

Article

## From Clichés to Mysticism: Evolution of Religious Motives in Turkish Cinema

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**Abstract:** As an art form, an academic discipline and an ideological instrument that finds a place in cultural studies and social sciences, film plays a significant role both in the creation and as a reflection of the culture in which it is produced and sustained. Within the relationship between religion and the cinema in the Turkish context, religion has ironically become an ideological discourse contrasting with the Islamic attitude prohibiting human depiction. This paper seeks to examine the transformation of both religious and secularist clichés and stereotypes in the Turkish cinema, by means of ideological and sociological critiques of some sample films.

**Keywords:** religious clichés; Turkish cinema; Islamic rituals; White Cinema

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### 1. Introduction

Within the relationship between religion and the cinema in the Turkish cinema, religion has ironically become an ideological discourse contrasting with the Islamic attitude prohibiting human depiction. As the young heir of the Ottoman Empire, which was administered under Islamic rule (Sharia) for about six centuries, the Republic of Turkey's relationship with religion, following the westernization/modernization process, has been reflected in Turkish cinema. The young republic considered religion to be a political threat, rather than a natural part of life, in the process of adapting its own revolutions to the conservative majority of society. Consequently, the narration of films produced in the early republic period was based on clichés and stereotypes that made a strict distinction between those who were 'bad' and those who were 'holy' or 'good', as representatives of

the ‘conservative religious mentality’ and ‘revolutionary perspective’ respectively. Withholding religious factors from the public sphere resulted in the representation of religion in films only at the symbolic level, a feature that lasted until the second half of the 1990s. There then followed the years when Turkish directors began to search for new forms of narration as alternatives to the popular Turkish cinema. Due to the rising moderate Islamic policies of this period, Muslim intellectuals and directors decided to use the cinema as an ideological tool, just like their secularist colleagues, and to create their own ‘counter cinema’, which would later be called ‘white cinema’. In fact, however, these films did not go beyond becoming Islamic versions of the secularist cinema. In spite of their poor cinematographic narrations and forms, however, these films, filled with clichés, stereotypes and direct messages, were received with great interest by those sharing the same ideological perspective.

For the last two decades, most young directors representing the new Turkish cinema have started to use rituals of Islamic ideas and philosophy and mystic stories rather than referring to clichés and stereotypes. This paper seeks to examine the transformation of both religious and secularist clichés and stereotypes in the Turkish cinema, through ideological and sociological critiques of some sample films.

The main rationale for this research is to try and answer the question of how the cinema especially dealt with and represented religion parallel to the changing policies and social transformations in the secular republican period, following long years in which that religion had been the central point of reference for organizing both the legal system and cultural life. Analyzing the portrayal in films of clergymen (imams), religious rituals and symbols, traditions and cultural differences, the authority of government, class relations and ideological positions of the individual, all caught between East and West—which are some of the basic concerns of the two perspectives here under consideration—enables us to clarify the relationship between religion and films in the Turkish cinema. Correctly interpreting directors’ choices of the religious elements used in their films, in terms both of content and of style, provides us with a rich methodology for understanding contemporary political and social changes in Turkey and their reflection in the new Turkish cinema.

## 2. Secular Outlook of the Young Republic

Between 1920 and 1930, the new Turkish nation was heavily engaged in building a new state, which involved the institutionalization of a new secular nationalist project constituted against the background of an Islamic past. The secularizing policy of the Turkish republic gave priority to laws that reorganized the relationship between religion and the state, but disregarded the necessary reforms in the relationship between religion and society. Islam was an important component of the old system, before its gradual demise during the republican era, when secular reforms abolished the caliphate, disestablished the institution of the ulema<sup>1</sup> [1], rejected Islamic law and adopted a modified version of the Swiss Civil Code, Latinized the alphabet, and, in 1928, struck out the sentence in the constitution of 1924 which stated that Turks were of the Islamic faith [2].

It was considered that all these changes, which were both conceptually radical and culturally significant, had to penetrate the whole of society as the only way to civilization. Cultural and artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Atatürk’s reforms defined ulemas as “non-civilized (non-scientific, non-positivist) persons who functioned within the boundaries of superstition. The ulemas did not constitute a scientific group, and were acting according to superstitions developed over centuries. Their name was *gerici*”.

studies were to be foremost among the instruments necessary to achieve this purpose, just as was the case in western developed countries. In a culture in which literature was well-developed, while arts such as painting, sculpture and the theatre were still a long way from the artistic values of the western world, cinema was acknowledged as a suitable method, as it corresponded to the tradition of 'storytelling'. Cinema was a significant ideological tool, through which the young republic could express itself. However, the young Turkish cinema had no opportunity to improve its own narration style and complete its sectoral development before attempts were made by the hegemonic official ideology to use it as an instrument. Thus, it could not fully develop as an art form, with the consequence that the relationship between the Turkish cinema and religion, as with other social issues, inevitably became fixed at the symbolic level by referring to clichés and stereotypes.

The secular gaze of the young republic's films with regard to religious elements was not much different from Hollywood's classic orientalist view of eastern people, who were portrayed in Hollywood films as barbaric, uneducated and a threat to western civilization. In the same way, priests and most of the conservative traditions attributed to Islam were pictured in early Turkish films as if they were serious obstacles for the modernization project of the republic.

At this point, it may be necessary to state that the term 'priests' does not here refer to persons with a religious institutional identity, as in the West, but to people who are called sheikh, hodja or dervish and are respected by the community. They are unusual people who cure diseases and other problems of daily life with blessings, spells and charms. Mediums who are active today might be considered their modern equivalent and they are compared with wizards, sorcerers and charm makers. The Turkish sociologist Subaşı explains the position of such hodjas within society as follows: "As is known, religion is the solemn guardian of culture, morals, manners and traditions in traditional societies. Religion, through which members of societies seek solutions to all their social and spiritual problems, thus becomes the ideal way for a group and its culture to prosper in traditional societies. It is beyond doubt that hodjas were the highest spiritual and social authority in a traditional society such as the Ottoman Empire." [3]. Moreover, Muslim clerics were the solemn representatives of all religious elements opposing modernization, due to their effective positions within the government and their power in decision-making mechanisms. Thus, in films concerning the National War of Independence, most of the clerics, who did not wish to lose their holy-hegemonic status, were represented both in social and governmental issues as traitors. "Kemalist [republican] ideology waged a war against superstition by banning the practices of the ulema (clerics) and promoting the civilized way ('westernization'), by establishing lawyers, teachers, doctors...The strategic goal was to change the great influence of the ulema on politics by removing them from the social arena". ([1], p. 171). In films reflecting this ideology from the early years of the republic, "the heroic figures of the idealist district officer and the village teacher bringing enlightenment where obscurantism and superstition prevailed, the effort to eradicate malaria, and the move toward the emancipation of women all appear as part and parcel of the same ideological package" [4].

