Religious Aspects of Modernization in Turkey and Japan

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The process of modernization of the “backward” nations such as Turkey and Japan, which will be considered here, involves changes in the value system as well as economic, political, and social changes. In traditional societies the value system tends to be what Howard Becker calls “prescriptive.” A prescriptive system is characterized by the comprehensiveness and specificity of its value commitments and by its consequent lack of flexibility. Motivation is frozen, so to speak, through commitment to a vast range of relatively specific norms governing almost every situation in life. Most of these specific norms, usually including those governing social institutions, are thoroughly integrated with a religious system which invokes ultimate sanctions for every infraction. Thus changes in economic or political institutions, not to speak of family and education, in traditional societies tend to have ultimate religious implications. Small changes will involve supernatural sanctions.

Yet such a society, when faced with grave dislocations consequent to Western contact, must make major changes in its institutional structure if it is to survive. What changes must be made in the organization of the value system so that these structural changes may go forward?

We may say that the value system of such a society must change from a prescriptive type to a “principial” type, to borrow again from Becker. Traditional societies, as we have said, tend to have a normative system, in which a comprehensive, but uncodified, set of relatively specific norms governs concrete

behavior. But in a modern society an area of flexibility must be gained in economic, political, and social life in which specific norms may be determined in considerable part by short-term exigencies in the situation of action, or by functional requisites of the relevant social subsystems. Ultimate or religious values lay down the basic principles of social action; thus such a normative system is called “principial,” but the religious system does not attempt to regulate economic, political, and social life in great detail, as in prescriptive societies. Looking at this process another way, we may say that there must be a differentiation between religion and ideology, between ultimate values and proposed ways in which these values may be put into effect. In traditional prescriptive societies there is no such discrimination. Difference of opinion on social policy is taken to imply difference as to religious commitment. The social innovator necessarily becomes a religious heretic. But in modern society there is a differentiation between the levels of religion and social ideology which makes possible greater flexibility at both levels.

How is the normative system in a traditional society to be changed from prescriptive to principial, and how is the differentiation of the religious and ideological levels to be effected, especially in the face of the concerted effort of the old system to avoid any changes at all? I would assert that only a new religious initiative, only a new movement which claims religious ultimacy for itself, can successfully challenge the old value system and its religious base. The new movement, which arises from the necessity to make drastic social changes in the light of new conditions, is essentially ideological and political in nature. But, arising as it does in a society in which the ideological level is not yet recognized as having independent legitimacy, the new movement must take on a religious coloration in order to meet the old system on its own terms. Even when such a movement is successful in effecting major structural changes in the society and in freeing motivation formerly frozen in traditional patterns so that considerable flexibility in economic and political life is attained, the problems posed by its own partly religious origin and its relation to the traditional religious system may still be serious indeed.

Let us turn to the example of Turkey. Ottoman Turkey in the eighteenth century was a traditionalistic society with a prescriptive value system. Virtually all spheres of life were theoretically under the authority of the religious law, the Shari‘ah. Indeed, the government was supposed to have an area of freedom within the law. But this freedom had become narrowly restricted. Precedents of governmental procedure were tacitly assimilated to the religious law.

Beginning with Selim III in the late eighteenth century, a series of reforming sultans and statesmen attempted to make major changes in Turkish society in an effort to cope with increasingly desperate internal and external conditions. While some changes were made, especially in areas remote from the central strongholds of the religious law, the reforming party was unable to attain any ultimate legitimation in the eyes of the people, and, although Turkish
society was shaken to its foundations, periods of reform alternated with periods of blind reaction in which reformers were executed or banished.

The last of these reactionary periods was that of the rule of the despotic Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who was overthrown in 1908 by a coup of young army officers whom we know as the “Young Turks.” By this time it had become clear to leading intellectuals that more was needed than another interim of liberal reform. They saw that a basic change in the cultural foundation of Turkish society was demanded if the long-delayed changes in economic, political, and social structure were to be effected. Some felt that a modern purified Islam could provide the new cultural basis, but orthodox Islam was so deeply imbedded in the fabric of traditional society that the Islamic modernists found little response in the religious party. Others looked to Western liberal democracy as a satisfactory foundation. Those sensitive to the mind of the Turkish masses, however, pointed out that the Turkish people would never accept a value system so obviously “made abroad” and which could so easily be condemned by the conservatives with the stigma of unbelief.

It was Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist much influenced by Durkheim, who ardently championed Turkish nationalism as the only satisfactory cultural foundation for the new Turkey. Gökalp found the referent for all symbols of ultimate value in society itself. His answer to the religious conservatives was that the true Islam was that of the Turkish folk, not of the effete religious hierarchy which was largely educated in the Arabic and Persian languages rather than the Turkish language. Here at last was an ideology to which the people could respond with emotion and which could challenge religious conservatism on its own grounds.

