

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## Religion-State Relations in Turkey, the Prospect of European Union Membership and the Lutheran Doctrine of the 'Two Kingdoms'

HAKAN OLGUN

Turkey has been living with the prospect of joining the European Union (EU) for a long time. In the Proposal concerning Turkey's EU membership issued by the Commission of the European Communities on 8 November 2000, one of the medium-term political criteria is to 'further develop conditions for the enjoyment of freedom of thought, conscience and religion' (Proposal, 2000).

The criterion of improving conditions for religious freedom in Turkey needs to be placed in the context of Turkey as a secular state and related to the understanding and practice of secularism there. Secularism as practised in Turkey in fact limits religious rights and liberties in certain ways. In spite of the officially secular nature of the Turkish state, there is a government institution, the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA, *Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi*), which one might expect would ensure the protection of citizens' rights to practise religion. Reality is different, however.

There are two different understandings of religion in Turkey. The first is that religion is something that people practise as part of their traditional culture; and the second is that religion is something that the state defines, sometimes according to universal values and sometimes according to its compatibility with national criteria. In government institutions the assumption that religion is defined and limited by the state is very common. This is a consequence of a specific understanding of secularism in Turkey. Although the modern Turkish Republic defines itself as secular, it has always followed a restrictive policy which has been suspicious of religion. In the West, 'secularism' usually means that the state remains impartial in religious matters. In Turkey 'secularism' refers to the fact that the state adopts a hostile attitude towards religion which is not of the type promoted by the state as compatible with the system.

With this understanding of secularism, the state aims to promote a Turkish religion which will have national characteristics; in this way it aims to avoid the danger that religion will become politicised. The process of nationalising religion runs the risk, however, of challenging traditional aspects of religion. It is here that the basic problem within Turkish religious life is to be found: the suspicion that the state wishes to take religious life under its own direction and control through the DRA.

The relationship between religion and state as developed in Turkey and the understanding of secularism as practised there satisfy neither religious believers nor people with no religious belief. Meanwhile Turkey's prospective entry to the EU

involves a growing expectation that secularism as it is understood in the West—an impartial attitude on the part of the state towards religion in general—should be practised in Turkey as well. In recent years this has given rise to a good deal of discussion in Turkey on the subject of religion-state relations. The main contention is that the Western European principle of church-state separation will benefit the traditional understanding of religion among the people of Turkey. This understanding totally separates the authority fields of religion and the state, but provides criteria for a positive relationship between the two. It originated in the Protestant Reformation, and was developed particularly in the ‘Two Kingdoms’ doctrine of Lutheranism.

In this essay I shall first discuss the Lutheran ‘Two Kingdoms’ doctrine, then describe current religion-state relations in Turkey and the role of the DRA, and finally examine the possibility that the ‘theological laicism’ suggested by Lutheran Protestantism might be applicable in Turkey on its way to the EU.

### **The Lutheran Doctrine of the ‘Two Kingdoms’**

The Lutheran doctrine of the ‘Two Kingdoms’ provides spiritual and secular descriptions of church and state and determines their respective rights, authority and missions. In Lutheran theology the ‘church’ is not a human formation; it is a community formed by God by means of the Holy Spirit; the latter ‘calls for, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith’ (Concord, 1959, p. 345). Therefore ‘the church is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments, but is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men’s hearts’ (Concord, 1959, p. 169). The visible signs of this church are God’s Word and sacraments. The church is described as ‘the community formed by all believers in which the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to Gospel’ (Concord, 1959, p. 32).

This description underlines two ways of understanding the church. First, the church is a community that brings together all believers; it is the community in which the Gospel is preached and the sacraments administered, under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. As Luther puts it, God’s Word needs God’s community (the church); and God’s community needs God’s Word (Luther, 1999b, p. 151). Second, the church has a responsibility in the process of preaching God’s Word which covers both the Gospel and the Law. The Gospel concerns forgiveness of sins; it contains the good news that God forgives human beings and that salvation is through Christ (Concord, 1959, pp. 478–79). The Law has two aspects, civil and theological. Civil law reflecting God’s will aims at the prevention of evil and at providing people with a safe and orderly life. The function of civil law is preserving the social order rather than achieving religious salvation. Meanwhile the theological law that is part of God’s Word aims to make people aware of sinfulness and lead them to the Gospel. The church, therefore, must preach civil law in order to prevent earthly injustice and disorder, and theological law in order that people may be saved from sins. The most important mission of the church is to supervise the separation of the Law and the Gospel (Concord, 1959, p. 478).