Hoping to bring about a change in society, these characters usually sacrificed themselves for the sake of a shift away from Turkish traditions towards westernization. For example, in the film *Hit the Harlot* [5] adapted from the novel of Halide Edip Adivar, who was one of the earliest women writers of Turkey, an idealistic young girl starts working as a teacher in a small village in the country during the National War of Independence. She teaches the main principles of the republic to students,

promoting a spirit of independence amongst them. She struggles against the traitors and bigots for the future of the nation. She also “helps to hide a resistance officer from the enemy. When the Greeks occupy the village, the conservative notables of the village, led by the imam, expose her.” He provokes people to punish her by stoning (known as ‘recm’ and used as a form of execution in some Islamic countries) “on the pretext that she spent the night with a man outside wedlock. Her tragic death at the end of the film results in hatred for the imam” [6] (and, thus, the old traditions he represents).

In *Ankara Post* [7], a movie about the Turkish War of Independence, which is adapted from Reşat Nuri Güntekin’s novel *A Disastrous Night* [8], the character of the imam was “confirmed as the symbol of reactionism, and an enemy” [9]. Similarly, the movie *A Nation Awakes* [10], which is also about the Turkish War of Independence and adapted from the novel of Nizamettin Nazif Tepedelenlioğlu, was based on the heroic story of a lieutenant and a private from the national forces fighting against the traitor Mullah Said and his supporters. In the final scene of the movie, the character of Mullah Said was regarded as the traitor cleric who collaborated with the occupying forces while Turkish soldiers shouted “*In our heart lies a strong faith for salvation and victory; the Turkish army attacks like lions roaring the name of Allah.*” [11]. The term traitor, which was identified with a religious character in the movie, can also be read as the projection of religious challenges towards the establishment of a national identity.

Islamic clerics were thus often represented as obstacles to the development of society and as unethical traitors who used religion for their personal interests. This fact started to seriously bother conservative and religious sections of society. In one instance, for example, the movie *The Mystery of Boğaziçi* [12], caused serious negative reaction. An attempt was made to prevent the making of the movie, which was about the use of religion for sexual abuse, even before it was shown in theatres. Özgüç states that, “During the shooting of outdoor scenes in the courtyard of Eyüp Mosque, faithful disciples of the Bektashi Order rebelled shouting ‘They are making a movie against Bektashism!’ ... Hundreds of people destroyed the movie set on the courtyard of the mosque, attacked the camera and beat the actors and actresses...” [13].

The conflict between the secular and religious, which sometimes occurred at a critical level and as physical resistance, was in fact the first sign of a long social segregation. It was one of the severe outcomes of the separation between state and religion, the regulator of social life. The new republican ideology, by denying the place of Islam as a discourse and its role as a ‘cement’ of society, “adopted national values instead and increased the distance between the educated and uneducated.” ([4], p. 71) This segregation sowed the seeds of a future social polarization that would continue until the present day, and sprang to life in the stereotypes of both secular and Islamic movies.

### 3. Intersecting Paths of Religious and Secular Directors

Following World War II, there was a movement towards a multi-party system in Turkey and the Democratic Party (DP) won power in 1950 [14]. The coming of the multi-party system under the premiership of Adnan Menderes witnessed tremendous transformations in the political, economic, cultural, and social structures of Turkey. An open economic system replaced the existing one, with the help of the industrialization program supported by Marshall Aid [15]. Menderes’ dream of ‘becoming a little America’ and ‘creating a millionaire’ with ready cash in every neighborhood, as well as

changes in the social structure caused by agricultural mechanization and rural-urban migration, determined the basic arguments that would dominate the Turkish cinema for years.

The developments and trends in world cinema paved the way for new perceptions and pursuits in the Turkish cinema which, at that time, far from being an artistic form, sustained its existence as a commercial product, namely, as theatre recorded on celluloid films ([6], pp. 21–22) <sup>2</sup>. The 1960s were important, since both conservative directors and secularist directors were active in the field of cinema and took a common attitude against the western-oriented commercial cinema, especially Hollywood, in line with their purpose of creating a new cinema. It can be said that directors of various political spectra were on the same page, even if only for a short period of time, in order to make genuine Turkish movies. Prior to mentioning where these crossing paths to a ‘National Cinema’ separated, it would be appropriate to look at the relationship of conservative sections of the community with the cinema, from which they remained distant.

It was not long before conservative representatives of Islam, who refrained from bringing what was sacred into view and restrained people from making representations (visualizing), accepted the power of the cinema, which, however, they steadily ignored, as they understood the futility of any physical or verbal resistance to this power. In 1943, the conservative poet Necip Fazıl Kısakürek said, “Cinema is surely a magnificent opportunity and a blueprint if is used with the mind and soul...” [17]. These words were the first sign of the creation of a ‘counter’ cinema that would support Islamic thoughts and evoke not only national but also religious feelings. Although the support of a respected intellectual like Kısakürek was quite an encouraging beginning, there were two main motives behind Islamic directors becoming more visible in the field of cinema and the gradual increase in the number of movies supporting religious elements. One of these motives was, as stated before, the policies of the Democrat Party (DP), which brought religion more into view within society. “The DP’s approach to religion involved the incorporation of Islam as a living cultural tradition into the mainstream of Turkish politics. Religion in this view was necessary social cement for the cohesion of society.” [18]. As a result of the politics of the DP, that “relegitimized Islam and traditional rural values, Islamic groups were gradually drawn into the competitive political arena for the first time.” [19].

