Representing the Non-Muslims

Arus Yumul

A few years ago a friend of mine whose mother was Turkish and whose father was Laz told me that in her childhood and youth she was almost ashamed of her father's ethnic origin because in those years the connotation of being Laz was far from positive. Because it was associated with backwardness, provinciality and boorishness, she had carefully avoided identifying herself with her father's origins. Nowadays, she admitted that not only was she at ease in accepting her Laz roots as one of the constituent elements of her identity, but she also would have donated money, if she had had enough, to the establishment of an institute for the research of Laz culture. My first reaction to this confession was the impression that "*the distinction between the modern and postmodern with respect to identity must be something like this.*" Here it should be remembered that while for a long time any mention of ethnicity was considered inappropriate in "polite circles", in more recent decades ethnicity has become extremely popular and "being ethnic" has become fashionable.

It was in the 1990s that the word ethnicity made its appearance in Turkish official, political, intellectual and journalistic discourse. Whereas in the past the existence of Muslim ethnic groups had been officially denied, in the nineties at least liberals began to acknowledge that Turkey, as heir to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, was itself a multicultural society, in fact, a mosaic. Thus Turkish society has recently come face to face with the exotic culture of its Other in the form of ethnic arts, literature, music and cuisine. Such cultural products, robbed of their history and context, have been piled up and re-packaged for consumers. Diverse cultures have returned as homogenized folkloric exhibitions. Difference has been commodified, and a portrait of plurality and multiculturalism has been produced. It was again in this period that Turkish society rediscovered the non-Muslims.

My aim in this paper is to look at ways in which various discourses, or what Michel Foucault calls discursive formations, have worked together to construct the non-Muslims as specific objects of analysis in a particular way, and in the process have limited the alternative ways in which they may be constituted.

The rediscovery of the non-Muslims had as much to do with what Kevin Robins (1991) calls "*fascination with difference*" as with a nostalgic longing for old Istanbul at a time when Istanbulites were starting to feel the threat of rural migrants, who, with their lifestyles and cultures, were transforming the cultural landscape of the city. The so-called civilized and modernized sections of the population focused their attention on Pera, the most Westernized and cosmopolitan district of Ottoman Istanbul. Related to this nostalgia for bygone life-

styles, there emerged a longing for the old inhabitants of Pera, namely the non-Muslims. It was asserted that Istanbul had lost its civility with the departure of the non-Muslims. The latter were reconstructed as precious objects of the past that had to be protected. Having lived among non-Muslims in the past and being knowledgeable about their lifestyles became symbols of status or distinction. This nostalgic impulse involves what McCracken (1998) has called "patina". McCracken suggests patina as a general term to refer to that property of objects by which their age turns out to be a key indicator of their higher status, and their promise to invoke nostalgia. Objects with patina are continuous reminders of the passage of time, and whenever elite lifestyles are endangered, patina acquires double significance, indicating both the special status of its owner and its owner's special relationship to a way of life that no longer exists. This is what makes patina an exceptionally scarce resource, for it always indicates the fact that a way of life is now gone forever. Turkish society reconstructed the non-Muslims, among other nostalgic items such as antiques, as objects having patina. They were "seized from time", made present and were assigned the nostalgic role as objects of value to be retrieved for the benefit of a weary, standardised and vulgarised Istanbul.