But the course of world history did as much as Gökalp’s eloquence to decide in favor of the nationalist alternative for Turkey. Not only did World War I shear Turkey of her empire, but the subsequent invasions of Anatolia threatened the very life of the nation itself. Mustafa Kemal, who led the ultimately successful effort of national resistance, partly chose and partly was impelled to make the nation the central symbol in his subsequent drive for modernization. As a result, the highest value and central symbol for the most articulate sections of the Turkish people became not Islam but Turkism, or nationalism, or Kemalism, or, simply, “the Revolution.” Having a strong national and personal charismatic legitimacy, Mustafa Kemal, later known as “Ataturk,” was able to create a far-reaching cultural revolution in which the place of religion in the society was fundamentally altered. We may note some of the landmarks in this revolution. In 1924 the office of caliph was abolished. In the same year all religious schools were closed or converted into secular schools. The most important change of all took place in 1926: the Muslim Civil Law was abandoned and the Swiss Civil Code adopted almost without change. Finally, in 1928, the phrase in the constitution stating that
the religion of Turkey is Islam was deleted, and Turkey was declared a secular state. That the Turks were deeply conscious of what they were doing is illustrated by the following quotation from Mahmud Essad, the minister of justice under whom the religious law was abandoned:

The purpose of laws is not to maintain the old customs or beliefs which have their source in religion, but rather to assure the economic and social unity of the nation. When religion has sought to rule human societies, it has been the arbitrary instrument of sovereigns, despots, and strong men. In separating the temporal and the spiritual, modern civilization has saved the world from numerous calamities and has given to religion an imperishable throne in the consciences of believers.5

This quotation illustrates well enough the transition from prescriptive to principial society and the differentiation of religion and ideology as two distinct levels. It is clear that the great advances of Turkish society in economic, political, and social life are based on this new cultural foundation. But implicit in Essad’s words are some of the yet unsolved problems about that new cultural pattern.

For Essad and other Turkish reformers “the Revolution” was a criterion for everything, even for the place of religion in society, and thus, whether consciously or not, they gave the revolution an ultimate, a religious, significance. The six principles upon which the constitution is based – republicanism, nationalism, populism, étatism, secularism, and revolution – are taken as self-subsisting ultimates. Thus the religious implications of the political ideology remain relatively unchecked. These express themselves in party claims to ultimate legitimacy and in an inability on the part of the party in power to accept the validity of an opposition, which are not in accord with the flexibility appropriate in a modern principial society.

On the other hand, Islam in Turkey has not on the whole been able to redefine its own self-image and face the theological issues involved in becoming a religion primarily, in Essad’s words, “enthroned in men’s consciences.” Nor has it been able to provide a deeper religious dimension of both legitimation and judgment of the six principles which are the basis of the new social life. It remains, on the whole, in a conservative frame of mind in which the ideological claims are considerable, thus still posing a threat, possibly a great one, to return the society to a less differentiated level of social organization. Considering the trend of the last forty years, however, we seem to be observing a differentiation in the process of becoming, but it is too soon to say that it has been entirely accomplished.

Japan, while illustrating the same general processes as Turkey, does so with marked differences in important details.6 Premodern Japan was a traditionalistic society with a prescriptive normative system closely integrated

4 Defining Secularization
with a religious system composed of a peculiar Japanese amalgam of Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism. In the immediate premodern period, however, a conjuncture of the Confucian stress on loyalty and a revived interest in Shinto began to have explosive consequences. The actual rule at this time was in the hands of a military dictator, or Shogun, hereditary in the Tokugawa family. The emperor was relegated to purely ceremonial functions in the palace at Kyoto. But, as economic and social conditions deteriorated under Tokugawa rule, important elements in the population became alienated from the political status quo. They proved extremely receptive to the religious message of the revival Shintoists and legitimist Confucians, who insisted that the true sovereign was the emperor and that the Shogun was a usurper. According to their conception, the emperor is divine, descended from the sun-goddess, and his direct rule of the Japanese people could be expected to bring in a virtually messianic age.

This movement was already vigorous when Perry’s ships moved into Tokyo Bay in 1853. The inability of the Tokugawa government to keep foreigners from desecrating the sacred soil of Japan added the last fuel to the flames of resentment, and, with the slogan “Revere the Emperor; expel the barbarians,” a successful military coup overthrew the Tokugawa and restored the emperor to direct rule.