The other motive was that Islamic directors considered the cinema to be merely a ‘*tebliğ*’ <sup>3</sup> (method of notification); for a long time, this point of view caused them to fall one step behind in creating an ‘original cinema language’, compared to their secular colleagues. According to Maktav, the ‘*tebliğ*’ mission of cinema is an important motive for it to gain approval on a religious basis, corresponding to the purpose of Islamic socialization [20]. At this point, it is possible to say that when Islamic directors produce movies reflecting their own ideologies, they are almost duty bound to harmonize the ‘representation restraint’ of Islam with the cinema.

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<sup>2</sup> The Turkish film industry was dominated by one man, Muhsin Ertuğrul (1892–1979), who studied theatre and film in Germany and Russia in the early twenties. Ertuğrul was a theatre director and head of the leading Turkish theatres of the era. Although he dominated the Turkish film industry until 1939, cinema always remained a side product; his main interest was in theatre. The first Turkish films were mostly plays, recorded during the summer months, when the theatres were closed. The actors in these films were theatre actors [16].

<sup>3</sup> This means a religious mission; to inform, to notify people of the best aspects of Islam as a religion.

Indeed, the cinema was even stated to be an instrument of Jihad in an interview with the National Turkish Student Union (NTSU). Referring to the hadith (body of Islamic traditions) in the article ‘Arm the Weapon of the Enemy’ in Tohum journal, Salih Gökmen said “Are those in whose hands we have left the cinema supposed to bring it to the point we want? How are they going to perform Jihad without expecting anything in return (*fisebilillah jihad*), as is constantly and heavily demanded in countless verses from the Qur’an? Unless a Muslim is as naïve as to believe that s/he can conduct Jihad against *kafirun* (infidels) with only a sword in his/her hand, s/he is as responsible for this command as any of the rest of us”. This perspective aroused great interest. Jihad can be carried out by the cinema, not by the sword ([16], p. 50).

Therefore, Islamic directors who considered being a Muslim a blessing and preferred explaining the virtues of Islam ‘through the cinema’ made movies about the lives of saints and prophets (known with the appellation Hz. —Hazret, a title for venerated religious figures) and Islamic heroes. In these movies, religious elements were conveyed within a pure mystic fantasy far from the physical world and present time, without considering historical facts, telling the stories of historical Sufi figures such as Yunus Emre, Haji Bektash Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal and Rumi Anadolu and of saints and prophets such as Joseph, Abraham, Jacob, Job and Solomon, who played a big role in the Islamization of Anatolia. The movies were presented to the rural (Anatolian) audience from a commercially pragmatist point of view, without having any aesthetic concerns. “The making of religious movies started in 1961 with *Hz. Ömer’in Adaleti* (The Justice of Omar), and the number gradually increased, with 6 movies in 1965 and 28 movies in 1973. Movies bringing together melodramatic factors, such as pain, agony, melancholic love and impossible coincidences, and religious factors, such as being rewarded with wealth as a result of poetic justice, mystic power and patience [21] as Wollen put forward, could not go beyond ‘primitive symbolism’<sup>4</sup> [22]. As a result, religious cinema became a new commercial genre, opening doors for producers into wealth, rather than being primarily or solely a *tebliğ* or mission tool.

All these negative developments in the Turkish cinema led to leftist, secular and conservative groups coming together for the creation of a high quality national cinema. While young directors uniting under the banner of the journal ‘*Yeni Sinema*’ (New Cinema) started criticizing commercial movies, which were almost identical to each other, conservative and nationalist intellectuals, who mostly conducted their activities under the auspices of the NTSU, were dissatisfied with the quality of movies where religious elements were used for emotional abuse. These intellectuals, who defended the view that Turkish traditions, culture and values should be transmitted through a high quality cinema language, leading to the establishment of a Turkish National Cinema, were, therefore, united at the meetings of the NTSU. However, the crossing paths of directors with different world views separated at the first seemingly insignificant turn. They could not agree on which of the two words available for expressing ‘national’ in Turkish should be used in the name for the ‘National Cinema’. “The word *milli* for ‘national’ is a loanword from Arabic and therefore associated with conservative nationalistic circles in Turkey; the Turkish word *ulusal* is the word for ‘national’ used by Kemalists.” [6] Indeed, future efforts to label the national cinema ‘Islamic Cinema’, ‘Green Cinema’ or ‘White Cinema’ did

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<sup>4</sup> “The concept of primitive symbolism is used in order to express the excessive significance attributed to certain symbols without forming an overall coherence.”

not only not contribute to its creation at all, but also resulted in the ‘quality’ problem of the cinema becoming even more neglected.

While Turkish commercial Yeşilçam (Green Pine) films were based on secular or religious versions of Hollywood types of melodrama, leftist intellectual producers, inspired by Marxist theories, Soviet Revolutionary Cinema, and especially Italian Neorealism, tried to create an alternative cinema, by making realistic films about the hard life in the Anatolian countryside and the suburbs of the metropolitan city of Istanbul. The common ground of the socially realistic movies of these directors was that all the films were about the conflict between the modern and the traditional. Rabassa expresses the social and political reality behind this conflict being based on the national reforms of the republic as follows: “However, most of these reforms were limited to the urban centers; the countryside remained largely untouched. Until the 1950s, the bulk of the Turkish population remained isolated and traditional, while the urban centers were modern and secular. In effect, two Turkeys coexisted in uneasy harmony: an urban, modern, secular ‘center’ and a rural, traditional, religious ‘periphery’, with little contact between them. The dominant elite were urban, modern, and secular, while the greater part of the population was rural, traditional, and pious.” ([19], p. 7) Cinematographic representation of religion and religious elements naturally took on a completely different dimension at this significant breaking point.

