

John Shindeldecker

Introduction

Almost every single guidebook or encyclopedia I have ever read describes Turkey as 99% Sunni Muslim. But the world is slowly learning of the existence of a large group in Turkey called Anatolian Alevi (Anatolia is a name for the part of Turkey which lies in Asia). The name Alevi sometimes appears in English as Alawi, Alawite, Alouite, or Alevi-Bektashi. Alevi faith and culture is called Alevism (*Alevilik*).

Finding objective and easily-understood material about Turkish Alevi in a language other than Turkish is very difficult. In fact, Alevi leaders asked me to write this guide because they lack any introductory material in English which they can give to their foreign visitors. My single purpose is to briefly, clearly, and objectively explain the beliefs and practices of Alevi and the issues they face today in a way that a reader with minimal knowledge of Turkey and Islam can understand.

For a variety of reasons, it is impossible to make absolute statements about Alevi beliefs and practices. So, by necessity I use statements like, “almost all,” “many,” “most,” and “some” when describing Alevi and their beliefs. This may be disturbing to the reader who wants a definite answer about what all Alevi believe and practice, but that is the nature of the subject. The reader should not be surprised that there is a wide variety of beliefs and practices among those who call themselves Alevi. There is a similar broad spectrum of belief and practice among those who call themselves Jews, Christians, Buddhists, or Hindus.

An Appetizer Plate

The foreign tourist coming to Turkey for the first time is overwhelmed when he encounters the richness and variety of Turkish cuisine. No matter how much he wants to, he cannot eat everything at his first meal. So tour guides often make suggestions for him to choose from the delicious appetizers, salads, soups, kebabs, and sweets of the Turkish kitchen. Like a tour guide, I have chosen representative topics and amount of detail I think the foreign reader can easily digest for his first encounter with Alevism. My hope is that the reader will have a tasty, balanced meal and the appetite to come back for more.

Important Turkish words and phrases in the text appear in *italics*. The translations are mine.

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Nefes

and

Cem.

I. Who are Alevis? What is Alevism?

I have personally heard or read all of the following statements about Alevis and Alevism:

“An Alevi is any Muslim who loves the family of the Prophet Muhammed.”

“An Alevi is simply any democratic, tolerant, human rights-promoting, modern-thinking person, whatever his religious background.”

“An Alevi is a filthy, immoral person who is so far from religion that he must first become a Christian before he can become a Muslim.”

“Alevism is the original, true essence of Islam.” “Alevism is a heterodox sect within Islam.”

“Alevism is the most authentic expression of Turkish Anatolian Islam.”

“Alevism is a philosophy, a ‘way of life.’”

“Alevism is pure sufism.”

“Alevism is pure Shiism.”

“Alevism is simply Sunni Islam with an extra emphasis on Ali.”

“Alevism is so syncretistic that it can't be counted as Islam at all.”

“Alevism is an alternative to orthodox Islam.”

“Alevism is an example of the classic Marxist struggle by an oppressed minority.”

“Alevism is a mixture of the best elements of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, and 20th century humanism.”

Four Blind Men and the Elephant

All of these opinions are debated today by Turkish and foreign scholars, researchers, and writers. To be sure, not all of these scholars, researchers and writers are objective. In the fascinating social and political climate of today's Turkey, many writers are using Alevis and Alevism as tools to put forth their own ideological agenda.

Actually, the various approaches to Alevism today remind me of the story of the four blind men who encountered an elephant for the first time. Each tried to describe his impression of the elephant to his friends by holding onto one part of the elephant. The first blind man, holding onto the elephant's trunk said, “It's a large, flexible hose.” The second, running his hands over the elephant's ears, declared, “No, I beg to differ, it is much more like a floppy, thick blanket.” The third, wrapping his arms around a leg, cried out, “I'm sorry, gentlemen, but you are mistaken. This thing called an elephant is a very large, ancient tree. I can't even reach all the way around it.” The fourth, running his hands along the elephant's body, yelled out, “You men don't know what you're talking about! This elephant is so broad and tall, it's more like a house than anything you've described!”

Learning about the nature of today's Alevism is much like the elephant and the blind men. You may receive as many opinions as the number of persons you ask. It all depends on the perspective of the person with whom you are speaking.

II. Alevi Population Size and Distribution

Determining how many Alevis there are today in Turkey is practically impossible. You cannot count them according to what language they speak, because most of them speak Turkish as

their mother tongue. You cannot count them according to where they live, because there are Alevis in almost all provinces of Turkey. Alevis have no distinguishing physical characteristics such as skin color, hair color, or eye shape. They wear no traditional dress that sets them apart from anyone on the street. In fact, unless an Alevi tells someone he is an Alevi, it is difficult to discern. Some will not even admit openly that they are Alevis.

Most Alevi writers and spokespersons claim that Turkey's population today is one-third Alevi-Bektashi, or more than 20 million. Lower estimates range from 10 to 12 million.

Traditionally, there have been significant populations of Turkish-speaking Alevis in the Central and East Anatolian provinces such as Çorum, Amasya, Tokat, Yozgat, Çankırı, Sivas, Elazığ, Malatya, Adıyaman, Bingöl, Muş, and Kars. These Alevis have traditionally been called Kizilbash (*Kızılbaş*) or Turkmen (*Türkmen*). However, due to mass migration to the cities and the mobility of today's Turkish population, Alevis now live in almost all provinces of the country.

Another smaller group of Turkish-speaking Alevis called the Woodcutters (*Tahtacılar*) have traditionally been spread out in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions.

One group of Alevis, living in an area traditionally called Dersim (today's Tunceli province, along with parts of Erzincan and Erzurum) speak a mother tongue called Zazaca, or Dersimce. This group has sometimes been called Kizilbash Kurds.

Though the subject of this handbook is Anatolian Alevis, the reader should be familiar with the names of similar groups in neighboring countries. In Syria, Iraq, and the Turkish provinces bordering those countries, Arabic-speaking groups with beliefs and practices resembling those of Turkish-speaking Alevis are called Nusayri, Alawite, or Alouite. Smaller sects in Iraq and Iran are called Ahl-i Haqq (Ali Ilahis) and Shabak. Some scholars group many of these sects into a broad category called the Ghulat. Today's Anatolian Alevis do not often associate themselves with these groups in Iran, Iraq or Syria. However, Turkish Alevis are quick to point out their similarities with certain Turkic-speaking groups in Central Asia and with the Bektashis of the Balkans.

III. Alevis and Islam

One of the first questions asked about Alevis is where they fit in Islam. I assume that if the reader has been exposed to Islam at all, he will be familiar with the commonly taught six basic Muslim articles of faith and the so-called five pillars of Islamic practice. Therefore, I will use this familiar framework as a starting point to describe Alevi faith and practice. Many Alevis will disagree that these six beliefs and five pillars are true Islam. However, I am using them as a starting point because, rightly or wrongly, almost every foreigner who hears about Alevism asks how it relates to these Islamic beliefs and practices. I leave it to the reader to make his own comparison between the Alevi and orthodox interpretations of these concepts. Later I will look at other aspects of Alevi belief and practice.