The religious community brought together by the Holy Spirit—the church—needs no earthly authority other than the Holy Scripture. The ‘Two Kingdoms’ doctrine covers the earthly realm as well, however. The civil aspect of the Law, which is part of God’s Word, directly concerns the state. In fact, the state as well as the church was instituted by God. According to Lutheran teaching, ‘all governments in the world and all established rules and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of

good order' (Concord, 1959, p. 37). From this point of view, the state receives its authority and responsibility from God. Luther likens the authority of the civil administration to the authority of parents. By means of the state, God provides 'food, house and home, protection and security' for the people, just as parents take care of their children (Concord, 1959, p. 385). The divine mission of the state does not give it the authority to interfere in the religious field, however. The area of interest of the earthly authority is defined as 'things that are out of the Gospel'. The state is 'temporal power'; it 'does not protect the soul, but with the sword and physical penalties it protects body and goods from the power of others' (Concord, 1959, p. 82). The function of the state is no less important than that of the church. The Augsburg Confession states that 'the two authorities and the functions of the powers' should 'both be held in honor as the highest gifts of God on earth' (Concord, 1959, p. 83).

Even if the state fails to fight sin and evil and to maintain justice, Luther still accepts its authority as legitimate (Luther, 1999c, pp. 75–129). Furthermore, the legitimacy of the authority of the civil government has nothing to do with whether the rulers are Christians or not. Rulers and officials who are not Christian may also practise the aims of the earthly government, and even, in some cases, more successfully than Christian rulers. In terms of its functions, no particular kind of state administration is any more legitimate than any other. All administrative systems, including kingdoms and tyrannies, have the possibility of serving divine purposes (Haemig, 2003, p. 7). According to Lutheranism, however, just as there cannot be justice without order, so there cannot be order without justice. Hence, the state must enforce the law without placing itself above the law, because the ruler administrates on behalf of God, and therefore his authority is not absolute and discretionary. His duty is to pay attention to the conscience of the people under his administration.

The aim, then, is to achieve not an absolute separation of church and state but an interaction between them, as described in the 'Two Kingdoms' doctrine. Indeed, it is very difficult to envisage an absolute church-state separation; according to the 'Two Kingdoms' doctrine, such a separation is not even possible (Whale, 1955, pp. 296–97). In the Lutheran understanding, 'church' as the spiritual kingdom and 'state' as the worldly kingdom are the two forms of God's rule on earth. Christians live simultaneously in these two kingdoms. The Gospel does not absolve people from being subject to civil administration; on the contrary, it encourages them to obey this administration (Concord, 1959, p. 223). The state prevents evil, keeps order and regulates the rights of citizens. It thus creates the right conditions for the church to preach the Gospel. In view of the fact that this is the function of the state, the church encourages citizens to obey the state. There is therefore an inevitable interaction between church and state (Haemig, 2003, pp. 9–10). Lutheran teaching summarises the function of the church as follows:

The two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused, for the spiritual power has its commission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Hence it should not invade the function of the other, should not set up and depose kings, should not annul temporal laws or undermine obedience to government, should not make or prescribe to the temporal power laws concerning worldly matters. (Concord, 1959, p. 83)

The functions of church and state must not be mixed. The church does not make political statements and, in the same way, the state has no authority to tell the church how to preach the Gospel. The church-state relationship in the Lutheran

understanding has been defined as ‘institutional separation and functional interaction’ (Stumme, 2003, p. 56).

The reason why church and state have distinctive functions is that both of them obtain their authority from God. If the state goes beyond its limits and sets itself above the divine plan, practising absolute authority over its citizens on the basis of its own political power, Lutheranism advises passive disobedience (Luther, 1999c, pp. 111–12). The Augsburg Confession says that the Christian must obey the law of the earthly authority as long as it does not require him to commit a sin; but if it does, he must obey God rather than man (Acts. 5:29) (Concord, 1959, p. 38). ‘If the government tolerates me when I teach the Word,’ says Luther, ‘I hold it in honor and regard it with all respect as my superior. But if it says: “Deny God; put the Word aside”, then I no longer acknowledge it as the government’ (Luther, 1999a, Ge. 27:11).

It seems to me that a principle which I call ‘theological laicism’ underlies current church-state relations in many Christian countries. Unlike the Lutheran doctrine of the ‘Two Kingdoms’, it does not see the state as playing any sort of divinely-ordained role. However the church, on the other hand, does play such a role, and enjoys freedom to do so. Thus, the modern ideologies of our era cannot limit the immunity and liberty of the spiritual area.