According to directors viewing society from a Marxist perspective, religion exists as an institutional structure developed by upper classes to control lower classes in class societies. However, in Turkish society, religion is a value adopted by the oppressed and wronged classes. Clerics and religious elements are not considered as threats to the system, but supportive factors for the exploiting landlords and the system. Movies of the time reflecting imams and other phenomena within the social reality of Anatolia were recognized in the world cinema in terms of their plots and original narratives. For instance, one of the significant directors of the period, Yılmaz Güney, who grew up among the poor working class, “developed his own personal style of epic and poetic realism, and attempted to create a new, distinctive film language suitable for Turkish subjects.” ([15], p. 660).

The movie *Hope* [23], which is considered to be a turning point, not only in terms of his directing career but also in terms of the Turkish cinema, tells the story of poor Cabbar maintaining his family by driving carriages. When his horse dies, Cabbar asks for help from the landlord, but the landlord refuses to help him. So, Cabbar asks for help from a respected hodja in the village. The hodja (Hüseyin) tells Cabbar that, in return for some money, he will cast a spell over him so that he can find some treasure. Believing that the hodja has mystic powers and can make him find treasure, Cabbar digs the soil and sees a snake. Just then Cabbar recalls the words of the hodja saying “*Jinns are creatures that can masquerade as anything they want; they can be a bird and fly, and they can be a snake and run.*” Therefore, Cabbar believes that the treasure he is looking for is now a snake running away from him. Disappointed, Cabbar tragically loses his mind. For his movie *Umut*, Güney says “I only wanted to show that metaphysics is a dead end” [24]. He argues that religion just keeps people occupied and prevents them from realizing their own powers. Yenen reads the movie as a criticism of the irrational effect of religion and superstitions on the rural population in Turkey, at whom they are directed, and states that the deserted and barren lands, dead woods and the extreme brightness which the director preferred to depict in his movie give the impression of a hallucination moving people away from reality, just as is the case with Cabbar, who moves from the physical to the metaphysical. ([21], p. 51).

In Metin Erksan's movie *Revenge of the Snakes* [25], the hodja stands behind the village headman, who represents power and authority in the village, and tells people not to oppose his unfair practices. Kara Bayram is a poor man. One day, the village headman makes a decision that contradicts with the traditions of the village and sells the land in front of Bayram's house to Haceli so that he can build a house. Soon, the problem becomes more serious and the parties plunder and rob one another's houses and resort to physical violence. Then the respected and esteemed hodja tells people in his sermons in the mosque that justice comes from Allah only and they should consent to the injustices they experience and be patient. This fatalist discourse implies keeping silent before and resigning themselves to authority and power without judging. Although it cleverly reflected the reality of village life of the time, the movie repeated the mistake of representing the hodja as a stereotype; the hodjas in countless Turkish movies were based on stereotypes with an exaggerated thick black beard and eyebrows, a stern face, declamatory talk and a black cap and gown worn both inside and outside the mosque.

Directors such as Metin Erksan, Halit Refiğ, Ömer Lütfü Akad and Duygu Sağıroğlu, representatives of the social realism movement which was quite popular at the time, gave remarkable examples of beliefs and practices presented as religion; these beliefs and practices were mostly considered to be 'bid'ah' (sinful innovations) and superstitions and remained the same in Anatolia even half a century after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic. One of these movies *The Sacrifice* [26], is based on a true story from a village of Erzincan province in the 1960s. The main theme of the movie is, as its name suggests, the sacrificial ritual in Islam, an historical-religious practice resulting from the fact that Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son Ishmael for the sake of Allah, who then sent him a ram to kill instead, and the way this event is perceived by the rural population. The main character Mümin prays to Allah that if he ever gets out of prison, in which he was put as a result of slander, he would sacrifice his future son. Judged not guilty, Mümin is released from prison and soon his wife becomes pregnant. Afraid that the baby is a boy, Mümin gets depressed; sadly, his fears come true and he has a son. He tries to forget his promise; however, it no longer rains in the village, causing drought. The peasants take recourse to praying for rain, an Islamic ritual, but it still does not rain. Mümin feels guilty about the fact that there is no rain, and eventually sacrifices his son. According to the beliefs of Islam, human beings cannot be sacrificed for Allah. Nevertheless, the movie is important, as it emphasizes the sectarian religious belief dominating villages in Turkey. Another important example of such movies is director Ali Özgentürk's movie *Hazal* [27] tells the story of Hazal, who is forced to marry the 12-year-old son of a family when their older son to whom she is about to get married dies. However, Hazal loves someone else (Emin), a fact for which both Hazal and her lover are killed. The most important aspect of the movie is that it indicates that out-of-date traditions still have a strong existence. These traditions include, for example, marrying the brother of the dead man, bride price, fertility magic, being a sect member, peasants being at the beck and call of village headmen and imams, and regarding technical and civilized aspects of society as sin, all of which are totally outside of the modern life in cities and do not correspond to the vision of a modern Turkey. Abisel states that, "Most of the movies of the time were about illogical and unfamiliar issues such as spells, charms and incenses, and brought out the beliefs and practices of hodjas, especially in rural areas, introducing imams, ill-minded village headman and landlords as powers against modernization." [28].

The movie trilogy *The Bride* [29], *The Wedding* [30], and *The Sacrifice* [31], by Ömer Lütfü Akad, one of the most important directors of the Turkish cinema, successfully sets forth the squatting

problem resulting from internal migration, and reveals the efforts of Turkish families to keep their beliefs alive in the metropolitan way of living. What is most noteworthy for the present article in this movie is the character of Hacı İlyas, who migrates from Yozgat, one of the conservative cities in Anatolia, to Istanbul. Hacı İlyas is a religious character, deeply committed to traditional values and tries to properly follow Islamic beliefs and practices. He does not adopt the corrupt city lifestyle as the head of the family, and puts pressure on his family in this regard; however, he is overwhelmed by his ambition to make more money within the capitalist system of city life. Instead of taking his sick grandson to a doctor, he tells people to take him to a hodja, to make charms and to conduct the superstitious practice of melting and pouring lead in order not to spend money, while he himself takes drugs when sick. Moreover, the movie draws attention to the sacrificial ritual. Before a ram can be sacrificed during the Sacrifice Feast, one of the main religious feasts, Hacı İlyas' grandson dies and the ram gets away. The movie relates the heavy price Hacı İlyas pays for the wrongdoings and injustices he engages in, despite his mask of piety, in order to make more money and associates these circumstances with the sacrifice ritual.

