as species—information which appears alien to the system and can perhaps be explained as being part of the developmental character of the instruction.

4. Man on earth: human beings as we see and know them on earth belong to this category. They are reincarnated in accordance with their behaviour as outlined below under 3b. If their lives have not been up to standard, a reincarnation downwards, to animals, is possible. The fate of an evil man might be disintegration into atoms to be dispersed in the realm of minerals.

3b. Spiritual man, or the spiritual self: every human being on earth is an emanation of an astral, shining or spiritual self. This spiritual self is androgynous and time and again sends part of itself down to earth as a man or woman with the task of improving itself in different incarnations, in different social positions, etc., in order to develop into higher degrees of perfection. The hope is that each reincarnation will lead to improvement and the ultimate goal is to become a 'Perfect Man' (see below).

It seems that the spiritual self is God on the lower level, to whom man directs his prayers. The spiritual self seems to be the voice of conscience, i.e. possibly the Holy Spirit in the Christian Trinity.

3a/2b. A Perfect Man has achieved what a Christian would call freedom from sin. At this level man on earth is completely united with his spiritual self and fully initiated—indicating that there exist lower degrees of initiation at level 4. To be fully initiated means to be united with God at level 2 but obviously with the option or duty of being reborn time and again (cf. Mahayana Buddhism).
A Perfect Man is not subject to but the master of the laws of nature, a quality which would explain, for example, the miracles performed by Christ. A fully initiated Person can move unhindered in time and space (cf. Shamanism). Other examples of Perfect Men are Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Muhammad and Ali. Possibly this level corresponds to the Son in the Christian Trinity.

On the earth there are always simultaneously about 300 Perfect Men (or 366 corresponding to the number of days in a leap year). The unknown period in the life of Christ is explained as being a time of tuition and initiation in the 'temples of Egypt'.

Some fully initiated people seem to live a secluded and secret life in celibacy and avoiding all worldliness. The words of the Bible 'to cast pearls before swine' relate to the necessity of hiding the inner meaning of the religious teachings from the ignorant masses, who lack the capacity to understand them. Some Perfect Men, such as Christ and Buddha, seem to have been criticized for having disclosed too much.

Could this degree of initiation correspond to the second highest in Bektas­hism, i.e. marifet, insight?

As mentioned above it seems difficult to find a place for the various angels in the chain of emanation. They could, however, be regarded as Perfect Men from earlier 'worlds'. As such they should have achieved union with God, which is also valid for Perfect Men in this world. Consequently they should all belong to the same level in the chain of emanation, i.e. 2b/3a.

2. Truth is God as intelligible to Man on earth. Possibly this level corresponds to God the Father in the Christian Trinity and the Allah of Islam.

Could this degree correspond to the previously mentioned highest degree of initiation in Bektashism, among others, that is hakikat, truth?

1. God is beyond conceiving; he is the Universe, present everywhere and consequently immovable.

If it is correct that the levels of emanation, including the transitory stage 2b/3a, are eight, this could be connected with the fact that the number 'eight' apparently carries a symbolic importance. Me'likoff quotes amyth about Haji Bektashi's death which relates that the Sultan ordered the construction of a mausoleum with an octagonal cupola—and an octagonal shape is not uncommon in Bektashi buildings—'en l'honneur du huitieme Imam' (Me'likoff, 1998a, p. 83), maybe a reference to the seven imams plus Haji Bektashi Veli, which would seem to indicate that the teachings described above belong to Sevener rather than Twelver Shicism (Dierl, 1985, p. 26). If special importance is to be attac­
A Surviving Neoplatonism: On The Creed of The Bektashi Order. Conversations With A Mürsit

hed to the number eight, it should be observed at this stage that in Neoplatonism (see below) a connection is to be found with the ogdoad, the eighth sphere above the seven planets, according to the Corpus Hermeticum (Copenhaver, 1992, pp. 6, 117). It can be interpreted as the dwelling of the Perfect Man.

Nowadays Betashism’s belonging to Twelver Shi’ism seems not to be questioned which perhaps could be explained by a habit grown out of taqiyya, little importance being attached to religious formalities, which are rejected on principle.

**Love thy neighbour**

This is the essence and core of religion and the measure by which human progress is evaluated.

