

The Alevi Turks Of Asia Minor (1)

G. E. White tarafından yazıldı.



G. E. WHITE

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Down through the ages the people of the East have been bound into tribes and nations by religious rather than political bonds. Men feel themselves to be one when their worship is one, and hold as aliens those who live next door if their creed and ritual are different. They intermarry only among those with whom they pray. They respect the authority of their Government officials because they must, but they welcome the orders of their priests because they want to. A religious ban is more dreaded than legal penalties, not only because the former represents eternal as well as temporal authority, but because it is supported by the sentiment of those whose opinions the culprit most cherishes. Spiritual dues are more cheerfully rendered than tithes to the reigning Caesar. Of course, the religious and political tithes are often co-extensive, and then there is no question of a clash or a preference between authorities. Indeed dissenters have not always been tolerated at all, and the separation between Church and State, which exists in some Western countries, and is freely discussed in others, has no proper place in the mind of a characteristic old time Oriental. His Government ought to represent his God, and if by some mischance his faith differs from the standard form of Orthodoxy his sect may be tolerated, as Christians have been habitually recognised and permitted in Mahommedan countries, or he may belong to some cult which tenaciously maintains its existence with a greater or less degree of secrecy. But it is the common custom in the Orient for a person to accept his religious connection from his parents, much as he accepts his name or his colour, openly or secretly maintain his religious status unchanged to the end, to render prime allegiance to his sect, and to give his left-over enthusiasm to patriotism for his country.

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Now the Ottoman Government is a Mahommedan theocracy, wherein the anomalous and doubtful experiment is on trial of regarding non-Moslems with the form of equality and fraternity. It is a bold and creditable attempt. In the fairest provinces of the Empire, those of Anatolia or Asia Minor, about one-fourth of the population is Christian, and of the remainder perhaps a fourth is composed of Shiites or Alevis, who are sectaries from the orthodox or Sunnite faith of Islam. The Sunnites follow the accepted traditions of the Mahommedan doctors, while the Alevis are adherents of Ali, the fourth Caliph, reject the Sunna, and claim to be the original and puritan representatives of The Faith. Most of the Turks, together with the Circassians, Georgians, Lazzes, and many Kurds, are Sunnite. But most of the Kurds, as we are told, and a very important minority of the Turks are Alevi, and in this they are affiliated in feeling with the Persians on the East, and with a considerable section of the Albanians on the West, as well as with the Nusariye in Syria, and scattered communities elsewhere. For the present all parties agree in ignoring this breach in the unity of Islam, but circumstances might so shape themselves as to bring it to the surface as a dangerous, if not deadly, wound.

This struggles among the followers of Mahomed during the first five caliphates must have left a line of cleavage deeper and more abiding than is ordinarily realised by the student of that history. Ali the Moslem saint and warrior, a near relative of the Prophet both by blood and by marriage, one of the sagest councillors and strongest lieutenants of Mahommed, fourth Caliph and almost chosen first, deposed from his high office by the warfare and intrigue of rival and hostile parties, then suffering assassination, as also did his sons Hassan and Husseyn, was probably the most commanding single personality in the Mahommedan world of the generation following the death of the Founder. The figure of Ali was one to conjure with among religious zealots, whose information was largely derived from hearsay, and whose passions were ever ready to be roused. His party gained and maintained the ascendancy in some countries, notably Persia; elsewhere it has lived on, with many varying local forms and adaptations, in quasi concealment.

The Alevi Turks of Asia Minor are pitiably simple, ignorant, and despised, and therefore secretive, deceptive, cunning. Jews are recognised as the people of the Tevrat or Law of Moses, Christians as people of the Gospel of Jesus, Mahommedans proper as people of the Koran, but the poor Alevis have no similar authorized Scripture, and are reproached as nondescripts accordingly. Yet they have certain well-established tenets and practices. They profess allegiance to a line of twelve Imams, of whom Ali was the foremost. They pay great respect to Ali, even putting him in place of God, as is alleged of them, or holding him as a divine incarnation. They also revere the memory of Hassan and Husseyn, by refraining from pleasant foods, and especially by drinking no water during the first ten days of the month Mouharrem. This is their real annual fast, and if they keep Ramazan it is for outward show. They have no mosques of choice, though the Government has required their construction in some places. Even then they are frequently unopened, unless during Ramazan a preacher is sent to collect and

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G. E. White tarafından yazıldı.