The industrialization, urbanization, circulation of capital, consumption policy and the sharply defined line between the working and middle classes, which all began in the 1950s and gained momentum with the policies of Turgut Özal in the 1980s (see section 3.1.), triggered the conflict between the modern and traditional. Besides the above-mentioned examples, there are many movies which emphasize issues such as migration from Anatolia to big cities and rich (dominant)—poor (oppressed) or peasant (traditional)—urbanized (modern) conflicts, and bring a critical perspective to the cultural erosion and social corruption resulting from western modernization and liberal economies. Although directors who preferred reflecting social realities from a local and traditional point of view rather than a Marxist perspective, as was the case with Yılmaz Güney, made movies highlighting traditional and religious elements that would prevent corruption, the fact that they sometimes used women's bodies as sex objects caused them to fall out with Islamic directors. As a result, right wing conservative directors started to express their own beliefs and ideas through a higher quality cinema language. The political and social polarization of the time appeared in the cinema as 'Revolutionary Cinema' on the left wing and 'National (*Milli*) Cinema' on the right wing. ([21], p. 58).

### 3.1. The Rise of the Right Wing National (*Milli*) Cinema

National (*Milli*) cinema is a Turkish cinema movement which began with the movie *Converging Paths* [32] and ended with the movie *Free Man* [33]; it encompassed a total of 42 movies made by directors such as Yücel Çakmaklı, Salih Diriklik, Mesut Uçakan, İsmail Güneş, Mehmet Tanrısever and Metin Çamurcu. Through concepts such as white cinema, Islamist cinema, Islamic cinema and conservative cinema, a number of attempts have been made to define the movement, which aimed to bring religion (Islam), a cultural resource, into the cinema as a thesis ([21], p. 62). The above-defined national cinema developed parallel to the political and social changes in Turkey from the 1970s to the 2000s. "Over the past several decades, the strength of Islamism, or political Islam, has been growing in Turkey. Prior to 1970, the religious right was just a faction within the mainstream center-right parties. In the 1970s, it emerged as a separate political movement under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan, who founded the National View (*Milli Görüş*) movement. The founders of the MNP political party and

its successors came out of the *Milli Gorus* movement, whose leaders sought a return to traditional values and institutions. They regarded the Kemalist attempt to replace the Islamic-Ottoman state and culture with a Western model as a historic mistake and the source of all the ills in Turkish society. Their goal was to build a ‘national (Islamic) order’ and put an end to the process of Westernization” ([16], p. 40) <sup>5</sup>. Representatives of the national cinema rising along with the National View movement decided to create an alternative cinema to the Turkish cinema, which never addressed the destruction caused by westernization in the lives of conservative religious people. The first example of the national cinema was the movie *Converging Paths* directed by Yücel Çakmaklı in 1971. The movie tells the story of a young woman who suffers very much and eventually finds happiness and peace in religion. Although conservative critics considered the fact that the movie had a vast audience as the ‘victory of Islamic cinema’, it would not be wrong to say that melodramatic clichés and popular stars of the time, e.g., Türkan Şoray, guaranteed a certain box-office success. Conservative directors also used these clichés in their movies, to which their national secular contemporaries often resorted, in order to explain the ‘traditional—modern’ conflict and to clarify the line between the good and bad, using stereotypes and recurrent patterns rather than characters and deep plots. In opposition to modernism, which was shaped by liberal economic policies that were believed to erode social values, nationalists placed traditions and cultural content, while conservatives adopted religious elements. All these movies included stars representing oppressed, wronged, poor but proud and good people, apartment life, the sine qua non of modern life (one of the basic indicators of urban modernization), pool parties where people drink and dance all day long, an evil actor for whom sexuality is no longer a taboo, (unlike the good people in a Muslim country), and definitely an evil blond actress. Similar to the movies of the early republic, the representation of ‘I’ and ‘the other’, separated from one another by a thick, sharp line, is quite significant in that it indicates the social segregation in Turkey. According to Cindoruk, this segregation results from the capitalist system, which he criticizes more than the political parties of today; “religion is used for ideological purposes in order to legitimize capitalism-related inequalities within the capitalist era, thus manipulating collective consciousness. Islamism introduces a political identity for this purpose, and tells people who they are and are not in order to give them a collective identity. Therefore, it uses the *us* and *them* conflict. Islamism develops a moral perception that considers Islamists normal, their political opponents deviant and any struggle against them rightful, and determines what ethics is.” [36]. The reflection of such a political point of view in the cinema reveals itself in conservative versions of similar movies, such as *Suffering* [37], *Zehra* [38], *Osman, My Son* [39], and *Ayşe, My Daughter* [40] by Yücel Çakmaklı, with famous actors and actresses, and similar melodramatic patterns, all of which submit themselves to the market economy they once resisted.

Efforts by the national cinema to make high quality movies criticizing itself came to a stop as a result of the financial difficulties affecting the Turkish cinema and of the military coups Turkey experienced almost every ten years. Every religious activity apart from the religious beliefs and practices determined by the government, especially during military coups (the latest coup was in 1980), was evaluated as ‘reactionary movements threatening national security’, and people living according to conservative Islamic rules were considered to be ‘others and strangers’ by elite republicans; all of these perceptions were reflected in the movies of the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980

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<sup>5</sup> For background on the *Milli Gorus* movement and its philosophy, see [34,35].

Turkish coup d'état, which resulted from the right-left conflict that developed parallel to world politics in the 1960s, intensified at the end of the 1970s and could not be prevented by the political authority, the army imposed sanctions on parties from both sides. However, the greatest danger in the eyes of the Turkish army, which considered itself the sole guardian and protector of the Turkish Republic after Atatürk, was the leftist groups. "There was no place for left-wing groups in the state envisaged by the generals" [41]. The precise attitude of the military junta towards left-wing Marxist groups paved the way for the rise of Islamic right-wing parties in Turkey. "The alternative they presented as a counterbalance to these ideologies was the welding of religion and nationalism that came to be known as the 'Turkish-Islamic synthesis'. Through this project of social engineering, religion was enlisted to reinforce national identity and as a bulwark against leftist ideology." [42].