This discovery of non-Muslims in the nineties corresponded to what Stanley Fish (1997) has designated as "boutique multiculturalism". Boutique multiculturalism, which should be differentiated from strong multiculturalism, "*is the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other in the manner caricatured by Tom Wolfe under the rubric of radical chic*" (378). Boutique multiculturalism is defined by its shallow and decorative relationship to the objects of its affection. In the Turkish version of boutique multiculturalism non-Muslims are depicted as esoteric objects and vestiges of the past that have to be preserved. The fact they are different is recognised. They are approached with curiosity, friendliness and tolerance. They are portrayed as warm, friendly, considerate individuals. They are seen as people who, with their different lifestyles, customs, cuisines, accents and so on, add depth and colour to the culture of the country. Intellectuals, writers, and journalists indulge in nostalgia for those days of yore when there were far more non-Muslims in Turkey. However, boutique multiculturalism keeps the multiplicity at the margins. Thus, the multiple identities within the nation are never pluralized as part of the nation. What is lacking in most of these accounts say non-Muslims is the acknowledgment of the fact that they themselves form an integral part of the nation; whereas such accounts portray them as outsiders, marginals or guests, non-Muslims stress that they seek inclusion and equality in a common society. Let me note in passing that such representations of ethnic or racial groups, so popular in the contemporary world, tolerate the folklorist Other deprived of its substance - like the multitude of ethnic arts, cuisines, and so on. Any "real" Other, by contrast, is instantly condemned for its fundamentalism, since "*the real Other is*

by definition "patriarchal", "violent", never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs" (Zizek 1997: 37).

This fact is clearly demonstrated by the results of a number of recent surveys, which show that the majority of Turkish youth believe that non-Muslims are evil and that a great many people prefer not to have non-Muslims as their neighbours. Of course these findings have to do with the negative portrayal of non-Muslims by the media, politicians and others who through their privileged access to public discourse play a formative role in shaping attitudes and opinions about others in society.

It was again in the nineties that the non-Muslims were reconstructed as dangerous objects. This involved the revitalisation of old prejudices. The designation as non-Muslim has been stigmatized. Non-Muslims have been depicted as the root of all evil, as people who stabbed the Turks in the back, as the enemies within. Such discourses have rendered normal the pejorative use of the terms "Greek", "Armenian" and "Jew", as in the case of curses such as "son of a Greek", "servant of a Jew" and "of an Armenian womb".

The ethnic loyalties of the non-Muslims have been perceived as a destabilising force subversive to national unity. They have been approached with suspicion and mistrust. They have been pressed to contribute to national causes as a proof of their loyalty, not only by those who are negatively disposed towards them, but also by those who oppose anti-minority sentiments and practices. One such person, for example, after referring to the supposed affluence of non-Muslims advised the religious heads of the non-Muslim communities to contribute financially to the Bosnian cause. A liberal Turkish journalist, on the other hand, interviewing two Jewish journalists, persistently asked them if they, like all the other Jews living in Turkey and in fact all over the world, were not agents of MOSSAD, thus implicitly questioning the loyalty of the Jewish community to the Turkish state and arousing the suspicions of the Turkish public that the Jewish community is serving alien purposes (Akman 1997). These examples, as well as the portrayal of non–Muslims as relics of the past that have to be protected, demonstrate that discursive formations once established as a ready-made way of thinking, rule out alternative ways of thinking or talking about a topic.

The concentration of non-Muslims in trade and industry--the outcome of historical circumstances--has been re-interpreted as a significant defect on their part. They have popularly been seen as exploiters of the wealth of the country at the expense of the Muslims, and without showing any signs of gratitude. Their presence in the economic sphere has been seen as damaging and dangerous to the welfare of the nation. Such discourses were recycled especially after research was published and a recent film was made on the Capital Levy (*varlık vergisi*) imposed during the Second World War. Although the Capital Levy was introduced as an emergency fiscal measure to tax war profiteers and high-income groups, it was applied in a discriminatory way and was imposed mainly on non-Muslims:

Non-Muslims had to pay ten times the Muslim rate and *Dönmes*--the crypto-Jews who had converted to Islam in the seventeenth century--twice the rate. Payment had to be made in cash and defaulters were deported to Aşkale, Erzurum for forced labour. The tax was instrumental in destroying the economic position of the non-Muslims and transferring control of the market to the Muslims.