Six Beliefs of Islam

The commonly taught six essential beliefs of Islam are as follows:

1. Belief in one God
2. Belief in angels
3. Belief in the holy books
4. Belief in the prophets
5. Belief in final judgment
6. Belief in predestination

1. God (*Allah / Tanrı / Hak*)

If you ask ten Alevis for a description of God, you will probably get ten different answers. Most Alevis I have talked with or whose works I have read believe one or a combination of the following concepts of God:

“Ali is a manifestation of God.”

“Perfect human beings are God.”

“God consists of all things in the universe.”

“God consists of all humanity.”

“You and I are God.”

“God is inside you.”

“God is an undefined force or power.”

“God is truth, love, and knowledge.”

“God is the creator.”

Quite often, Alevis will define God by what he is not. Their purpose is to contrast their belief with what they think other religious groups believe about God. For example, almost all will declare that whatever God is, he is certainly not an angry master who delights in forcing the slaves he has created to obey strict religious rules or face the penalty of burning for eternity. In the same line of thinking, almost all Alevis will deny that God is one who will reward those who follow his rules on earth with eternal pleasures in heaven.

2. Angels (*Melekler*)

Alevis often say that man is the highest created being, and that the angels “bowed down to Adam when he was created” (*Adem’e secde ettiler*). Many say that the angel Gabriel was the messenger between God and Muhammed during the transmission of the Kuran.

Alevis who believe in literal good and bad angels and spirits (*cinler*) often practice superstition to benefit from good ones and to avoid harm from bad ones.

However, many Alevis do not believe in these supernatural beings and say something like, “Satan is simply the selfish desires (*nefis*) within you.”

3. Holy Books (*Kutsal Kitaplar / Hak Kitaplar*)

Alevis generally speak of four major holy books: Torah, Psalms, Gospel, and Kuran (*Tevrat, Zebur, İncil, Kuran*

). These belong to the monotheistic “religions with books,” that is, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Almost all Alevis will say that the four holy books were “let down from heaven” (*indirilmiş*

) to certain prophets: the Torah to Moses, the Psalms to David, the Gospel to Jesus, and the Kuran to Muhammed. Most will say these books were God's written revelation when they appeared, and that the Kuran is the last written revelation of God.

Almost all Alevis say that the Kuran contains everything that was in the first three books, or that all four books are basically the same. Many Alevis claim that the first three books predicted Muhammed's coming. Some say that the Biblical prophet Elijah is Ali.

Most Alevis believe that the original Kuran stated clearly that Ali, Muhammed's cousin and son-in-law, was to be the Prophet's successor, that is, God's vice-regent on earth, or caliph (*veli*, *halife*). But most claim that the parts of the original Kuran related to Ali were taken out by his rivals.

According to Alevis, the Kuran should be interpreted esoterically, inwardly, or mystically (*batini yorum*). For them, there are much deeper spiritual truths in the Kuran than the strict rules and regulations that appear on the literal surface (*zahiri yorum*). However, most Alevi writers will quote individual Kuranic verses as an appeal for authority to support their view on a given topic, or to justify a certain Alevi religious tradition. Alevis generally promote reading the Kuran in Turkish rather than in Arabic, stressing that it is important for a person to understand exactly what he or she is reading.

However, many Alevis do not read the Kuran or the other holy books, nor base their daily beliefs and practices on them. They consider these ancient books irrelevant today.

Alevis also look to other religious books outside the four major ones as sources for their beliefs and practices. These include:

1. the hadith (*hadisler*), the traditions of Muhammed;
2. the *Nahjul Balagha*, the traditions and sayings of Ali;
3. the *Buyruks*, the collections of doctrine and practices of several of the 12 imams, especially *Cafer*;
;

4. the *Vilayetnameler* or *Menakıbnameler*, books that describe events in the lives of great Alevis such as Haji Bektash.

A significant number of unwritten Alevi teachings and legends are credited to Ali, Muhammed, Haji Bektash, and others (*rivayetler*).

Alevis generally place greater importance on living human revelation and wisdom than on the written Kuran or other holy books. Alevis often quote these two statements:

“Ali is the speaking Kuran.”

Ali konuşan Kuran’dır.

“The greatest holy book to be read is a human being.”

Okunacak en büyük kitap insandır.

Apart from books, perhaps the most important source of Alevi beliefs and thought are the mystical poems and musical ballads (*deyişler, nefesler*) that have been passed down from generation to generation, many of which have not been recorded in writing. Among the greatest Alevi-Bektashi poet-musicians (*zanlar* *aşıklar, o*) are

Yunus Emre

(13-14th century),

Kaygusuz Abdal

(15th century), and

Pir Sultan Abdal

(16th century).

4. Prophets (*Peygamberler*)

Alevis in general express belief in the prophets mentioned in the Kuran. These were men chosen by God for specific purposes for specific times. Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammed received major books from heaven. Others, like Abraham and Noah, also received small amounts of written revelation from God. Most Alevis say that all the prophets were sinless. Some say that all the prophets were human representations of God.

I believe it will be helpful for the perspective of the foreign reader if I give a little more detail on Alevi beliefs about Jesus and Muhammed, who Alevis consider to be the last two prophets.

Jesus

To the majority of Alevis, Jesus is no more or less great than any of the other prophets. He is known specifically as the prophet of the Christians, and the prophet to whom the Gospel (*İncil*) “descended upon.” Some Alevis believe the Kuran literally where it says that Jesus was born of a virgin. Alevis who do not believe in the supernatural do not believe the Biblical stories of Jesus's virgin birth, his working miracles, and his resurrection from the dead.

However, almost all Alevis who have read the New Testament (also *İncil* in Turkish) strongly identify with how Jesus acted toward the religious fanatics and hypocrites of his day. Alevis are also surprised at how Jesus summarized all of the teaching of the Torah, the Psalms, and the prophets in two simple commands: “Love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength; Love your neighbor as yourself.” This essential teaching of Jesus reminds Alevis of their basic values of “love of God and love of man” (

Tanrı sevgisi, insan sevgisi
).

Some Alevis are aware of the teaching of Jesus' second coming to earth. Among these Alevis, some say that Jesus is the same person as Mehdi, the 12th imam, who they are waiting to return to earth.

Muhammed

To Alevis, Muhammed is the seal, the last of the prophets. No one bearing the title prophet has come since him. As the final prophet, receiver of the Kuran, and cousin and father-in-law of Ali, Muhammed has a very special place in Alevis' minds and hearts.

As we shall see later, many Alevis equate Muhammed and Ali, and use the single name Muhammed Ali for this personality.

5. Judgment (*Ahiret* / *Yargılanma*)

As stated above, Alevis do not accept the idea of a hard-faced God judging man based on how he has performed his religious duties during his life on earth. No Alevi I have met or read about believes in a literal hell where souls will burn eternally. Nor do they believe in a heaven which will be filled with pleasures like wine and women for men who have been religious on earth. Alevis love to quote the 13-14th century Turkish poet **Yunus Emre**, who declares his inner love for God by rejecting a literal, sensual paradise:

"They say heaven

Is a mansion and virgins.

Give those to whoever wants them.

What I need is you, you."