Nevertheless, the main factors leading to the rise of these parties were, firstly, the conservative attitude and liberal economic policies of the Prime Minister Turgut Özal, who took over the government within three years from the coup d'état, and, secondly, the army's attitude towards conservative Muslims. It held them at a distance behind an uncrossable barrier; they thus became 'wronged people', who felt restricted in spite of the army's paradoxically positive attitude towards moderate Islam. This situation led to an increase in the number of aggrieved people (and of the votes of future conservative parties) and to a political issue of legitimate claim of rights<sup>6</sup>[43].

Within a short time, this unjust treatment, in conjunction with the movement from the reawakening Turkish cinema, led to the creation of a general framework in which the national cinema became a cause to be championed. Movies of the time were now more visible thanks to advanced technology and free market strategies<sup>7</sup> [44,45], and reached wider masses. The movies *Abdullah from Minye* 1–2 [46], by Yücel Çakmaklı, which are considered to be 'true examples' of the national cinema, introduced Islam as an issue. This issue is built upon the learning, teaching and living of Islam, the legacy of the past, in opposition to the modern western lifestyle that developed with the Turkish Republic within the modernization project. That Islam is learnt and taught not as a superstition but as a science in the movies of the time is quite significant as it suggests a counter argument. In the above-mentioned movie, which is set in Egypt rather than Turkey, the main character loses his father at an early age and wants to continue his education with the help of his mother. However, upon being subjected to violence there, he quits school. Abdullah works at several jobs, reads Islamic books suggested by his boss, who is one of the respected intellectuals of the time, and shares his knowledge with others. When his neighbor reports him to the police saying that he conducts illegal reactionary activities, he is arrested and put into prison, as such activities are considered to be part of a political movement aiming to overthrow the government and introduce Sharia law. However, this was considered such a sensitive

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<sup>6</sup> Female students and women were not allowed to enter universities, military hospitals and facilities such as cafeterias, and to work in the public sector covering their heads. Moreover, people who had graduated from Imam Hatip High Schools offering religious education were not allowed to enter military academies. "Students, who wished to attend universities with their headscarves, began to demonstrate in various ways to protest that the authorities were keeping them out of the campus. Although the issue was of direct concern mainly to women, male students made up the majority of the protestors. The basic claim of the rioting students was: 'I cannot practice my faith as I wish'.

<sup>7</sup> Özal played a key role in the liberalization of the economy and in the shift from import substitution to export orientation in Turkey." "The Özal government invested important sums in the construction of new highways, communication technology and electronic facilities. This in turn accelerated Turkey's integration into the global process.

issue and a serious crime of sedition in Turkey that the scenes, even though it is a fictional movie, were shot as if the story takes place in Egypt, not in Turkey, for fear of reprisals. The movie gives significant messages through the story of Abdullah, who is freed when Nasser takes over the government, and attempts to demonstrate to the audience what may be achieved by following Islamic beliefs and practices. “Abdullah implements his beliefs and practices within a plan based on Islamic economy which he called an *Islamic Reform Program*, and turns this program into a corporate structure under the name *Solidarity Fund*...The profit made from the commercial activities in these fields is used to pay zakat (obligatory alms) and financially support Islamic institutions, and the remaining profit or loss is shared among the shareholders.” ([21], p. 81). The effort of Muslims to be organized on both economic and cultural bases, a situation reflected in the form of a solidarity fund in the movie, makes a reference to the IIBA (Independent Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association—known as MÜSİAD) which was an association established in Turkey after 1990 by Islamic companies and conservative businessmen. The subtext of the movie can be understood as “the need of Islam to gain power not through traditional discourses but through liberal, not exactly capitalist, economic policies and to exercise this power for the sake of Islam along with the science and technology of the West” and even if this can never be reflected with any cinematographic aesthetics worthy of the name, it still sheds light upon Turkey today.

In another striking movie of the time, *You Are Not Alone* [47], the daughter of a rich family, Serpil, who studies medicine, questions concepts such as life, death and the after life. Eventually, she decides to cover her head and lives her life according to the rules of Islam. She seeks the answers to her questions in the depth of the spiritual world, not in the temporary and material world. Her radical transformation is considered to be a ‘psychological disorder’ by her family and social environment, and she is forced to go back to ‘normal’. The movie is interesting in terms of its plot based on the isolation of people who prefer to live in accordance with Islamic norms; however, it is a very long way from the art form it aims to be. The movie presents Serpil’s old friends with whom she no longer gets along as ‘the others’ who (never ever) question anything and just go to parties, use drugs and dance, and are therefore nothing more than marginalized clichés. Other movies which followed, such as *Butterflies Fly to Eternity* [48], *How Could You Do That to Us* [49] and *Boots* [50] continued to emphasize clichés such as the inequalities suffered by people who want to live according to their beliefs or who do not accept the impositions of the Turkish Republic in religious contexts, e.g. the Turkish azan (call to prayer), and to represent the ‘Islamic life’ as the only thing to be resorted to in order to get away from the filthiness of the material world. Consequently, in the 2000s, there was an Islamic cinema, which could neither attain success as popular cinema because of the religious messages it included, although it used all the popular clichés usually guaranteeing box office success, nor successfully create the artistic movie language it longed for. On the other hand, the phenomenon of ‘religion’ was used by conservative directors and representatives of the new Turkish cinema, and even though they were not part of any specific movement such as Islamic or white cinema, these movies are able to offer us a picture of the contemporary social structure of Turkey.