instruct an unresponsive audience in correct Mahommedan forms of worship. Contrary to the precepts of the Koran, they allow the use of wine, though they deny the right to drink enough to fuddle the God-given faculties. They also deny the right of divorce, of which Orthodox Mahommedans so freely avail themselves, especially those who are of some social standing, and plural marriage is almost unknown among them, unless the first marriage is childless. They believe in the transmigration of souls, holding that if a man leads a brutish life he may be reincarnated as a brute, while a fine horse may harbour the choice spirit of some one who deserves a noble abode. But the present culture of Asia Minor rests on several earlier strata, of which the oldest that can be distinguished is the Hittite. That covered most of what we know in the third and second millenniums B.C. Then follow an Anatolian period, a Greek, a Roman, a Byzantine, and so we reach the present stage, the character of which is prevailingly Turkish. But however many times these fair lands have been swept by foreign armies or colonised by invading hordes, in no case have the earlier inhabitants been entirely exterminated. Many of them have lived on, and have carried forward their religious customs and convictions with the tenacity known to be common in such circumstances. The origin of existing rites and beliefs must, therefore, in many instances be sought in pre-Mahommedan, pre-Christian paganism; and such survivals from primitive culture would be most abundant among the most simple and ignorant. And these are the Alevi folk, whose standard forms shelter much that is a relic of the times of pure paganism.

But let us look at their authoritative exponents, namely the Bek Tash Dervishes, whose centre is at their Tekye near Kir Shehr, between Angora and Cesarea. Twelve "Tariks," or Orders, of Dervishes are habitually distinguished, and of these, one, the Bek Tash, is affiliated with the Alevis. History records that when Sultan Orchan, who was girt with the royal sword in 1326, founded the corps of Janissaries, that terrible instrument by which Christians were made to conquer Christians for the glory of Islam, the new regiment received its name and its first blessing from Hadji Bek Tash. He was a venerable Dervish, who had wandered forth from Khorassan in Central Asia. During the 500 years of their continuance, the Janissaries were always closely associated with the Bek Tash Dervishes. Hadji Bek Tash himself, the pir or founder of the order, in due season betook himself to the site now honoured with his name, and passed the remainder of his days in residence and devotions in a cell, which is still shown the visitor. His tekya, which may best be described as a Dervish monastery, was endowed with abundant revenues, and toward this centre the eyes of every Alevi Turk are directed, as being the headquarters of his religious organisation. Kerbela, near Baghdad, may receive more reverence from its associations with the family of Ali, and have a larger constituency, because it is within reach of the Persians, but Kerbela is too far away to serve the Alevi of Asia Minor. His spiritual centre is at Hadji Bek Tash.

The present writer had long wanted to visit the Alevi shrine, and it was with great interest that he found himself approaching the place in the summer of 1912. The village contained six hundred houses, around which the conical grain stacks rose like the tents of a camping army. Above the flat roofs of the village houses stood out the green hexagonal dome of the tomb of Hadji Bek

The Alevi Turks Of Asia Minor (1)

G. E. White tarafından yazıldı.

Tash, and beside it the grey tower of the so-called tomb of Sultan Balum. Entertainment was hospitable furnished me in the konak, or mansion, of Jemal Chelebi, the lineal descendant, as is believed, of Hadji Bek Tash, and the present Head of the Order, though the Chelebi himself was away from home, much to my regret. This man has more influence than any other over a clan estimated at from two to four millions. There is a tradition that some years ago the Government at Constantinople wished to reduce the income of the foundation, and sent word demanding the submission of its deeds and documents. But the Chelebi, believing that once the documents were out of his hands they would never return, submitted copies of the originals, and sent out word tall his men to be ready for an insurrection. No one would care lightly to provoke such an uprising, and the affair was allowed to pass without further demand for the documents. The Alevis stood their ground. And yet they do not seem at all like a military clan, but singularly docile, and wishing only to be left in quiet. This shrine is the resort of pilgrims from Persia, Albania, and all the countries between. The Chelebi administers the revenues of the tekye, and the rich offerings of the pilgrims. No visitor to the place has accomplished the purpose of his journey without seeing Jemal Effendi and receiving his blessing. Pilgrims are said to enter his reception room on their knees as his willing and devoted servants; they advance, kiss his hand, slip the offering they have brought under his cushion, receive his benediction, and withdraw without rising to their feet. The astute Chelebi has the reputation of knowing what to expect in the way of gifts from different suppliants, and to make sure before admitting them to his precense that their gifts will accord with their conditions.

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