Cennet cennet dedikleri

Bir köşk ile bir kaç huri

İsteyene ver sen anı

Bana seni gerek seni

Alevis in general say that if God is going to judge mankind, he won't do it based on a person's performance of religious ritual during his life, but according to how that person has treated other people. They say that God commands,

“Don't come to me if you have taken another person's rights.”

Bana kul hakkıyla gelme.

The 15th century Alevi poet **Kaygusuz Abdal** even challenges a common idea of God's judgment. In the following lines, the poet dares God to face the same test he expects of men:

“So you made a bridge of judgment

for your slaves to pass over

that is thinner than a hair.

How about if we watch you try and pass over it, if you're so brave?"

Kıldan köprü yaratmışsın

Gelsin kullar geçsin deyü

Hele biz şöyle duralım

Yiğit isen geç a Tanrı...

6. Predestination (*Kader*)

The doctrine of a God being in control of everything, determining everything, and being the source of both good and evil is not prominent in Alevi thought. This is called by various names and is equivalent to predestination or determinism (*kader*, *alın yazısı*). Alevis who believe in God as a concept of love reject the idea that a loving God would be the source of evil.

In practice, most Alevis live their daily lives as if a person can actually change his or her lot in life through education, work, and cooperation. In fact, a common Alevi statement is, "The greatest act of worship is to work" (*En büyük ibadet çalışmaktır*). However, almost all Alevis accept the idea that certain facts of life are out of their control, such as accidents, sickness, and death.

This finishes our brief summary of Alevi belief from the point of view of the commonly known six basic articles of Islamic faith. Now let us turn to the Alevi perspective on the commonly taught five pillars of required Islamic practice.

The Five Pillars of Islamic Practice

The commonly taught five essential practices, or “pillars,” of Islam are as follows:

1. Confession of faith
2. Fasting
3. Ritual Prayer
4. Offerings
5. Pilgrimage

1. Confession of faith (*Kelime-i şahadet*)

It is taught that saying the creed, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammed is the apostle of God” is required of any person who wants to be a Muslim. This confession contains the twin doctrines of God and the last prophethood of Muhammed. Some Alevis will add this statement to the creed: “Ali is the vice-regent (*veli*) of God and Ali is the trustee (*vasi*) of Muhammed.”

In the above discussion on the six essential points of Islamic faith, we saw the various Alevi beliefs about God and Muhammed. Alevis who say this confession will obviously be thinking of their own unique beliefs about God and Muhammed when they repeat the creed.

In addition, most Alevis place more importance on how a person interacts with other people, that is, whether he acts like a “human being” (*insan*), than whether he has correct theology. Most say,

“The important thing is not religion, but being a human being.”

Önemli olan din değil, önemli olan insan olmak.

2. Ritual Prayer (*Namaz*)

Almost no Alevi practices ritual prayer five times a day or goes to a mosque (*cami*) for the prayer service at noon on Fridays. These are simply not Alevi religious customs. In fact, several sayings succinctly summarize the Alevi attitude toward ritual prayers:

“We don't do ritual prayers, we do supplication.”

Bizde namaz yok, niyaz var.

This means that when Alevis pray in their worship meetings, they are entering into a deeper spiritual relationship with the leader of the meeting and with God than if they were simply doing a form of prayer.

To Alevis, relationships with people are more important than observing formal religious ritual. Two common Alevi sayings illustrate this:

“If you hurt another person, the ritual prayers you have done are counted worthless.”

Bir insanı incitsen, kıldığın namaz geçerli değil.

“My Kaaba is a human being.”

Benim Kâbem insandır.

The Kaaba is the building in the courtyard of the great mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which is the focus of prayer and object of pilgrimage for millions. This saying can be interpreted, “My spiritual focus of attention is the people around me, not a building in Mecca.”

Even though Alevis do not go to mosques or practice ritual daily prayer, they do hold corporate worship in a service called an assembly meeting (*cem* or *ayini cem*).

3. Fasting (*Oruç*)

Alevis who fast generally do not observe their major fast for 30 days during the month of Ramazan. The main Alevi fast is held during the first 12 days of the Muslim month of Muharrem (*Muharrem* or *Mâtem Orucu*), which comes 20 days after the Feast of Sacrifice (*Kurban Bayramı*).

Another Alevi fast is the three-day Hızır fast (*Hızır Orucu*), generally observed 13-14-15 February.

4. Offerings (*Zekât*)

There is no set formula or amount expected for almsgiving among Alevis. A common method of Alevi almsgiving is through donating food, especially sacrificial animals, to be shared with worshipers and guests. Alevis also donate money to be used to help the poor, to support the religious, educational and cultural activities of Alevi centers and organizations (*dergâh*, *vakıf*, *dernek*), and to provide scholarships for students.

5. Pilgrimage (*Hac*)

Visiting Mecca is not an Alevi practice. However, visiting (*ziyaret*) and praying (*dua*) at the tombs (*türbe*) of Alevi-Bektashi saints is quite common. Alevis are not commanded or required to make these visits. They do not go to gain credit in heaven. Their purpose is to ask for spiritual cleansing and blessing for themselves or others. Some of the most frequently visited sites are:

1. **Hacı Bektaş**, Kırşehir

Hundreds of thousands of Alevis gather in the memory of Haji Bektash at his lodge (*tekke*) and tomb every 16 August.

2. **Abdal Musa**, Tekke Köyü, Elmalı, Antalya

Its special celebrations are held in June.

3. **Şahkulu Sultan**, Merdivenköy, İstanbul

Cem services are held here every Sunday and on Alevi holidays.

4. **Karacaahmet Sultan**, Üsküdar, İstanbul

Cem services are also held here every Sunday and on Alevi holidays.

5. **Seyit Gazi**, Eskişehir

IV. Alevi Customs and Holidays

Here are some of the most significant Alevi practices and ceremonies that strike the interest of visitors. There are some variations among Alevi-Bektashi groups regarding the form, meaning, and dates of these customs and celebrations.

Assembly Meetings (*Cem* or *Ayini Cem*)

The essential Alevi corporate worship service is called a congregational or assembly meeting (*cem* or *ayini cem*). Alevis generally believe that the *cem* has its roots in an original worship and teaching meeting of forty spiritual individuals (*Kırklar Meclisi*) led by Ali.

In Anatolia, assemblies have been traditionally held on Thursday evenings and called *cuma akşamları*, literally, “Friday nights.” However, for convenience, in some places today they are held during the day on Sundays, which is the official weekly holiday in Turkey.

A building or room set apart for such meetings is called an assembly house (*cem evi*), but private homes are also a suitable location for an assembly meeting.

*Cem evi*s do not have minarets (

minare
) , and
cem
meetings are not announced by a call to prayer (
ezan
).

An assembly meeting is led by a “grandfather” (*dede*), a man recognized to have spiritual and moral authority in the community and who claims a direct blood line connection to the family of Muhammed through one of the twelve imams (
seyyitlik
). In Anatolia,
dedes
generally serve in geographical regions. That is, one
dede
takes responsibility for one, two, three, or more villages, and travels between them. All of the residents in a village are responsible to one
dede
.