I would suggest that Japan was at this point, in 1868, virtually at the beginning of serious Western influence, in a position that Turkey reached only in the early 1920’s under Mustafa Kemal. But she reached it in quite a different way. Unlike Turkey, one of the very foundations of the old traditional order in Japan, the divine emperor, provided the main leverage for the radical reorganization of that order. The young samurai who put through the Meiji Restoration used the central value of loyalty to the emperor to legitimize the immense changes they were making in all spheres of social life and to justify the abandoning of many apparently sacred prescriptions of the traditional order. No other sacredness could challenge the sacredness inherent in the emperor’s person.

Here we see an ideological movement, essentially political in nature, whose aim was the strengthening and thus the modernizing of Japan, taking a much more openly religious coloration than was the case in Turkey. There was in the early Meiji period an attempt to make Shinto into the national religion and a determined effort to root out all rival religions. Christianity was sharply discouraged, but it was on Buddhism, the chief native religious tradition with little relation to the imperial claims to divinity, that the ax fell. The Buddhist church was disestablished, and all syncretism with Shinto prohibited. In the words of D. C. Holtom:

Members of the royal family were debarred from continuing in Buddhist orders; Buddhist ceremonials in the imperial palace were prohibited; Buddhist temples all over the land were attacked and destroyed. A blind
6 Defining Secularization

fury of misplaced patriotic zeal committed precious Buddhist writings, fine sculptures, bronzes, wood-carvings, and paintings to the flames, broke them in pieces, cast them away, or sold them for a pittance to whosoever would buy. Buddhist priests were prohibited from participating in Shinto ceremonies. They were subjected to beatings and threatened with military force. Monks and nuns in large numbers were obliged to take up secular callings.7

Grave foreign protests on the subject of Christianity plus serious unrest among the masses devoted to Buddhism forced the abandoning of the policy of religious persecution. Liberal elements within the country agitated for the complete separation of church and state, and the Meiji leaders were brought to understand that religious freedom was a principle of the modern society they were trying to establish. Consequently, the government included in the constitution of 1889 a clause guaranteeing freedom of religion. At the same time it continued its support of the state Shinto cult, whose main aim was the veneration of the emperor. It solved this seeming contradiction by declaring that state Shinto was not a religion but merely an expression of patriotism. Nevertheless, the existence of the national cult imposed a real limitation on the independence and effectiveness of the private religious bodies. Though in the 1920’s there was a strong tendency to differentiate religion and ideology, in times of stress such as the late 1930’s and early 1940’s religion was completely subordinated to and fused with a monolithic ideology, an ideology which had demonic consequences both for Japan and for the rest of the world. The new, 1946, constitution, by disestablishing Shinto and deriving sovereignty from the people rather than from the sacred and inviolable emperor, theoretically completed the process of secularization.

But, in fact, serious religious problems remain. All religious groups with the exception of the Christians were compromised by their connection with the nationalistic orgy. In the absence of any really vigorous religious life, except for the popular faith-healing cults and the small Christian community, the religious impulses of the Japanese people find expression for the more radical in the symbol of socialism, for the conservatives in a longing for a new and more innocent version of state Shinto. Here, as in Turkey, the differentiation between religion and ideology remains to be completed.

Other examples of the processes we have been discussing come readily to mind. Communism is an example of a secular political ideology which successfully came to power in the prescriptive, religiously based societies of Russia and China. But communism itself makes an ultimate religious claim, and here, as in the case of Japan, a secular ideology claiming religious ultimacy has embarked on courses of action which hinder, rather than further, the transition to modern principal society. It is perhaps safe to say that alongside the serious political and economic problems which communism faces today is the perhaps even more serious cultural problem, the problem of the differentiation of the religious and ideological levels.
In conclusion, it seems worthwhile to stress that the process of secularization, which is in part what the transition from prescriptive to principial society is, does not mean that religion disappears. The function of religion in a principial society is different from that in a prescriptive society, but it is not necessarily less important. Moreover, in the very process of transition religion may reappear in many new guises. Perhaps what makes the situation so unclear is its very fluidity. Even in highly differentiated societies, such as our own, traditional religion, so deeply associated with the prescriptive past, is still in the process of finding its place in modern principial society.

Notes

1. This paper is a fragment of a larger study of the relations between religion and politics in modern Asia and the tentative conclusions put forward here may be altered as a result of the larger study. I am indebted to Niyazi Berkes and Talcott Parsons for reading earlier versions of this paper.
3. Throughout the discussion of Turkey I shall rely heavily on lectures and unpublished material of Niyazi Berkes, of the Islamic Institute at McGill University, who is undertaking a pioneering study of Turkish modernization.
4. A translation by Niyazi Berkes of selected writings of Ziya Gökalp is forthcoming.
6. For a more extensive treatment of the Japanese case, especially the premodern background see my Tokugawa Religion (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).