#### 4. Who are We? The Search for Identity and New Forms between the Modern and Traditional

At the premiere of his movie *Phoenix* [51], Mesut Uçakan asked people not to criticize technical matters such as editing, shooting, *etc.*, and said, “Here, we question life itself. We question who we are.” [52]. This key question reveals the identity issue of Turkish people who are caught between the modern and traditional in the modernization adventure that began with the westernization efforts in the Ottoman Empire and continued parallel to the Turkish Republic. As Nilüfer Göle notes, “Attempts at modernization in Muslim countries become a matter of ‘civilization’ when they are defined essentially by Western experience and culture.... The term ‘civilization’, then, does not refer in a historically relative way to each culture—such as French, Islamic, Arabic, African—but instead designates the historical superiority of the West as the producer of modernity” [53]. With the renewal of the Islamist movements during the 1980s, a historical return—a reconsideration of this ‘civilizing’ shift—became crucial to understanding the emotional, personal, and symbolic levels that defined the conflicts and tensions between Islamists and modernists ([53], p. 76). In the 2000s, in the search for an Islamic identity, conservative intellectuals who opposed the degenerating effects of Western modernity on Islamic values did not want to stay away from the paradoxical concept of civilization determined by the West. They constructed their identities, which the West defined as ‘the others’ from an orientalist point of view, between western modernity (representing civilization) and the traditional. However, this modernity was represented through a formal transformation rather than an intellectual transformation in the religious movies of the new Turkish cinema. Islamic clerics who were once represented as stereotypes now appeared as well-educated, intellectual, tolerant and humanist characters adopting western technology and modern life practices.

The most striking example of this transformation is, as the English name suggests, the movie *The Imam* [54]. Emre, main character of the movie, “confronts himself by secularizing the Muslim subject, *i.e.*, the spiritual subject, as a modern identity within the material world” ([52], p. 151). A former student of an Imam Hatip (religious) High School, Emre manages to graduate as a computer engineer from one of the most prestigious universities of the country. He goes on journeys he calls ‘getaways’ on his motorcycle, during which he makes internal reckonings. His long hair and modern practices do not allow him to be accepted within the traditional environment; however, he is also a ‘stranger’ in the environment he lives in, as he stays away from alcohol, entertainment or the social life practices he considers degenerating. The movie presents an alternative representing the modern and moderate side of Islam, as opposed to ‘the other’ created by the West and the official ideology, by contrasting a character like Emre with the intolerant Hacı Feyzullah, who represents a stricter Islamic understanding. This alternative character replaces the former republican intellectuals enlightening the peasants. As Göle states, “ironically, the new Islamist counter-elites are almost the mirror image of the previous secular republican ones” [55].

At this point, it would be appropriate to explain the concept of Islamic counter-elites. As stated above, the precautions taken by the Turkish army to protect secularism, the fundamental principle of the Turkish Republic founded by Atatürk, first became a claim of rights and then a legitimate political movement. The last straw for many people came with the decisions taken on 28 February 1997 and known as the ‘soft revolution’. This act by the Turkish army resulted in the closure of the Welfare Party, as the representative of a legitimate political movement, on the grounds that it was a ‘reactionary

threat'. Most people who were fed up with unstable governments and coalition governments then voted for the charismatic leader Erdoğan, who promised a new Turkey that would keep the doors of the 'civilized' (material) world of the West open but embrace the spiritual world of Islam. "Under the JDP (Justice & Development Party), the government of Turkey has gone through a liberalization process, referred to by some as a 'silent revolution'" [56]. This silent revolution "represents a historical break in terms of providing to a socially Muslim party an opportunity to restructure the political landscape and expand the public sphere..." and through this revolution "politically active Muslims in Turkey have evoked Islamic symbols and institutions to express their notions of community, identity, self and justice. More importantly they utilized Islam to construct their own version of modernity." [57].

The movie *Takva* [58], which tells the story of conservative Islamists caught between the earthly pleasures and comforts of modern life and the spiritual world they fight for, is quite significant since it includes real dhikr (repetitive invocation) scenes, a first in the Turkish cinema, uses high quality cinema language, reflects religion as an economic and corporate concept for the first time, and introduces the main character as a 'subject'. The main character Muharrem is a worker, who spends his life between dhikr rituals of the sect of which he is a member and his simple house where he only eats, prays and sleeps. Due to his honest personality and modest life, he is soon given responsibility for the financial affairs of the sect. His new job earns Muharrem money and power, and he who had always lived a life that was based on the fear and love of God and was far removed from earthly affairs until that moment becomes depressed, as he cannot understand the relationship between financial conditions and world views that are the economical politics of religion. All the things he learned as true, good, nice, meritorious, sinful, pious, *etc.* become inconsistent with his new life. The job he takes for the sake of God causes him to sin countless times, again for the sake of God; he collects rental income from poor people, offers bribes in order to be privileged in government bureaucracy and deceives people in commercial purchases. Unveiled attractive women trigger his repressed sexual desires and haunt his dreams. These different lifestyles with which he is unfamiliar promise him a world that is far beyond his little old life. Muharrem is caught between this new world, which offers him prestige, pleasure, guilt and a new identity, and his old life, which he now questions. The movie ends with a scene where Muharrem loses his mind, as he cannot come to terms with the things he has done.

In Turkey, Turkish Islamist policies boosted by the liberal economic conformism of the JDP (Justice and Development Party-originally known as AKP) dominate the country, contrasting with the secularist perception of a nation state and the disparagement of conservative people of the Turkish Republic as 'the others'. It could be said that it is no longer possible to claim that 'unjust treatment' enables the Islamic cinema to appear as the 'political opposition', because, as Göle asserts, "As these new agents of Islamism began to obtain the same cultural capital as the republican elites, share the same university classes, occupy the ranks of parliament, and participate in public debates on television, they started to gain public visibility, social recognition, legitimacy, and prestige." ([55], p. 5).