Dogmas and rituals are worthless; Confucius is reported to have said that it is possible to get ordinary people to follow but not to understand (cf. the parable of ‘pearls before the swine’). In Sunnism, like other formal religious prescriptions, the Ten Commandments and rules regarding praying, fasting, forbidden food, etc. are regarded as belonging to the Law which the masses are forced to obey by complying with formalities and dogmas. By initiation into a higher degree of knowledge and awareness, and thereby learning and understanding the essence and core of religion, a person is no longer bound by these formalities as contained in the Shari’a, for example. He or she is then enlightened enough to follow the Way by obeying the voice of conscience and thus to proceed alone by carrying out the religious commandment not to harm fellow human beings but to love his or her neighbour. (Compare the last sentence of Corpus Hermeticum XII: ‘There is but one religion of God, and that is not to be evil.’) This teaching contains a social obligation to strive for the general well-being and welfare of mankind, which is also an imperative in the political field. Everybody’s task is to improve himself through reincarnations in order to arrive at the goal, to become a Perfect Man.

**Trinity**

The concept of the Trinity was a recurrent theme in the instruction and this should perhaps be understood as a way of facilitating the reception of the instruction for a Christian pupil. Nevertheless, the concept remained unclear and is conveyed here only tentatively.

1. God the Father (cf. level 2 above) seems to be the God of Heaven, beyond reach and accordingly taking interest in mankind in general rather than in the lives of individual human beings on earth (level 4).

2. God the Son seems to correspond to the Perfect Man who has achieved union with God, i.e. level 3b/2a above, represented by Abraham, Moses, Jesus,
Buddha, Muhammad and Ali, among others, according to the various faiths. Could these be compared to saints or angels?

3. God the Holy Spirit seems then to correspond to the Spiritual Self, the ‘Voice of Conscience, guiding man on his way to perfection and union with God.

A Surviving Neoplatonism

Does the phrase ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ reflect these three levels, and if so, how? Could one venture to translate the phrase as: ‘I am the tarnkat, the marifet and the hakikat’? Such reflections, however, remain extremely tentative.

The central role given to mankind in Bektashism should be remembered. It was illustrated during the ‘Alevi Days of Culture’, organized in Stockholm in March 1997 by Alevis living in Sweden. The headline on posters and programmes read ‘God is Man’, which becomes more intelligible when seen against the background set out above. Because of the emanation chain, mankind, like everything else, stands in a direct relationship to God. In the Islamic context the Trinity is composed of Allah, Muhammad and Ali, and Ali is given the dominant role, like Christ for many Christians. In the Bektashi context God seems to be beyond reach and Muhammad is clearly eclipsed by Ali. Muhammad often appears to be identified with Ali to such an extent that it is difficult to avoid the impression that this is done in order to avoid the embarrassment of completely neglecting him. These aspects of the instruction were unclear and the possibility should not be excluded that I have over-interpreted them in order to arrive at a comprehensible picture.

On the Neoplatonic Roots of Bektashism

The central theme of the tuition given by the mu‘ṣrit contained two main elements: the chain of emanation and the development to a Perfect Man through reincarnation. These concepts hardly concord with the image of God the Creator of the monotheistic religions. It was, however, claimed that the Bible and the Qur’an contain hidden messages (batinism) proving these views and that these are explicit for the initiated. These messages become much less hidden if they are set in their context of the Hellenistic conception of the world which dominated the region and the period in which Christianity and Islam emerged. Even a concise review of their prevalence in Hellenistic philosophy is enough to demonstrate how the ideas set out above illustrate the common origin of Alevi–Bektashi and Western thought.

In his chapter on the relationship of Bektashism to other beliefs Birge mentions rural Alevism, Sunnism, Shi‘ism, shamanism, Neoplatonism and Christianity (Birge, 1965, pp. 210–218). He emphasizes that the mysticism prevalent in Bektashism, as well as in Islam in general, is inherited to a great extent from Neoplatonism. He traces the tradition by way of Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240) and
A Surviving Neoplatonism: On The Creed of The Bektashi Order. Conversations With A Mursit

Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037) to Plotinus and further back to Plato and Pythagoras. It should in this context be stressed that from the point of view of Sufism it is not a question of inheritance or tradition, but of an experience lived by each individual Sufi in person (Idries Shah, 1971, p. 161).

