



# What does the rising number of Diyanet Women Preachers Mean in Contemporary Turkey? Reflections on Ethnography and Interpretation in Policy Analysis

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## Abstract

Since the 2010s, the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has turned into a mammoth institution expanding its scope and scale as it pertains to the religious services provided in Turkey and abroad. The reorganisation of the state agency occurred via a redefinition of religious services directed to women, families, children and migrants' communities living abroad. To implement this, the number of Diyanet's personnel has skyrocketed reaching 130,658 in 2022. This led to a change in religious officers' status within society which invested their profession, vision and their mission. With the intent to reach more people and to extent religious services the Diyanet has opened new positions for women religious officers to be employed as preachers (*vaizeler*) and Qur'an teachers. The number of female personnel has increased from 2,696 in 2004 to 17,876 in 2017 to reach 25,056 in 2022. This article investigates the meaning of Diyanet's policy aimed at expanding the number of women working as preachers in mosques. By directly observing the preacher's daily engagement in providing women and families with religious services, the contribution alights on how a pious female bureaucrat has come to the foreground. The inclusion of devout women within the state bureaucracy calls into question the evolution of Turkish state's boundaries over religion and urges a broader redefinition of the intertwined relationship between women, religion and the state in contemporary Turkey.

**Keywords:** women preachers, Islam, Turkey, political ethnography, secularism

## Introduction

The paper grounds empirically on research conducted between 2013 to 2019 to investigate the increasing number of women included in the workforce of a Turkish state institution, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).<sup>1</sup> Established in 1924, the latter has been considered one of the emblems of Turkish assertive secularism (*laiklik*).<sup>2</sup> As an administrative office it embodies the republican will to bureaucratise and control the expression of religion in the public sphere (Gözaydın 2008:217). However, over almost a century, the Diyanet has deeply evolved in scope and scale, turning into a mammoth agency whose ramifications extend beyond Turkey (Maritato 2021; Öktem 2012; Öztürk 2016). In a similar fashion, secularism, the idea of a strong state apparatus engaged in spreading secular values among the society has been distorted from the original meaning. Since 1965, the diffusion of public morality in society was included among the Diyanet's duties and religion raised to prominence as a public factor rather than a mere set of beliefs characterising the individuals' private sphere.<sup>3</sup> The state discourse<sup>4</sup> on secularism does not convey the image of imams and preachers as suit and tie bureaucrats illustrating the Turkish state' interpretation of Sunni Islam on occasion of religious feasts or celebrations. On the contrary, religious scholars have pervasively accessed state institutions gaining public visibility in both religious and secular realms (Çinar 2005; Lord 2018). Although the redefinition of religious officers' status in society has originated far before the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) came to power in 2002, the early 2000s and the post 2010 marked a turning point in the redefinition of religious services. The forms and the meanings of this transformation are indeed more substantial than the previous attempts for the scope and scale of the interventions.

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The expanded religious services which are currently provided by the Diyanet combine psychology, theology, guidance, and counselling and comprise education on religion and morality, religious counselling and guidance, and spiritual support. Moreover, religious services have expanded far beyond the mosque and religious education. Protocols and agreements with ministries and state institutions allow Diyanet officers to provide guidance and moral support in hospitals, women's shelters, prisons, orphanages, reformatories, and student dorms (Maritato 2020: 256).

The reorganisation of the Diyanet occurred via a redefinition of religious services directed to women, families, children and migrants' communities living abroad. To implement these projects, the number of Diyanet's personnel has skyrocketed reaching 130,658 in 2022.<sup>5</sup> This led to a change in religious officers' status within society which invested their profession, vision and their mission. With the intent to reach more people and to extend religious services, the Diyanet has opened new positions for women religious officers to be employed as preachers (in Turkish *vaize*, pl. *vaizeler*) and Qur'an teachers. The number of female personnel has increased from 2,696 in 2004 to 17,876 in 2017 to reach 25,056 in 2022.<sup>6</sup>

To assess the forms and meanings of a policy regulating female religious services and moral support in today's Turkey, I opted for directly observing the vaizeler's activities in different municipalities of Istanbul to grasp the "everyday" of their profession and the services provided. Through the lens of political ethnography and the ethnography of policy, the everyday is here defined as the stage (in terms of time and space) in which policies are performed and implemented.

The work stems from the following questions: How is the policy of introducing women preachers in Turkey's mosques implemented in the everyday? And what does this policy mean in contemporary Turkey?

It conceptually addresses the key role played by reasoning and heuristics (Wagenaar 2011) in the elaboration of conceptual understanding of power relations regulating policies. Against this backdrop, ethnographic observation, far from being the mere inclusion of a "human factor", is employed to uncover the structural features of public policies (Dubois 2009: 235). According to Dubois, ethnographic observations of basic bureaucratic work and relationships allows to make a critical examination of general evolutions as they not only give a better understanding of the realities of public intervention, but they are also a powerful way of revealing its structural characteristics and current transformations (Dubois 2009: 223). Moreover, to experience the daily life allows to acknowledge the informal to grasp what is behind some meanings and to involve participants of the research in knowledge production.