In this new period, in which Turkish cinema is considered as art on both national and international platforms, religion has become an object of metaphorical expressions, full of mystical elements and references that enable philosophical examinations, rather than a clearly suggested case or issue in the movies of directors representing either viewpoint. The director of the movie *Anka Kuşu*, for example, which is considered to be the 'native Matrix' states that the metaphysical journey in the movie aims to enable people to explore their own truths ([52], p. 39). The main character Selman questions the

meaning of life, asking philosophical questions such as ‘What is the truth?’, ‘Who is God?’ and ‘Who am I?’ These questions lead him to believe that there might be another life, another dimension where anything is possible. This is a metaphysical and mystical world where the truth is hidden behind the things we imagine we have seen before. Unlike in previous years, the director Uçakan prefers opening the doors of Sufism for those who want to explain their own existence rather than giving direct religious messages. Although the movie is not based on a strong narrative due to the poor legacy of its genre, it is important in that it brings forward a different point of view of Islam and the relationship between religion and human beings. However, it is the young directors of the Turkish cinema who have made a great difference in this regard, a fact for which Islamic directors might envy them. These young directors have been in search of an alternative genre as opposed to popular cinema, and have sought the answers to questions regarding life and existence within the Islamic philosophy of Sufism, which they have cleared of formal rituals and superstitions. This provides not only a new perspective on the phenomenon of religion but also a rich cinematography that aesthetically presents the past and the future, the new and the old, the mystical and the truth, and the traditional and the modern together. Derviş Zaim, one of the successful representatives of the new Turkish cinema, transformed the conflict between the traditional and modern into reconciliation in cinema language. Hilmi Yavuz evaluates Zaim’s movie *Dot* [59] as “a masterpiece uniting aesthetics and Sufism” and says “We follow a route from Islamic aesthetics to Islamic ontology based upon Islamic calligraphy.”[60]. The movie, as its name suggests, tells a 13th century story about the dot of the Arabic letter “nûn” which is left unwritten as the character runs out of ink. The calligrapher sends his apprentice to get ink in order to complete the dot. The story is a long one; however, the director is successful as he manages to combine calligraphy with the subtext telling us that the universe completes its evolution by means of human beings. In order to give the feeling of a continuous and an uninterrupted time, the director tells the story through *Ihcam*, a calligraphy technique in Islam, which means writing in one stroke without lifting your hand, in a long take of seventy five minutes. Choosing the immense Lake Tuz (salt/white) as the venue for shootings, the director shows the dead body of the apprentice, a little black dot on the lake, who dies at the end of the movie, as the missing dot of the calligraphy at the beginning of the movie. According to Yavuz, “the death of the apprentice Ahmet ending the movie is actually the dot Gayb puts ending the calligraphy, which represents the human being as an innocent and decent creature” ([60], p. 193). Symbols and metaphors often used by Semih Kaplanoğlu, another successful representative of the new Turkish cinema, in his trilogy *Egg* [61], *Milk* [62] and *Honey* [63] leave us between the reality of life and the metaphysical world. The director expresses his own in-between state-of-mind as an individual as follows “If we only care for the spiritual and ignore reality, that is the earthly, it would be most likely to become a fantasy, a danger for us. However, if we care for both reality and the spiritual, then we can consider both the earthly and the spiritual zones. We realize that the two cannot be separated from one another; therefore, the movie we make should also be aware of this fact.”[64].

The movie *Egg* is also evaluated as “a movie which gives the first signs of an opportunity of a Sufi language that shows that life and objects are in fact the realm of the imaginary and brings into view the truth, *i.e.*, what cannot be seen, through the main character Yusuf, attention to the name itself, and the well scene appearing as a dream—referring to the revival of Joseph who is thrown in a well” [65]. The darkness inside the unconsciousness of Yusuf is his hometown, represented with the image of a well.

Yusuf manages to get out of the well at the end of certain confrontations, conflicts and metaphysical events, and is reborn. Following the burial and the funeral, Yusuf walks into the forest near the cemetery. He sits there and falls asleep. In his dream, he sees himself getting out of a well. He holds an egg in his hand. When the egg is broken, he wakes up. The rebirth and transformation of Yusuf are symbolized with the metaphors of well and egg. This movie of the director alone includes intense symbols and metaphors, all enough to make a full story of a single book. It is possible to say that there are many elements similar to the ones argued in the present article within other movies of the new Turkish cinema. However, not all the movies having an intense form and content integrity are examined here, in order not to push the boundaries of the study. There is no doubt that various studies to be conducted in this field would provide valuable data regarding Turkish cinema and the society it represents.

## 5. Conclusions

Cinema's power to manipulate feelings and thoughts and to perfectly reflect the society in which it is created places it in a valuable position within cultural studies. However, what really makes cinema valuable in the fields of art and social sciences is its artistic value. When the ideological or social function of cinema becomes the core reason for production, cinema moves away from its artistic value and becomes a mass of images teaching lessons to people. From this point of view, it is possible to say that the Turkish cinema fell in the trap of transforming its power into an ideological discourse without having a mature cinema language. An examination of trends in the history of the Turkish cinema (national cinema, revolutionist cinema, auteur cinema, *etc.*) reveals that Islamic cinema comes first among those that fell into this trap. It remained distant from the concept of cinema itself and totally misunderstood its purpose by evaluating it solely as a means towards the Islamic mission. The movies of the time could not go beyond satisfying a limited audience, despite all the efforts of the representatives of Islamic cinema, and remained as 'sermons' within the literature of the Turkish cinema. Moreover, it was observed in the present article that, in the limited number of examples of Turkish movies which were examined above, certain stereotypes and clichés were used both in popular Turkish cinema, as well as in Islamic cinema, for the representation of religious elements. However, in the past ten years, the way in which those Turkish directors who have tried to create their own styles and had international success with their movies have represented religious elements is quite remarkable. In the movies of these directors, religion is represented neither as a threat against modernism nor an imposed ideological discourse. Religion is more a natural part of daily life, and, more importantly, a philosophical reference resource for searches of identity and personality, for faith and for questions of existence. The paths of both Islamic directors and art directors cross once more in these kinds of searches and spiritual journeys. From a sociological perspective, the present situation can be read as a complicated process during which people are caught between common traditional values and modernity, and both parties suffer existence and identity problems as a result of external factors such as advanced capitalism and globalization, as any belief system and ideology has been destroyed. As for the Turkish cinema, it has been observed during the present study that religion is considered to be a philosophical phenomenon, which auteur directors successfully represent in terms of aesthetics. This indicates that when cinema sincerely addresses any phenomenon regarding human beings, it can continue to exist with the artistic power human beings still and always need, despite

advanced technological developments manipulating human perception and vicious capitalism transforming any form of ideology. This fact still offers researchers and people who want to make movies as works of art a unique opportunity.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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