A traditional Alevi *cem*, called a *görgü cem*, is only open to those who have made a commitment to each other and to follow their *dede*.
No unreconciled people can participate in an assembly. Before the
dede
holds the religious services he acts as a judge in a kind of people's court (
halk mahkemesi
), reconciling differences between congregational members. Those who do not confess their personal sins or who are not reconciled with others are disciplined by the *dede*, and are considered put out of fellowship (
düşkünlük
). They are not entitled to take part in the service or share in the community meal until they repent.

Open, public *cem*s are held in some cities today. Their format is somewhat different than a traditional village *cem*. The following is a brief description of the kind of assembly a visitor may be invited to attend or will see demonstrated on television.

The *dede* sits on a sheepskin (*post*) on the floor at one end or side of the room. The

congregation, which consists of both men and women, sits in a circle on the floor facing each other. There is no physical separation of men and women. The women are not required to wear any certain type of clothing or to cover their heads, although many do. Children are also allowed in the meeting.

Participants in the assembly take off their shoes before entering the room. A visitor will generally not see Alevis perform ceremonial washings (*abdest*) immediately before a public service; worshipers are instructed to come to the assembly after they clean themselves all over by bathing or showering. Most Alevis say coming to worship clean on the inside (*batini* or *iç temizlik*) is at least as important as being clean on the outside (*zahirî* or *dış temizlik*). Many say inner cleanliness is even more important.

The service mainly consists of the *dede* saying prayers, giving short religious messages, singing solo ballads, and leading the congregation in singing. Another key element is a circling ritual dance (*semah*) performed by selected men and women in a group that can vary in size. The *dede* plays a seven stringed lute (*saz, bağlama*) while singing and while the dance is being performed. Sometimes an accompanist (*zakir*) will play a lute with, or instead of, the *dede*. During certain parts of the service, the congregation assumes a worship position, kneeling and sitting on their ankles, occasionally bowing their heads to the floor in unison (*halka namaz*).

The service is held entirely in Turkish, including all the prayers and singing. However, in some ceremonies portions of the Kuran may be read in Arabic. The subjects of the ballads, prayers and speeches include encouraging the congregation to love God, to love other people, and to apply the teachings of Muhammed, Ali, the twelve imams, and Haji Bektash. An emotional climax of the service is one or more ballads in memory of the murders of Ali and his sons. The murder of Ali's

son, Hüseyin, at the battle of Kerbela is especially remembered.

To conclude the worship service, the congregation shares a meal (*lokma*) together, which usually includes a ram that has been ceremonially sacrificed (*kurban*).

There are other details involved in the assembly meeting, comprising twelve acts of service (*oniki hizmet*), but these are enough to give the reader a flavor of the ceremony.

Though Alevis are mystical in many of their beliefs, they do have regular form or design in their ceremonies and practices (*erkân*). Traditionalist Alevis believe that certain exact rituals must be followed and specific prayers (*gülbân*) said during *cems* and for all other religious rites and ceremonies. Because most Alevi forms and traditions have been passed down the generations orally rather than in writing, these forms may vary from region to region. However, non-traditionalist Alevis will say that it is not necessary to follow any form strictly.

Semah

Characterized by turning and swirling, this dance of worship has many varieties. Performed by men and women to the accompaniment of the lute, the *semah* is an inseparable part of any *cem*.

It symbolizes the putting off of one's self and uniting with God.

Spiritual Brotherhood (*Müşahiplik*)

A keystone of Alevi faith and society, *müşahiplik* is a covenant relationship between two married couples. In a ceremony in the presence of a *dede*

, the two couples make a life-long commitment to care for the spiritual, emotional, and physical

needs of each other and their children. The ties between couples who have made this commitment is at least as strong as it is for blood relatives. So much so, that *müşahiplik* is often called spiritual brotherhood (*manevî kardeşlik*).

Fast of Muharrem (*Muharrem* or *Mâtem Orucu*)

This major Alevi fast is generally held the first twelve days of the month of Muharrem, or 20 days after the Feast of the Sacrifice (*Kurban Bayramı*). In addition to abstaining from food, many Alevis who fast from sunup to sundown during these twelve days will also abstain from drinking water both day and night. They will intake liquids other than water during the evening. During this fast, Alevis will also avoid any sort of comfort or enjoyment. A main purpose of this fast is to mourn the murder of Ali's son, Hüseyin, during the battle of Kerbela.

Ashure (*Aşure Günü*)

At the conclusion of the fast of Muharrem, a special food dish called ashure (*aşure*) is prepared from a variety (often 12 in number) of grains, fruits and nuts. Many events are associated with this celebration, including the salvation of Hüseyin's son, Zeynel Abidin, from the massacre at Kerbela, thus allowing the bloodline of the family of the prophet to continue.

Fast of Hızır (*Hızır Orucu*)

Many Alevis fast for three days in mid-February to honor Hızır, a supernatural being who they believe has been sent by God throughout history to save those who are in distress.

Hidrellez (*Hızır-İlyas* or *Hidrellez*)

According to legend, Hızır (*Hızır*) and the prophet Elijah (*İlyas*) drank of the water of life. Hızır comes to the rescue of those in distress on land, and Elijah helps those at sea. It is believed by many that Hızır and Elijah meet at a rose tree in the evening of every 6th of May.

Sacrifice (*Kurban*) and Meals (*lokma*)

As mentioned above, sacrificing sheep to be shared among the congregation is a part of the *cem* ceremony. Alevis also sacrifice sheep and share meals to remember deceased loved ones. In a tradition called the Abdal Musa Sacrifice (*Abdal Musa Kurbanı*), Alevi villagers gather once a year in the winter months to sacrifice sheep, share a meal together, reconcile with one another, and to ask for blessing. Alevis living in cities often gather at one of the worship centers to hold these sacrifices.

Centers such as the Şahkulu Sultan Dergâhı and Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhı in Istanbul hold sacrifices on a daily basis, not just at the Feast of the Sacrifice (*Kurban Bayramı*). They open their doors and welcome without charge anyone who wishes to partake of a meal (*lokma*) of lamb, rice pilaf and *ayran* (a drink made from yogurt and water).

Newroz (*Nevruz*)

The day of 21 March is known by most Alevis as a day of newness, reconciliation, and the start of spring. Many Alevis also believe that 21 March is the birthday of Ali. Some also believe that it is the wedding anniversary of Ali and Fatima, the day Joseph was pulled out of the well, and the day God created the earth. *Nevruz* is celebrated with *cem*s and special programs.

Alevi Organizations, Worship Houses and Community Centers

Almost every month, new Alevi organizations, foundations, and associations are opened all over the country. Most center around the preservation and continuation of Alevi-Bektashi culture. Some are formed to promote political issues of specific concern to Alevis.

*Cem evi*s are being built in many neighborhoods in the largest cities of Turkey and in quite a few provincial capitals. These are in addition to the historic lodges (*dergâh*) which have recently been restored. These

*cem evi*s

and

*dergâh*s

are built to be multi-purpose community centers, not just places of worship.