In this context, I would like to describe a relatively recent TV commercial advertising Petlas, a Turkish tyre company, based on a real-life episode: During the Dardanelles War, when the vehicles carrying guns and ammunition to the front have run out of tyres, the commander of the regiment sends one of his soldiers, Muzaffer, to Istanbul, ordering him to find tyres at any cost, since the fate of the war depends on them. Muzaffer finds the tyres in a shop owned by a Jew who will only give the tyres in exchange for a cash down payment. The country is at war and money is tight. Determined to get the tyres through fair play or foul, Muzaffer resorts to forgery. Working through the night, he prepares an Ottoman banknote almost identical to the real note, with one important exception: Whereas real banknotes included a clause stating that the value would be paid in gold in Dersaadet (Istanbul), this one states that it will be paid with the blood of the martyrs in the Dardanelles. Next morning, at the break of dawn, Muzaffer goes back to the Jewish trader and purchases the tyres with the false note. The Jewish trader realises that he has been deceived only when he reads the statement concerning the method of payment, after Muzaffer has already left with the tyres. The state later pays the money to the merchant. The audience learns from the narrator, an old man, who had accompanied Mehmet Muzaffer to Istanbul during the episode and who is recounting the story to Petlas workers, that Muzaffer died in another battle. After referring to the importance of the "national" production of tyres (by Petlas) the narrator utters the following words: "Mehmet Muzaffer is proud of you my sons."

The message the advertisement conveys is clear: If industrial production and economic activities are left to the "outsiders", then at such crucial moments as war we will be left without the necessary supplies. As such, the ad mobilises fear and anxiety not only about national security but also about "outsiders", "enemies in our midst", a conception that triggers an intense "*boundary-drawing bustle, which in its turn generates a thick fall-out of antagonism and hatred to those found or suspected guilty of double-loyalty and sitting astride the barricade*" (Bauman 1989: 65). By depicting Jews, who have been living amidst Muslims for centuries, as outsiders the commercial both certifies the socio-cultural validity of the definition of the Turkish nation present in the popular mind, and reinforces it, despite official definitions to the contrary, as being Muslim.

Although based on a historical event, the Petlas advertisement, by depicting the Jews as controlling trade while Muslims heroically defend the fatherland, resorts to an ahistorical representation of the Jews, making no reference to the chain of events leading to this situation. The population of the Ottoman Empire

was divided into the categories of Muslims and non-Muslims. And in accordance with Islamic Law, non-Muslims professing monotheistic religions based on revelation were accorded the protection and tolerance of the state on the condition that they unequivocally acknowledged the primacy of Islam and the supremacy of Muslims. Besides paying an additional tax, there were certain restrictions imposed on them, the chief one being their exclusion from governmental service and the privilege of bearing arms. This state of affairs led to an ethnic division of labour, with Muslims dominating the government and non-Muslims the economy, especially, trade. What remains obscure in the advertisement is the fact that in the Ottoman Empire the key basis of power as well as status was service to the state: "*the wielders of political power, not the merchants, were the first citizens of the realm*" (Mardin 1973: 172).

That the merchant is a Jew amplifies the significance of stereotypical representation. The universal stereotype of the Jew as the eternal stranger is reaffirmed by the commercial. As a member of a supra-national people hated for their cosmopolitan internationalism, the Jewish merchant cannot be expected to display any sense of patriotism towards the fatherland. Although the advertisement makes no explicit reference to the merchant's identity, his Jewishness is inscribed on his body. His stature, size, facial structure, nose and so on, that is, his physicality, to use Eisenstein's (1996) term, are reminiscent of figures used to depict Jews in caricatures. He fits the ubiquitous profiteering Jewish merchant stereotype. As such the depiction points to the immutability of the otherness of the Jew. Although he utters just a few words, his accent discloses his identity. His physicality represents the polar opposite of the strong-built, tall and handsome Mehmet Muzaffer. His dress makes it clear that he is living a prosperous life, in sharp contrast with the poverty of the "authentic" members of the nation (Yumul 2004: 40-3).