### **Religion-State Relations in Turkey**

The question of the relationship between Islam, the traditional religion of Turkey, and the state has been an important dimension of the modernising process which has been the goal of the Republic of Turkey. When it was founded in 1923 the new republican state abolished all the regulations and institutions of the Ottoman state which related to religion, including the Caliphate and the *Shariyyah wa Awqaf Wakalati* (the administrative body for religion in the late Ottoman period); in 1924 the DRA was founded, to ‘deal with matters relating to the faith, prayer and ethical principles of the religion of Islam, to educate people about religion and to administer the mosques’ (Diyaset, 2005). The DRA was thus designed to supervise religious worship and ceremonies rather than to articulate a religious view on the activities of the state.

The Ottoman Empire was officially an *umma* (community of believers) made up of many nationalities. Muslims prayed and received religious education in Arabic, and the political administration of the *umma* was in the hands of the caliph, in the person of the sultan, located in Istanbul. The new republic, by contrast, originated as a nation-state based in Anatolia. In abolishing the caliphate it abolished the theoretical basis for the unified Islamic *umma*. The founders of the republic, who were aiming at the formation of a nation-state, started the process of nationalising Islam. This included the translation of the Quran and other religious texts from Arabic into Turkish, and the performance in Turkish of religious rituals such as *adhān* (the call to prayer), *tekbīr* (the phrase ‘Allahu akbar’, ‘Allah is great’) and *hutbah* (sermons by the imam).

Lutheranism influenced many modernising ideologists of the republic, at least insofar as it was connected with the formation of German national identity. It was argued that the process whereby Germans became a nation involved the standardisation and modernisation of the national language, which in turn strengthened national consciousness and led to the liberation of Germans from the dual yoke of the Latin language and Rome; and that this process had started with Luther’s translation of the Bible into German. It was argued that if the Turkish religion were nationalised, the Quran translated into Turkish, prayers offered in Turkish, and mosques modernised

like Protestant churches, developments in Turkey would follow a similar course (Cündioğlu, 1999, p. 90). It was argued that in order for Islam to become the Turkish religion it would be necessary for prayer and worship to be in the native language, which is the language of the heart (Cündioğlu, 1998, p. 76).

The DRA, as the new state institution responsible for religion, played an important role in nationalising Islam in the early years of the republic. It conveyed the state's decisions to the faithful, sending round circulars in Anatolia arguing that performing religious rituals in Turkish would be 'suitable for the national purpose' (Cündioğlu, 1998, pp. 104–5, 108). The nationalisation of Islam involved many difficulties both from the theological and from the traditional point of view. The DRA played no role in conveying such difficulties to the state authorities; its role was simply to convey the state's decisions to the mosque. Soon it was decreed that anyone issuing the call to prayer in Arabic rather than Turkish would be severely punished. The DRA inspected mosques to ensure that religious nationalisation policies were being followed.

Compulsory Turkish for the call for prayer was never widely acceptable in Turkish society, however, and it was abolished in 1950, when Turkey entered the era of multiple political parties. Indeed, the Turkish people reacted negatively to the whole project of nationalising religion which was pursued in the early years of the republic. At that time the DRA was seen as the vehicle for effecting an unpopular state policy, and it has retained this reputation ever since. Nevertheless, over 80 years since the foundation of the Turkish republic, the DRA is still at the core of debate on religion-state and religion-people relations in Turkey. The DRA is a political body and its directors are appointed by the government. Criticism continues to be levelled at the DRA, its activities and its mission. Some of the main criticisms are as follows.

First of all, the DRA is criticised for maintaining state policies. Just as in the pre-Republican period religion was used for justification of the dynasty and the Caliphate, so today the DRA promotes the republican government (Yar, 2001, pp. 45–46). The term 'justification' (*mesrūlastırma*) is important in religious discourse in Turkey today. For instance, the concluding declaration of a recent DRA consultation (15–18 May 2002) states that the use of religious sources in a discretionary way as a justification device by the leaders of some religious groups or by individuals who consider themselves as scholars in religion must be prevented. The same document speaks of the need to combat 'marginal tendencies in religious matters' (Güncel, 2002). The DRA is criticised for trying to monopolise the interpretation of religious sources and to make its own interpretation compulsory (Yar, 2001, p. 46).

A related criticism is that the DRA is failing to fulfil its real function. Although it is a state institution, the DRA is said to have a conciliatory mission between religion and the state; on the contrary, though, it exclusively promotes the government's understanding of religion-state relations (Zengin, 1995, p. 9), in the context of 'nationalisation' (Yar, 2001, p. 45). A former director of the DRA, for example, took every opportunity to speak of the DRA's effectiveness in promoting national unity (Yılmaz, 1996, pp. 157–60).