Here are some of the activities and services provided by today's Alevi organizations and centers:

1. weekly worship services (*cem*)
2. lute (*saz*) and *semah* training courses
3. sacrifice making and preparation (*kurban* and *lokma*)
4. supplemental public school lessons
5. foreign language lessons
6. handicraft and job skills training for women
7. medical and dental clinics

8. bridal gown borrowing services

9. Alevi-Bektashi history and culture courses and seminars

10. scholarship programs for university students

11. book and recorded music sales

12. research libraries

13. book and periodical publishing

14. radio/TV program production and broadcasting

15. funeral and burial preparation services

V. Alevi Views of Ali

The name Alevi can be simply translated into English as “of Ali” or “follower of Ali.” It fits a pattern in Turkish for common names of two other major religious groups: *Musevi*, (follower of Moses (*Musa*), or Jewish); and *İsevi*

, (follower of Jesus (
İsa
), or Christian).

There is much debate as to actually when the broad Anatolian population which today call themselves Alevis actually took on that name. For our purposes here, it is enough to simply know that today they do prefer to call themselves Alevi.

It is visibly obvious that Ali is extremely important to modern Alevis. His picture is prominent in every Alevi worship place and association, and it often appears on the cover of Alevi publications. Many families place pictures of him in their homes. And some, particularly young people, wear small gold replicas of Ali's sword, *zulfikar*, attached to chains around their necks.

Essential Views

While there is a wide variety of opinions among Alevis about exactly who Ali was or is, almost all Alevis agree on the following:

1. Ali was Muhammed's cousin (*amca oğlu*) and son-in-law (*damat*), marrying the prophet's daughter, Fatima.
2. Ali was the first to believe in Muhammed's prophethood; therefore he became the first Muslim.
3. Ali was the closest human being to Muhammed.
4. Ali was Muhammed's intended successor, and therefore the first caliph, but competitors stole this right from him. Muhammed intended for leadership of Muslims to perpetually stem from his family line (*Ehli Beyt*) beginning with Ali, Fatima, and their two sons, Hasan and Hüseyin. Ali, Hasan, and Hüseyin are considered the first three imams, and the other nine of the 12 imams (

oniki imam

) come from Hüseyin's blood line. The names and approximate dates (A.D.) of the birth and death of the 12 imams are as follows:

İmam Ali (599-661)

İmam Hasan (624-670)

İmam Hüseyin (625-680)

İmam Zeynel Abidin (659-713)

İmam Muhammed Bakır (676-734)

İmam Cafer-i Sadık (699-766)

İmam Musa Kâzım (745-799)

İmam Ali Rıza (765-818)

İmam Muhammed Taki (810-835)

İmam Ali Naki (827-868)

İmam Hasan Askeri (846-874)

İmam Muhammed Mehdi (869-)

Most Alevis believe that the 12th imam, Muhammed Mehdi, grew up in secret to be saved from those who wanted to wipe out the family of Ali. Many Alevis believe Mehdi is still alive and/or he will come back to earth some day.

Debated Views

Apart from these basic ideas, there is a wide spectrum of opinion even among Alevis as to the true nature of Ali. The following ideas are all based on a combination of Kuranic verses, hadith, and folklore (*rivayet*). Here are some of the most common concepts of Ali circulating among today's Alevis.

1. Ali is the ultimate example of the perfect human, apart from the prophets. Ali is attributed with nearly supernatural strength and spiritual wisdom, giving him a place almost as high as a prophet. An example of this thought is the saying (sometimes attributed to Muhammed):

“Muhammed is the city of spiritual knowledge, Ali is the door.”

Muhammed ilim şehridir, Ali kapısıdır.

2. Ali is equal to Muhammed in enlightenment and authority. Ali and Muhammed are likened to the two sides of a coin, or two halves of one whole apple, as in the following poem:

“Ali is Muhammed, Muhammed is Ali;

I saw one apple, praise Allah”

Ali Muhammed'dir, Muhammed Ali

Gördüm bir elmadır, elhamdü-lillâh

Again, from a saying attributed to Muhammed:

“Before the creation of Adam, we were one glorious light; the light of glory on Adam's forehead was divided into two; one half appeared on my forehead, the other on Ali's.”

Hz. Âdem yaratılmadan önce tek nur idik; Hz. Âdem'in alnındaki nur ikiye bölünmüş ve birisi benim, birisi de Ali'nin alnında doğmuştur.

3. Ali is deity in a trinity with Allah (*Hak*) and Muhammed.

Most Alevis recite this phrase in their prayers: “For the love of God, Muhammed, Ali” (*Hak-Muhammed-Ali aşkına*

). When many say this and the phrase, “Allah-Muhammed-Ali” they are intentionally equating the authority of the three.

4. Ali is deity by himself.

In a poem written by a Bektashi lodge leader named **Hilmi Dede Baba** and commonly quoted by Alevis, the poet says that wherever he looked - at Adam and Eve, at Noah, at Abraham, or even in the mirror - “Ali appeared before my eyes” (

Ali göründü gözüme

). I understand the poet to mean that Ali is timeless and present everywhere. The poem also declares:

“He is Jesus, the spirit of God,

He is king of this world and the next,

He is the protector of the believers,

Ali appeared before my eyes”

İsa-yı ruhullah O'dur

İki alemde Şah Odur

Müminlere penah O'dur

Ali göründü gözüme

The poem’s final stanza says,

“Ali is first, Ali is last,

Turkish Alevis Today

John Shindeldecker tarafından yazıldı.

Ali is inner knowledge,

Ali is external knowledge,

Ali is pure, Ali is glorious”

Ali evvel Ali ahir

Ali batın Ali zâhir

Ali tayyib Ali fâhir

One more poem cited by Alevis is attributed to **Jalaladdin Rumi (Mevlana)**, who was among the greatest of Turkish mystics, but himself not considered an Alevi.

“At the coming into existence of the world,

Ali was present.

While the world was forming,

Ali was there.

Until the world took its basic form,

The one present was Ali.”

Cihan var oldukça Ali var idi.

Cihan var olurken de Ali vardı.

Cihan'ın temeli suret buluncaya kadar

Var olan Ali idi.

VI. Alevis, Haji Bektash, and

Bektashism

Somewhat distinct from but quite similar to Anatolian Alevism is a religious order or sect (*tarikat*) called the Bektashis, named after Haji Bektash (

Hünkâr

Hacı Bektaş

Veli

), who lived in the 13th century. There have historically been two groups of Bektashis. One, called the Çelebis, claimed that they were direct physical descendants of Haji Bektash (

bel evladı

). A larger group of Bektashis, called the Dedes or Dedebabas, claimed that Haji Bektash had no natural sons but only had spiritual disciples (

yol evladı

). Bektashis are found throughout Anatolia and the Balkans, particularly in Albania.

It has been commonly explained that a person only becomes an Alevi by being born into an

Alevi family, but a person can become a Bektashi by joining the sect. In a very broad historical generalization, it has been said that Bektashis were traditionally urbanized and educated while Alevis lived in villages in the Anatolian countryside.

To show that modern Alevi and Bektashi groups have much more in common than they have differences, Alevis will often talk about “Alevi-Bektashi culture” (*kültür*) “Alevi-Bektashi faith” (*inanç*), or “Alevi-Bektashi philosophy” (*felsefe*). Many describe the differences between the groups with these statements: “There is no difference in path, just in practices” (*Yol farkı yok, sürek farkı var*) and “The way is one, the form a thousand and one” (*Yol bir, sürek bin bir*).