In recent years another discourse that presents an idealised history concerning the tolerance of the Ottoman Empire towards its non-Muslim subjects has gained wide popularity. Representatives and religious heads of non-Muslim communities have been invited as speakers to conferences and seminars dedicated to the theme of tolerance in an effort to romanticise the Ottoman Empire's treatment of its non-Muslim subjects and disseminate legends of a peaceful coexistence throughout centuries of Ottoman rule. Concerning the hierarchical nature of Ottoman multiculturalism, this discourse has either remained silent about or implicitly justified the inferior status of non-Muslims.

Non-Muslim communities that were accorded the status of a religious community (*millet)* under the Ottoman Empire were allowed a considerable degree of autonomy in their internal affairs. In this system each ethno-religious group was placed under the leadership of its respective religious head, who was the administrative officer responsible to the state for his community and vice versa.

The Turkish Republic established in 1923 not only adopted a secularist policy but also embraced the civic conception of the nation, which, in principle, ac-

cords equality to all citizens irrespective of race, ethnicity or creed. Common laws, rights and duties bind its members. Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution stated that "*The word Turk, as a political term, shall be understood to include all citizens of the Turkish Republic, without distinction of, or reference to race or religion.*" The 1982 Constitution maintained this position. Thus, Article 66 reads that "*A Turk is someone associated with the Turkish state by the ties of nationality*" . Yet the ethos upon which the Republic is based has since its earliest years incorporated use of the word *Turk* in a racial, religious as well as political sense (Nışanyan, 1995). Vagueness has characterised the use of the word Turk, with different definitions emphasised at different times.

The legal status of non-Muslims in the Republic of Turkey was established by the Treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923), which recognises Jews, Greeks and Armenians as minorities. The Treaty stipulated that as citizens of Turkey they were entitled to the same civil and political rights as their fellow citizens, and that without distinction of religion, they were equal before the law (*Lozan Barış Konferansı* 1973: 10-4). Beyond the rights enjoyed by all citizens, the Treaty conferred on these communities the right to run their charitable, religious, cultural and educational institutions. The Treaty granted all three minorities the special privilege of maintaining their own laws governing family and inheritance matters (Article 42). The three minorities, however, yielding to the pressures exerted by the authorities, renounced this privilege. Thus the *millet* system ceased to exist; the authority of the heads of the non-Muslim communities was reduced to spiritual matters only. The non-Muslims became citizens and Turkey achieved legal unity. But across the ages, religion and nationality have been so inseparably intertwined that in the popular mind being Turk has been associated with being Muslim, and differences of faith have been used to advance nationalistic objectives. Despite official definitions to the contrary, it was the cultural identity of the demos, especially its religious identity, which constituted the nation, thus collapsing the political/legal category of "Turk" into a category of identity, and perverting the egalitarian logic of citizenship by rendering those left outside the cultural definition of the nation, explicitly or implicitly, into second-class citizens.

The categorisation of the population into Muslims and non-Muslims has been accompanied by status differentials. Here let me cite the remark of then President Süleyman Demirel in 1995, concerning the Kurdish problem, who, after pointing out that under the Lausanne Treaty Kurds were considered equal citizens of Turkey, added: "*We are telling the West that … [the Kurds] are the owners of the whole of this country. Why should they be given minority rights and made second class?*" (*Turkish Daily News*, 10 May 1995).

The classification of the population into Muslims and non-Muslims has marked more than religion. It has involved not only status differentials but also in the dominant culture it has signified a divide between qualitatively different kinds of human beings. The prevalent portrayal of non-Muslim women in Turkish nov-

els and films has been as servants, prostitutes and mistresses. With their beguiling seductiveness these women arouse the sexual desires of Muslim males. The latter have no intention of marrying them. Rather, experiencing sex with non-Muslim women has been for them a way to make themselves over, to leave Muslim innocence and enter the world of experience. The sexually available female Other with her lasciviousness has been constructed in direct opposition to the assumed sexual purity of the Muslim female. One of the main objections of the intellectuals and columnists to the above-mentioned film on the Capital Levy was that it portrayed a Muslim woman falling in love with an Armenian man. The way women are represented is important because nationalism requires women to bear the burden of representation, for it is the women that are constructed as the symbolic carriers of the identity, honour and values of the collectivity.