Finally, the DRA is criticised for keeping a closed mind to alternatives. Its training programmes and the services it provides are based on mainstream Islam; it keeps away from all sectarianism (Yar, 2001, p. 44). The DRA is thus criticised not only by representatives of the mainstream Sunni tradition but also by the Alawites, who represent another interpretation of Islam in Turkey. The Alawites would indeed generally reject the idea of cooperation with a body like the DRA; they see religion as essentially a civil phenomenon which should not be under state control. Some argue that a body like the DRA is inappropriate for a secular state (Kutlu, 2001, p. 24). The Alawites tend to ally themselves with non-religious political groups.

Critics of the DRA thus say that state administration is restrictive of religion and that in any case a secular state should not have an official institution responsible for religion. They propose two basic solutions.

The first is that the DRA should be an autonomous juridical public entity (Hatemi, 1998, pp. 198–99). Even some DRA representatives support the idea that the DRA should be autonomous, with an elected director (Özbuğday, 1998, pp. 253–54). It is not possible to claim that the state is impartial to all faiths as long as the DRA is under state control (Akdemir, 1998, p. 257). Some sociologists argue, however, that giving the DRA an autonomous status would mean that there were two authoritarian structures, religious and secular (Zengin, 1995, p. 13).

The second proposal is to abolish the DRA altogether, in line with the 'laicist' principle of independence of state and religion. According to this principle, religious faiths are recognised as important cultural elements, and citizens may choose and practise their faith freely as long as they do not infringe public security, public ethics, public health or the rights and liberties of others; their activities are subject to secular law (Hatemi, 1998, p. 199). As long as the DRA retains its present place in the state structure, 'official laicism' as practised in Turkey will grow more and more different from the laicism practised elsewhere (Kılıçbay, 1998a, pp. 133–34).

The present state of the debate may be summarised as follows. There is criticism of the status of the DRA as a state institution under political control. Turning the DRA into an independent structure, however, would be likely to mean the continuation of the understanding that there is just one type of Islam in Turkey. It would also be likely to introduce two different institutional approaches, 'secular' and 'religious', and might eventually bring about a dualist relationship like the church-state understanding in Catholicism. Meanwhile some fear that complete abolition of the DRA might lead to socio-religious chaos: the Turkish people, after all, have always led their religious lives according to the regulations of the DRA.

### **Possible Future Developments**

The principle of laicism determines religion-state relations in Turkey. As a constitutional principle, laicism protects the state against religion but also enables the state to interfere in the religious field using its legislative and executive powers. It seems that the state assumes that religious liberty would undermine its authority. There are for example some limitations on even the expression of religious belief in some government institutions.

Unlike Christianity, Islam does not recognise a separation between the spiritual and secular realms. Political power in the Muslim world has usually defined its authority in Islamic terms. Islam has been a commonly accepted value-system for the state and the individual alike, in the context of which the state and the citizens have worked out their responsibilities to each other. This functional relationship has been to some extent undermined, however, by the modern values which determine political, social and juridical relationships in society today. In Turkey, Islam has become a 'people's Islam', consisting of worship and ethical principles; but this 'civil' model of Islam has always been under the supervision of the state through the DRA.

Although the traditional understanding of the relationship between religion and the state is different in Christianity and Islam, in my view the understanding of religion-state relations as it has developed in countries with a Lutheran heritage is applicable to Turkey today. The French Revolution was not only an antimonarchical but also an

anticlerical movement. Laicism in France, as a result, is protective against religion. The relations between religion and the state seem to be more positive in countries with a Lutheran Protestant heritage. According to Lutheran doctrine, the state should confine itself to its secular mission, preventing evil and injustice, while religion, consisting of worship and ethical and religious training, is the preserve of the community of believers. In Luther's understanding, the state had a divinely-appointed role. This is not the modern understanding. Luther had not experienced the development of modern democracy. Governments which are formed according to universal democratic principles express the authority of the people rather than the will of God. Luther taught that a religious believer has the right to exercise passive disobedience if the state interferes in the religious field. He did not explain in detail how this disobedience might be expressed; but clearly it would involve the withdrawal of popular support for the government. Yet just such a response is appropriate in a modern democratic society. A government which interferes in the religious sphere and ignores the immunity of that sphere will lose popular support and with it the people's mandate.