Alevis today place great importance on Haji Bektash. They proudly display his picture in their associations and worship centers. They name associations after him. They often quote sayings attributed to him. Hundreds of thousands of Alevis visit his tomb in Kırşehir every August.

There is very little actual historical detail available about Haji Bektash. It is almost universally accepted that he was a Turkmen born in Horasan in Iran, trained as a mystic, moved to Anatolia, settled in what is now the town of Haji Bektash, and died around A.D. 1271. Beyond these few facts there are many stories about Haji Bektash whose truth is debated. Most of these stories show Haji Bektash as a man with supernatural wisdom and powers.

Today, Alevis love to quote sayings attributed to Haji Bektash. Here is a sample:

“Seek and find.”

Ara bul.

“Don’t forget that your enemy is also a human being.”

Düşmanınızın dahi insan olduğunu unutmayınız.

“Teach the women.”

Kadınları okutun.

“Don’t do to anyone what you don’t want done to you.”

Nefsine ağır geleni kimseye tatbik etme.

“Do not criticize any man or people.”

Hiç bir milleti ve insanı ayıplamayınız.

“Even if you are offended, do not offend in return.”

İncinsen de incitme.

“Take responsibility for your words, actions, and morals.”

Eline diline beline sahip ol.

“Take responsibility for your own spouse, job, and nourishment.”

Eşine, işine, aşına sahip ol.

VII. Alevis and Mysticism

In the previous discussion of how Alevis approach holy books and ritual prayer, I touched on the fact that they bring an inner, deeper, mystical interpretation to such things. In Islam this type of approach is called sufism (*sufilik* or *tasavvuf*). This inner or mystical approach to life affects Alevis' view of religious law and other religious forms as well.

When Alevis describe the importance they place on Ali, Kerbela and the 12 imams, most very quickly add, “We love Ali and the family of the prophet, but we have absolutely no other connection with orthodox, legalistic Shiites like in today's Iran.” Anatolian Alevis distinguish themselves from those who follow religious law by emphasizing their mystical approach to life.

Four Doors, Forty Levels (*Dört kapı kırk makam*)

One key way Alevis describe how they are different than those who follow Islamic law (*şeriat*), but also love the family of the prophet, is with the concept of Four Doors, Forty Levels (*dört kapı kırk makam*

). This is the process by which an individual commits him or herself to a living spiritual guide (*dede, pir, mürşit*

) and that spiritual leader guides the person through a series of four “doors” (*kapı*

), each of which has ten “levels” (*makam*

). The individual enters the first door as a novice. The person who makes it through to the fourth door achieves oneness with ultimate truth (

hakikat

). The doors' names are religious law, spiritual path, spiritual knowledge/skill, and spiritual truth (*şeriat, tarikat, marifet, hakikat*).

To Alevis, anyone who only believes in the rule of religious law has not advanced beyond the most basic level of spiritual knowledge. Whoever has entered the next level through a relationship with a spiritual guide has left religious legalism behind and started on the path of inner, deeper spiritual insight.

The “perfect human being” (*İnsan-ı kâmil*)

Related to the idea of going through stages of spiritual development until achieving oneness with truth is the concept of attaining total completeness. This is called becoming the “perfect human being” (*insan-ı kâmil*). It appears to me that most of today's Alevis would define the perfect human in practical terms as one who is in full moral control of his or her selfish desires (*eline, diline, beline sahip*), treats all kinds of people equally (*yetmiş iki millete aynı gözle bakar*), and serves the interests of others.

“I am Reality” (*Enel Hak*)

As stated above, a significant point in Alevi mysticism is the concept of the worshiper becoming one with *Hak*, that is, Truth, Reality, or God. They love to tell the story of **Hallac-ı Mansur**, a 10th century sufi Muslim who uttered the phrase, “I am Truth” (*Enel Hak*).

Religious authorities interpreted this statement as Mansur’s literally equating himself with Allah. They brutally martyred him in Bagdad for his so-called blasphemous mystic beliefs.

Alevis and Mevlana

Alevi-Bektashis are not the same as the followers of **Jelaladdin Rumi**, commonly known as **Mevlana**

. Mevlana lived in the 13th and 14th centuries in Konya and was the founder of the sect called the Mevlevi, popularly known as the whirling dervishes. His mystical poems are world-famous and quoted by Alevis and Turkish Muslims of all backgrounds. Though the reader may find similarities between Alevi-Bektashi beliefs and practices and those of Mevlana, it is important not to equate or confuse the two sects.

VIII. Alevis and Folk Beliefs

Elements of folk religion or superstition are evident in the beliefs and practices of a significant number of Alevis today. These beliefs include faith in the undocumented miraculous feats (*kerametler*)

) of Alevi-Bektashi saints and *dedes*

. For example, Ali is said to have appeared as a talking lion to Muhammed.

Haji Bektash

is said to have been miraculously transported to Mecca (hence the name Haji).

Abdal Musa

(14th century disciple of Haji Bektash's lodge) is said to have caused water to emerge from one side of a mountain during the summer and from the opposite side during winter.

Balim

Sultan

(Bektashi leader of the 1500s) is said to have been born miraculously.

Haji Bektash is also said to have performed other miracles whose evidence remains in the area around the town of Haji Bektash in Kırşehir. When I visited there, one example explained to me by local residents concerns the legend of the "rock with the hole" (*delikli taş*)

delikli taş

). According to the story told to me while I was standing in front of the

delikli taş

, soldiers attacked Haji Bektash's lodge and he fled to the surrounding hills on his horse. There he found refuge under this outcropping of rocks. The enemy soldiers surrounded Haji Bektash for forty days and forty nights. Then, with one blow of his fist, Haji Bektash knocked a hole in the rocks large enough for both him and his horse to escape. The hole then closed back down to the size of a normal person's shoulders.

The hole in the rock remains today, and many Alevis believe that if a righteous person tries to fit through the hole, it will open wide enough for him or her to pass through. But if an unrighteous person tries to squeeze through, the hole will shrink even further, making it impossible for him or her to pass. Each year, hundreds of individuals try to go through the hole.

Many Alevis today observe other folk religious practices. The sources of these practices are debated:

1. lighting candles at the tombs of saints;
2. kissing door frames of holy rooms;
3. not stepping on the threshold of holy buildings;
4. seeking prayers from reputed healers;
5. writing wishes on strips of cloth and tying them to trees that are considered to be spiritually powerful.

IX. Alevis, Prejudice, and

Persecution

Alevis almost universally feel that they have been persecuted for their beliefs and cultural values for centuries. This prejudice is one reason why only until the 1990s did great numbers of Alevis begin publicly identifying with their faith and culture through publications and by forming various organizations. Blatant acts of prejudice and persecution against Alevis have made major headlines in the foreign and local press in recent years. I will now give three examples of prejudice and two recent incidents of violence that Alevis often discuss to demonstrate they suffer persecution.

Slander (*iftira*) in public school classrooms

It is a common complaint by Alevi students and parents that Alevism is either totally ignored, or it is described as an immoral, non-Muslim religion by teachers of the required religion classes in public schools. Many Alevis point out that their children feel degraded by such slander and feel helpless to correct their teachers' statements.