As is apparent from the foregoing, non-Muslims have been imagined as falling outside the definition of the nation. In various discourses they have been assigned the symbolic role of representing all those characteristics and values that the authentic Turkish nation does not stand for. They have been depicted as outsiders, foreigners or guests. Although their existence in these lands extends over centuries, in some cases pre-dating Muslim existence, they have been constructed as the stranger in the Simmelian sense, that is, as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, see themselves as people who belong to the land, and as such, oppose being portrayed as domestic aliens, as individuals who because of their ethno-religious backgrounds do not possess the right stuff to be considered real members of the nation. "*All through my school life and afterwards*", resents an Armenian, "*I have repeatedly been asked the following questions: "Where did you come from?"; "Why did you come"; "Are you from Greece?"; "Are you an immigrant?"; "Why did you settle in Turkey?" As a person belonging to a family [living in this country for generations], being exposed to such and similar questions makes me feel that we are not considered as integral parts of the whole. … Nowadays I reply to these questions in the following way: "We have been here all the time; where did you come from?*" (Hancı 1995: 36).

Just as the representation of the non-Muslims has been ambivalent and ambiguous so was the response of the latter. Perhaps for the first time since the establishment of the Republic, it was in the nineties that non-Muslims began to get involved in identity politics. They demanded recognition and preservation of their cultures. Identity politics also involves claiming one's identity as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group. Non-Muslims, especially the intellectuals, started to talk openly about their present grievances and the injustices committed against their communities in the past.

They transformed themselves from the silent Other into one seeking recognition and equality, rather than toleration. A Jewish intellectual, Rıfat Bali, for example, has recently asserted that the relationship of a modern nation state with its citizens cannot be based on granting toleration. This was new. On the other

hand, non-Muslims continued with their old survival strategy, namely that of maintaining a good reputation as law-abiding, loyal citizens providing willing hands to prop up the national economy, super-patrons promoting the nation's vision and destiny. They remained committed to displaying their faith in the system and their future. They were assimilated to various discourses of Ottoman pluralism and tolerance. In 1992, the Turkish Jews, for example, established the Quincentennial Foundation to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the acceptance by the Ottoman Empire of Sephardic Jews fleeing persecution in Spain.

In the nineties both the representation of the non-Muslims in Turkish society and the counter-representation of non-Muslims in their own communities have involved the articulation of a new discourse to an already existing one. This has resulted in ambivalence and ambiguity. Ambivalence is characterized by the co-existence of conflicting drives and sentiments towards the same object. It refers to the co-existence of love and hate.

References

Akman, N. 1997. "Türkiye'nin Parçasıyız". *Milliyet*, 18 May 1997.

Bauman, Z. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge.

Eisenstein, Z. 1996. *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century*. London, New York.

Hancı, K. 1995. "Ankaralı Ermeni-Katolikler". *Birikim* 73, 35-6.

Fish, S. 1997. "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech". *Critical Inquiry* 23. 378-95.

Lozan Barış Konferansı Tutanaklar, Belgeler 1973 trans. Seha L. Meray, Ankara.

Mardin, Ş. 1973. Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics? *Daedalus*, 102, 169-90.

McCracken, G. 1998. *Culture and Consumption*. Bloomington.

Nişanyan, S. 1995. "Kemalist Düşüncede Türk Milleti Kavramı". *Türkiye Günlüğü* 33. 127-141.

Robins, K. 1991. "Tradition and Translation: National Culture in its Global Context". In J. Corner and S. Harvey (eds.) *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*. London.

Yumul, A. 2004. "Mediating the "Other" through Advertisements". In T. Parfitt and Y. Egorava (eds.) *Jews, Muslims and Mass Media*. London.

Zizek, S. 1997. "Multiculturalism or the Cultural Logic of Multicultural Capitalism". *New Left Review* 225. 28-51.