Hellenistic culture was widely embraced by the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and was open to be appropriated by the Arabs when they extended their territory under the banner of Islam. The works of the philosophers of antiquity were available in Syria and were translated into Arabic, later to return and make a lasting impression on Western scholars. The prevalence of Neoplatonism in Anatolia in the times of Julian the Apostate is affirmed by John Julius Norwich (1990, pp. 94, 228), who also calls attention to the Persian King Chosroes’ enthusiastic welcoming of the Greek philosophers and scholars who sought refuge in Persia after Emperor Justinian’s closure of Plato’s Academy in Athens in 529.

The reception in Persia of the heritage of ancient knowledge is confirmed by Hourani, who also stresses the importance of Ibn Sina and Ibn al-Arabi for teaching the theories of emanation and the Perfect Man. He also draws attention to al-Birùnîs (973–1048) comparison of Greek and Indian thinking (Hourani, 1992, pp. 60–61, 135–140, 142).

The inspiration originates with Plotinus who calls the origin of all things ‘the absolute and irrevocably One’ (the Good) (Plotinos, 1953, pp. 378–379) from which the world emerges ‘like concentric circles in diminishing clarity, perfection and existence’ and ‘pluralism streams out of unity’ (Ahlberg, 1952, p. 204), also described in the words: ‘the world forms a series of diminishing spirituality’ (Plotinos, 1953, p. xi). It should be added that the flow of emanation is double, one downwards from God and one upwards returning to God.

Aristotle imagines a series or chain from pure matter to pure form. The highest principle is immovable and identified with God, whose ‘activity is contemplating his own contemplation’ (Ahlberg, 1952, p. 156; Bhagavad-Gita, IV–V). This aspect was absent from my mursit’s tuition but is reminiscent of Dierl’s description of God at the highest level as lacking knowledge of himself. God’s will to get to know himself takes the shape of the chain of emanation (Dierl, 1985, p. 66). The theory of Perfect Man is also to be found in Aristotle, who distinguishes him from the morally good man: ‘The most perfect human fulfilment is found to lie not in moral action . . . but in intellectual contemplation’ (Aristotle, 1976, p. 40). In the present context this would imply that the morally advanced man follows the way (tarikat), while the Perfect Man is United with God through contemplation and thereby has risen beyond the earlier stages to truth (hakikat).
Plato supported the idea of reincarnation: 'The soul having led a sensible, pure and righteous life and having liberated itself from the dross of sensualism, will after death move there [to the world of ideas]. But the soul who has been submerged in sensualism must be purified through a number of reincarnations, until being worthy of rising to his original home' (Ahlberg, 1952, p. 143). Also in the Phaedrus there are clear indications of the theories of emanation and of the Perfect Man (Plato, 1953, pp. 471, 479, 483).

The theory of transmigration is traced back to Pythagoras (sixth century BC), who is supposed to have learnt it in Egypt or the Middle East (Ahlberg, 1952, p. 43). In this way the circle returns to the repeated references of my mus'risit to the origin of the creed in the 'Egyptian temples'. Other eastern and shamanistic influences on levism–Bektashism are also evident but they lie outside the framework of this survey, the aim of which has been limited to showing the survival of Neoplatonic ideas in Anatolia until our own time, and to demonstrating that they are not restricted to intellectual Bektashism but are also applied as living concepts in popular Alevism.

Tolerance and harmony between believers in different faiths are a hallmark of democratic societies. They are also a prerequisite for the European Union, especially in its phase of enlargement and consolidation. This means that the forces of pluralism and secularism must constantly be secured afresh. In this respect the Alevi constitute an asset not only for Turkey and other possible candidates, but for all Europeans. As has been illustrated in the foregoing account of the origins of their concepts, Alevism and Western thought stand closer to each other than either may realize.

Notes

1. The word 'serf' is preferred to the more commonly used 'slave' as they were not bought and sold but tied to their master the Sultan in a way that is reminiscent of the peasants in medieval Europe being tied to the land of their feudal lords as serfs and villeins.
2. This account is based on corresponding sections in Cornell (2001).
3. A description of the method is to be found in the relevant chapters of Idries Shah (1971).

References


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