“The candle went out” (*mum söndü*)

Many non-Alevis have the idea that during *cem* ceremonies held in the evenings, Alevis extinguish all lights and then commit incestuous and adulterous orgies (*mum söndü*

). Alevis cite an event which occurred in February, 1997 as an illustration of the depth of this prejudice. At the time, Turkish television and printed media were promoting a campaign against corruption in government called “One minute of darkness for the purpose of enlightenment” (*Aydınlık için bir dakika karanlık*

). All citizens who wanted to show their support for clean, transparent government were encouraged to turn out all of the lights in their homes for one minute at 21:00 every night for a month. To express his dislike for such a protest, the government's Minister of Justice told the national press, “They are practicing ‘the candle went out’” (*‘mum söndü yapıyorlar’*)

.

Kizilbashlik

Kizilbash (*Kızılbaş* - literally “redhead”) is a term historically used as a name for Alevi groups

living in Anatolia. There is debate as to when the term actually came into use. But it is universally accepted that it comes from the fact that these Alevi Turkmen tribesmen at some time wore red headgear in battle. However, Alevis today prefer not to refer to themselves as Kizilbash. The term is used by non-Alevis to imply that Alevis are immoral.

Alevis point to an example of this prejudice which occurred on a private television company's nationwide broadcast in January, 1995. Trying to be crudely humorous, a popular game show host had one of his female assistants dress as though she were pregnant. He told her, "I hope that baby isn't mine" (*Umarım benimdeğildir*). The girl replied, "No, it's my father's" (*Yok, babamın*). The man then said, "I didn't know you were a Kizilbash" (*Kızılbaş olduğunu bilmiyordum*).

Sivas

In July, 1993, an Alevi group called the Pir Sultan Abdal Association sponsored a conference in the capital city of Sivas province. Not all of the participants were Alevi. One non-Alevi participant was the Turkish author, Aziz Nesin, who was famous for being an outspoken critic of religious fanaticism. On Friday afternoon, 2 July, a group protesting the conference and Nesin's presence there appeared outside the hotel where the conference was being held. The hotel erupted in fire, and 37 people inside died from flames and smoke.

Alevis generally interpret the incident this way: The protestors were angry that the Alevi Pir Sultan Abdal Association had invited Aziz Nesin to their town and the protestors had been stirred to violent action during the Friday noon prayers at mosques. Alevis feel that because certain officials did nothing to prevent the protestors from burning down the hotel, they were just as guilty as those who set the fire. Alevis also feel the government did not act quickly enough to bring to justice all of those responsible for this incident.

Gaziosmanpasha, Istanbul

In March, 1995, someone fired a machine gun into a tea house frequented by Alevis. Two men were killed, including an Alevi *dede*. Many residents of the neighborhood, which is heavily

populated by Alevis, demonstrated because they felt the police were neither quick enough or serious enough in their investigation of the incident. Tension elevated, and in four days of demonstrations in various neighborhoods of Istanbul, more than 15 unarmed people, mostly Alevis, lost their lives from bullet wounds and other violence. Alevis generally interpret these incidents as conscious persecution against them.

Many Alevis feel that these examples are not isolated, but are simply the continuation of centuries of prejudice and persecution directed at them for their beliefs and practices.

X. Alevi-Bektashi Humor

Alevis and Bektashis love to use humor to mock religious legalism, hypocrisy, and those who they feel have persecuted them. This humor reveals much about Alevi-Bektashi thought. To understand their humor is to understand the Alevi-Bektashis' approach to life, religion, and their place in society. Here are only a few examples of the hundreds of Bektashi jokes (*fıkralar*) that have been collected.

This first joke reflects the Alevi attitude toward the legalism of the five pillars.

The pillars of Islam

A religious fanatic was debating with a Bektashi, and asked, "How many are the pillars of Islam?"

The Bektashi immediately answered, "One!"

The fundamentalist retorted, "Look at that! You don't even know the pillars of Islam and yet you brag you're an expert dervish!"

“Be patient, and let me explain, O teacher,” answered the Bektashi. “You see, I’ve noticed that you all don’t go on the required pilgrimage and you all don’t give the required alms to the poor. Well, we don’t fast during Ramazan and we don’t do the daily prayers. Between us, what have we left of the five pillars except the confession of faith?”

As was mentioned above, Alevis do not observe the fasting month of Ramazan. Over the centuries, this has become the subject of many, many Bektashi jokes. In the following joke there is play on words. In Turkish, to not keep the fast, or to break the fast at the wrong time, is to literally “eat the fast” (*oruç yemek*).

The fast and the prayers

Some folks asked a Bektashi saint, “Which do you love the most: fasting, or doing the required prayers?”

Without hesitation, he answered, “I love the fast - because it can be eaten!”

Scores of Alevi-Bektashi jokes reflect the tension of their living under the rule of Muslim religious law in pre-Republican Turkey while non-Muslim minorities were exempt from certain restrictions. Alevis still tell jokes like the following two examples concerning Ramazan because they feel social pressures on them to conform continue to this day, even if religious law is not the law of the state.

Count your blessings

One day during Ramazan, an Alevi *dede* was caught eating and thrown in jail. While looking out through the bars of his cell, he saw a man eating a watermelon. He yelled to the man, “Hey, what are you doing? Don’t you know it’s Ramazan? Be careful, or you’ll suffer the same fate as me!”

The man answered, "But I'm not a Muslim."

Jealous of the man's freedom, the *dede* called out, "In that case, give a thousand thanks while you're eating!"

Look what it cost me

While walking by a Bektashi's house one day during Ramazan, a man saw through the window the Bektashi enjoying a fine meal. The Bektashi motioned for the man to come in. Unable to resist the Bektashi's hospitality, the man joined him. But when a policeman came by and saw them, he took them both to court. The judge heard the other man's case first, and because he had no good excuse, the judge gave him his penalty.

But the Bektashi was very sorry to see the man pay for his crime, feeling he had a part in it. When it was the Bektashi's turn to be questioned, the judge asked, "Why weren't you fasting?"

"I am a Christian, sir!" answered the Bektashi.

"Well, in that case, you are free to leave," said the judge.

"But I want to become a Muslim, sir," said the Bektashi.

The judge's eyes brightened. "That's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

The Bektashi continued. "But sir, before I become a Muslim I have one request. I'd like you to forgive and release my friend here."

The judge thought about this a minute. Figuring it was worth releasing the man to gain a Christian convert to Islam, he agreed.

Outside, the man thanked the Bektashi. But before they parted the Bektashi warned him, “Notice what happened. To save myself, I had to become a Christian. Then to save you, I had to become a Muslim. Next time be more careful. I don’t want to have to work so hard again!”

The drinking of alcohol is not forbidden among Alevi-Bektashis. Many of their jokes feature this subject. Here is one example:

Wine and water

Due to the pressure of his friends, a Bektashi went with them to a mosque at Friday noon. During the sermon, the imam was describing in vivid detail all of the natural and religious reasons why drinking any alcohol at all is bad.

As an illustration, the imam said, “If you put a bucket of water and a bucket of wine in front of a donkey, which one will it drink? The water, of course. Now why would a donkey choose to drink the water and not the wine?”

