

## Editorial

### *Religion, Identity and Minorities in the Middle East – Strategies and Developments*

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The consideration of faith and ethnic minorities in the Middle East remains today, as it has been for some time, immensely relevant. In this issue, we see this subject approached from a refreshingly wide perspective. Yet, in spite of their diversity, the topics addressed by the contributors reflect many shared situations in today's Middle East, and possibly beyond, which often have their roots in mass migration, war and conflict, and globalisation. Through their work, we see once more the way that anthropology is uniquely qualified to reflect upon the reformulation of cultures in the modern world whilst simultaneously highlighting the fate of those who fall between the interstices of dominant political paradigms.

Erdentug's article on Christmas in Turkey is a fine example of this. Easily underestimated, the complexities of interaction between the West and Turkey bring into focus very quickly the question of cultural authenticity, the first theme of this issue, as globalisation intensifies. For instance, readers will remember the reaction of Prime Minister Erdoğan on Turkey's bid to join the EU yet again receiving a rebuff, when he pointed out that the EU's aims to modernise and achieve a tolerant society are the same as those of Turkey, and that he would be quite prepared to substitute the EU's rhetoric with his own 'Ankara way' to that effect. Likewise, Erdentug explores the way that the Christmas tree, long an established symbol in Christian societies, has gradually become appropriated by Turks as part of their New Year's Eve ceremony. This has been accompanied, more recently, by an increasing use of Santa Claus as a symbolic figure. While these are clearly innovations, we can hardly say that Christmas festivities in the West have the sole prerogative to use these ritual tokens. Such appropriations, even on a global scale, are likely to remain a feature of our social world, and a fascinating comparative project would be to trace the use of the Christmas tree and Santa Claus in other countries of the region.

The political connotations of any such borrowing are obvious and may quickly become more complex than they initially appear. This is evoked in the



article by Dağtaş, which discusses the debates surrounding the widespread and growing use of the headscarf in Turkey, a controversy that raises the questions of omission and commission, of compulsion and desire. The argument hinges almost entirely around the claim that women wearing the headscarf in public spaces have chosen to do so and the counterclaim that these women are either compelled to do so or that such an action has more to do with collective or political actions than free will. The political is clearly an important dimension, but, in addition, just as in the case of the Christmas tree and the emergence of New Year's Eve as a festival, it is possible to see these actions as a response against the deritualisation of communities in the present-day world. Living in a modern and atomised society has its advantages, but it is equally pleasant to have a badge of membership, whether expressed in clothing or in some other form, to indicate shared commitments and concerns. This seemingly simple approach changes the parameters of the argument away from the ideological and more towards the relationship between coercion and conformity as a general tension in our contemporary worlds – something that is brought nicely into focus by Dağtaş taking the military, with their emphasis on uniformity and obedience, as the setting for her article.

Tragically, globalisation does not appear to have led to a greater mutual understanding of diverse ways of thought, and nowhere is this more evident than in the question of minorities and religion, our next theme. Cantini, in his article, outlines the case of the Baha'is, who seem destined to find a spiritual space only with the greatest of difficulty. Such heterodox minorities adopt various strategies in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves. These strategies include seeking employment in a neutral public sector, attempting to migrate in order to create anonymity in a new social context, avoiding obvious public ritual behaviour, pacifism, seeking to blur fixed identity boundaries and interacting with moderate political parties. However, these options appear to be less feasible if the state itself erodes the neutral sphere in which diversity of thought can flourish. It is striking that the Baha'is' problems were exacerbated at two points in particular: first, when the state prohibited their places of worship, and second, when they were no longer allowed to equivocate their public identity by writing 'other' as their religion on official documents. The government insisted that all citizens should be Jewish, Christian or Muslim. Here we see a tragic downside to the creation of public cultural identities within the political sphere, one that is being played out repeatedly in other countries, as the example of the Alevi in Turkey, for instance, attests.

Our third theme, that of ethnic or national minorities, is treated in an article by Rezvani on Muslims who are ethnically Georgian. This welcome article focuses on the way that the Fereydani Georgians in Iran have staked a space for themselves within the nation by stressing simultaneously their distinctive ethnic roots, their numerous contributions to the Iranian nation and their commitment to the Shi'a faith. In a process that Rezvani refers to as 'emic coherence', these people narrate and represent their past in a way that conforms

with how they define their identity. This unusual, but not unknown (e.g. we may take the example of the Ghurkas and the British), survival of old-fashioned rhetorical devices into the modern world is well worth studying. In this instance, membership in the nation state may encourage, rather than inhibit, a sense of minority group cohesion.

The final article, by Bjawi-Levine, details the plight of Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. The occupation of Iraq and the ensuing sectarian violence have created a large community of refugees and asylum seekers in Jordan, who suffer not only from the traumatic experience of persecution, but also from the stress of overstaying their visas and the fear of deportation. The article brings us back in a nuanced way once more to the ever-present backdrop of conflict and the endless cultural and sociological impasses faced by those who have the misfortune to be displaced through adversity or war.

In the 'Notes from the Field' section, the text '*Ziyareti*: Imagined Sacred Places and Cultural Transmission among Georgians in Turkey' argues that it is possible to evolve a fusion with the less orthodox aspects of a religious practice in order to create a link with an otherwise dominant religious position. This argument would certainly appeal to Ramsay in his massive, late-nineteenth-century oeuvre on Anatolia, with its emphasis on survival imbued in shrine worship. However we finally decide to evaluate these ethnographic findings, there is no doubt that the *ziyaret* is an issue in many parts of the Middle East, and it is useful to have such a rich ethnographic description with regard to the Georgians in Artvin. 'Notes from the Field' also features a comment on Ibn Khaldoun. This seemingly inexhaustible scholar provided Gellner with much of his inspirational approach to Muslim societies. He is a figure whom we could and should revisit, as much for his profound insights into our perennial human problems as for the historical worth of his theories. Here, in a most suggestive piece, we see how Ibn Khaldoun's approach to education appears to be strikingly modern in its insights.

What we should not forget is that all the currents that have been touched upon in this collection – modernisation, dress, faith, state, military, conflict – operate simultaneously. It is only by retaining in our work a sense of multi-stranded dynamism, which is clearly evident in these articles, that we can truly appreciate the Middle East.

– David P. Shankland and Soraya Tremayne, co-editors