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, one of the EU entry criteria for Turkey is that it improve conditions for freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In my view the most productive way forward in this respect will be to concentrate on the DRA and its function in the Turkish state, and to revise this role, and hence religion-state relations in Turkey, in the light of religion-state relations as they have evolved in countries with a Lutheran heritage of 'theological laicism'.

## References

- Akdemir, S. (1998) 'Maddelerin Müzakere ve Oylanması' ('Negotiating and voting for the articles'), in M. Gündem (ed.), *İslam ve Laiklik (Islam and Laicism)* (Istanbul, Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), pp. 219–67.
- Concord (1959) *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of The Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and tr. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press).
- Cündioğlu, D. (1998) *Türkçe Kur'an ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi (Turkish Translation of the Quran and Republican Ideology)* (Istanbul, Kitabevi).
- Cündioğlu, D. (1999) *Türkçe İbadet (Prayer in Turkish)* (Istanbul, Kitabevi).
- Diyanet (2005) Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Kuruluş ve Görevleri Hakkında 633 Sayılı Kanun, Madde 1 (Law no. 633, on the Establishment and Duties of the Department of Religious Affairs, Article 1), <http://www.diyaret.gov.tr/turkish/default.asp>.
- Güncel (2002) *Güncel Dinî Meseleler İstişare Toplantısı-I Sonuç Bildirgesi 2002 (Current Religious Issues Consultation Meeting-I: Final Communiqué 2002)* (Ankara, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Dini Yayınlar Dairesi Başkanlığı).
- Haemig, M. J. (2003) 'The confessional basis of Lutheran thinking on church-state issues', in J.R. Stumme and R.W. Tuttle (eds.), *The Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press), pp. 3–19.
- Hatemi, H. (1998) 'III. Komisyonun Çalışma Raporu' ('Activity report of Council III'), in M. Gündem (ed.), *İslam ve Laiklik (Islam and Laicism)* (Istanbul, Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), pp. 197–99.
- Kılıçbay, M. (1998a) 'Dünyada ve Türkiye'de Laiklik' ('Laicism in the world and in Turkey'), in M. Gündem (ed.), *İslam ve Laiklik (Islam and Laicism)* (Istanbul, Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), pp. 123–89.
- Kılıçbay, M. (1998b) 'Maddelerin Müzakere ve Oylanması' ('Negotiating and voting for the articles'), in M. Gündem (ed.), *İslam ve Laiklik (Islam and Laicism)* (Istanbul, Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), pp. 219–67.



- Kutlu, S. (2001) 'Alevilik-Bektaşiliğin Diyanet'te Temsili Problemi' ('The problem of representation of Alawism and Bektashism in the Department of Religious Affairs'), *İslamiyat*, 4, 1, pp. 21–40.
- Luther, M. (1999a) 'Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26–30', in J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 5 (St Louis, MO, Concordia Publishing House) (CD ROM).
- Luther, M. (1999b) 'Church and Ministry III', in J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 41 (St Louis, MO, Concordia Publishing House) (CD ROM).
- Luther, M. (1999c) 'The Christian in Society II', in J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (St Louis, MO, Concordia Publishing House) (CD ROM).
- Özbuğday, Ş. (1998) 'Maddelerin Müzakere ve Oylanması' ('Negotiating and voting for the articles'), in M. Gündem (ed.), *İslam ve Laiklik (Islam and Laicism)* (Istanbul, Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), pp. 219–67.
- Proposal (2000) *Proposal for a Council Decision on the Principles, Priorities, Intermediate Objectives and Conditions Contained in the Accession Partnership with the Republic of Turkey* (Commission of the European Communities, 8 November), [http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/turkey/pdf/ap\\_turk\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/turkey/pdf/ap_turk_en.pdf).
- Stumme, J. R. (2003) 'A Lutheran tradition on church and state', in J.R. Stumme and R.W. Tuttle (eds.), *The Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press), pp. 51–68.
- Whale, J. S. (1955) *The Protestant Tradition: an Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Yar, E. (2001) 'Dinin Siyasallaşması ve Dinsel Bürokrasi' ('Politicisation of religion and religious bureaucracy'), *İslamiyat*, 4, 1, pp. 41–49.
- Yılmaz, M. N. (1996) 'Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı ve Milli Bütünlüğümüz' ('The Department of Religious Affairs and national unity'), in *Tartışılan Değerler Açısından Türkiye (Turkey and the Values under Discussion)* (Ankara, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları), pp. 157–60.
- Zengin, B. (1995) 'Din-Devlet İlişkileri Bağlamında Diyanet' ('The Department of Religious Affairs and state-religion relations'), *İzlenim*, 21, pp. 6–15.