Unable to control himself, the Bektashi shouted out, “Because it’s a donkey, that’s why!”

XI. Alevis and Current Social Issues

Here are a few examples of the issues Alevis feel are important in Turkey today.

Women

Alevis are proud to point out that they are monogamous, Alevi women worship together with men, Alevi women are free to dress in modern clothing, Alevi women are encouraged to get the best education they can, and Alevi women are free to go into any occupation they choose.

Democracy

In a debate between democracy and Islamic law, or sharia (*şeriat*), it would be almost impossible to find an Alevi who would argue against democracy and for rule by religious law. Nearly all Alevis are for equal rights for minorities and women, the rule of constitutional law, tolerance and equal rights for all religions, and freedom of speech.

Ataturk

Almost all Alevis speak of Ataturk (*Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*) with great respect. They believe his reforms placed Turkey on the road to become socially progressive, educationally advanced, and technologically modern. Many hang pictures of Ataturk in prominent places in their homes, offices, associations, and worship centers right next to their pictures of Ali and Haji Bektash.

Secularity

Alevis are almost universally in favor of separation of religion and state, or secularity (*laiklik*). Alevis often discuss these main issues connected with secularity in Turkey today:

1. the required religion courses in schools;

2. whether Alevis should be officially recognized as a distinct religious group;

3. the existence, activities, and funding of the government's Department of Religious Affairs (*Diyarbakır İslam İşleri Başkanlığı*).

For historical reasons that are beyond the scope of this handbook, the Turkish government recognizes Jewish and Christian minorities, but Alevis are not officially recognized as a religious minority. This fact has many effects. For example, children of recognized minorities can request to be excused from the required religion classes taught from elementary through high school, but Alevis cannot. Alevis complain that all religions are not taught objectively in the schools. They say the vast majority of religion teachers not only stress one type of Islam, but they show prejudice against Alevis. Many Alevis say the required religion classes should be abolished. Others say they should at least be administered so that all religions are covered fairly and accurately by the teachers.

The Department of Religion receives its money from the national budget, which is funded with taxes from all Turkish citizens, including Alevis. One of the Department of Religion's functions is to recruit tens of thousands of Muslim imams, assign them to mosques, and pay their salaries. But because the Department of Religion does not recognize Alevi clergy (*din adamları*) or Alevi places of worship, Alevis point out that none of the imams on the payroll of the Department of Religion are Alevi.

Two of the main activities promoted by the Department of Religion include arranging pilgrimages to Mecca and setting the calendar for fasting during Ramazan. These have no importance for Alevis.

Alevis claim that in addition to the Department of Religion denying by its actions that they exist, the department purposely appoints non-Alevi clergymen to Alevi villages and encourages the building of mosques in them. As mentioned above, the mosque is not an Alevi place of worship.

There are different opinions among Alevis regarding how to approach these issues. One group claims that, if Turkey is a secular state, the Department of Religion should be abolished. Or, they say, the Department of Religion should at least be funded privately with voluntary

donations by citizens rather than from tax money coming out of the pocket of Alevis, who see no benefit at all (and some would say even receive persecution) from the Department of Religion.

Other Alevis argue that the Department of Religion should continue to exist as a tax-funded government agency, but should recognize Alevis as separate and equal to other religious groups. These Alevis think that the Department of Religion should then divide its budget proportionally, allowing selected Alevi representatives to distribute and administer the portion set aside for Alevis. In the current discussions of actual money distribution, an obvious major issue is deciding which individuals or organizations should represent Alevis to the Department of Religion.

These issues illustrate the significance of the many heated debates about the Alevis' identity within Islam, the size of the Alevi population, and how Alevi individuals and organizations should relate to the government.

XII. Alevi Identity Today

I began this guide by asking the questions, Who are Alevis? and What is Alevism? As we have seen from this overview of the beliefs, practices, customs, and values of today's Alevis, it is impossible to give a brief and simple definition of today's Alevis and Alevism. The reader should not be surprised at this, because it is also impossible to briefly and simply define any of the other faiths in today's world. In every major religious group - Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu - there are a variety of interpretations and a spectrum of attitudes: traditionalist, fundamentalist, conservative, nominal, and liberal. The same is generally true of Alevis.

In the past few years, there has been an explosion of articles, books, and television programs on the subject of Alevi identity. The more books and articles that are written, the more definitions of Alevism seem to appear. In fact, one Alevi scholar has identified 32 different published interpretations of the nature of Alevism.

I have observed that most Alevis are actually pleased that they cannot be placed in convenient religious, social, or political categories. They prefer to simply introduce themselves as Alevi, define the term Alevi in their own words, and say, "We look at all people equally. The important thing is not a person's religion, but whether he is a true human being."

Books for Further Reading: ENGLISH

The Bektashi Order of Dervishes

Birge, John Kingsley (Luzac & Co. 1965)

Written in 1937, this remains the most detailed and authoritative work on the subject in English.

Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans

Hasluck, F. W. (Oxford, 1929 & Octagon, 1973)

This two volume masterpiece is based on research and writing done from 1913-20 and contains several specific sections on Alevis and Bektashis.

The Darvishes or Oriental Spiritualism

Brown, John P. (Oxford, 1927)

Written in 1867, this contains the first-hand observations of an American translator, with some chapters pertaining to Bektashis. Note: some of its statements are considered inaccurate by scholars.

Extremist Shiites: the Ghulat Sects

Moosa, Matti (Syracuse University Press, 1988)

Contains specific chapters on Turkish Alevis, Bektashis and related groups (though these groups do not wish to be considered “extremist Shiites!”) Its extensive Notes and Bibliography are excellent sources for other articles and books.

Books for Further Reading: TURKISH

Alevi-Bektaşî Tarihi

Kocadağ, Burhan (Can Yayınları, 1996)

A recently-published history written for a general audience.

Alevilik: İnanç, Edeb, Erkân

Yaman, Mehmet (1993)

Provides a broad introduction to Alevi beliefs and religious practices.

Alevilik Nedir?

Öz, Baki (Der Yayınları, 1995)

Compares and contrasts thirty-two opinions of Alevism's identity.

Alevilik Nedir?

Yaman, Ali (Şahkulu Sultan Külliyesi Vakfı, 1998)

Summary of Alevi history and culture based on latest academic research.

Öz Kaynaklarına Göre Alevilik

Zelyut, Rıza (Yön Yayıncılık, 1992)

An introduction to Alevi history, faith and practices.

Şaha Doğru Giden Kervan: Alevilik Nedir?

Şener, Cemal (Şahkulu Sultan Külliyesi Vakfı, 1997)

An attractively-printed general introduction to Alevism with color photos.

Türk Sufiliğine Bakışlar

Turkish Alevis Today

John Shindeldecker tarafından yazıldı.

Ocak, Ahmet Yaşar (İletişim Yayınları, 1996)

A Turkish university professor's socio-historical analysis of scholarly and popular views of Alevi-Bektashism.

Uyur İdik Uyardılar

Melikoff, Irene (Cem Yayınevi, 1993)

Articles on the history and sociology of Alevi-Bektashism by a world-f