Within this framework, the research is conceived as a process related to an inductive reasoning balancing the practical immersion in fieldwork and the continuous reflection on the issues at stake.

Either presented as a tendency, an "état d'esprit", or rather a heterodox approach to social science, politics from below roots its fundamental postulates on a sort of "heuristic cynicism" in the face of academic and political conventions and common assumptions. This cynicism derives from and is nurtured by a deliberate will to confront theories with the "everyday" (de Certeau 1990).

The article is organised as follows: in the first section I will develop the crucial role of the field, and the importance of ethnography of public policies as a methodology to approach the everyday implementation of a state's art of governing. In the second section, the focus will be placed on the inductive reasoning and interpretation leading to the formulation of analytical categories. Politics from below is here assessed as a process casting light on how the political opportunities structure changes and forges new policies. In the early 2000s, pious women's access state bureaucracy. Invites to carefully consider the evolution of the Turkish state's boundaries over religion (Aymes, Gourisse, and Massicard 2014: 30-31) entailing a broader redefinition of the intertwined relationship between women, religion and the state in contemporary Turkey.

## Ethnography and Interpretation as a Method to Study Women Preachers in Diyanet Mosques

While methodologically thinking about politics from below, ethnography stands out. Although at different levels, the below is indeed perceived as intrinsically observable and accessible. The point is, how does the immersion in the everyday aimed at detecting its political dynamics concretely occur? To answer this question, it is necessary to resort to a concept traditionally belonging to anthropologists: the field.

### *Ethnographic Fieldwork and Politics from Below*

The field is not (only) a *place*. It is rather composed of continuous definitions, networks, and contacts that should be attentively handled. As Clifford Geertz (2003: 161) affirms: "the locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods...); they study in villages". Indeed, as soon as I started my research, one of the issues I was confronted with was exactly how to fully explore the multi-faceted field. Dealing with observant women who practise and "live Islam" every day,<sup>7</sup> in conducting the fieldwork, I spent most of the time in mosques and praying rooms; however, I also met with vaizeler in fancy coffee houses located in Istanbul's *Istiklal Caddesi*.<sup>8</sup>

One afternoon, while sitting in a café in the central district of Beyoğlu, the local vaize, Fatma, spoke about how her job does not finish when the preaching session ends and she leaves the mosque: "you know what? Sometimes I must turn off my mobile phone as soon as I come back home. Women have my phone number and call me at any time. I receive so many phone calls that my husband gets annoyed. So, I should say to women 'this is my private number, not the fatwa online service!'"<sup>9</sup> Meeting with the vaizeler outside of the mosques or the bureaucratic offices of the Diyanet helped me to approach their religious engagement and their public role of state-sponsored professional religious expert in its entirety. This also led to consider the fieldwork as a method (Olivier de Sardan 1995: 3) and to reflect on researcher's positionality.

When I approached the topic of this research, I was not aware of the number of activities carried out by professional female preachers in Turkish mosques; the absence of any previous information about the religious services which were carried out during the week fostered the necessity of directly observing, or better, following the seminars organised. Moreover, the lack of basic information and academic publications – except for the works of Fatma Tütüncü (2010) and Mona Hassan (2011) – it was difficult for me to espouse a singular theoretical framework to be "tested" on the field. Therefore, an inductive perspective resulted as the most appropriate. In doing so, I started from what I could observe of this policy being implemented: the preachers' daily engagement in what the Diyanet framed as the duty of "irşat", enlightening women about religion. The latter has become not only the topic of my research, but also the lens through which I could observe the ways the policy is daily performed, and the meanings associated with

it. In this sense, the Diyanet's vaizeler were not a "case study" by which to evaluate the validity of theoretical models, nor was I, as a researcher, observing them from an external point of view meant to *extract* data from the fieldwork. On the contrary, my interpretations and reasoning originated from being in the field, building trusting relationships with the participants. The methodology of organisational ethnography resulted extremely fertile in this respect.

Perceived as the studying of everyday complexity, organisational ethnography points out the contribution of an ethnographic approach to the organisations' study. Sierk Ybema, Dvora Yanow, Harry Wels and Frans H. Kamsteeg (2009: 13) refer to it as the "combined field research tools of observing (with whatever degree of participation) conversing (including formal interviewing), and the close reading of documentary sources" through a "first-hand, field-based observation and experiences [...] participating in organizational members' life worlds, establishing working relationships with them". This method aims at learning about the organisation and its members, while at the same time, maintaining a stranger's perspective and being part of what is seen and experienced. In this sense, balancing immersion and distance means to get close with the members of the organisation to understand their "everyday life world from within". However, to ground my research on the activities carried out by female preachers enrolled by the Diyanet, there is another point that needs to be stated: my intent was not to use the fieldwork to integrate the "human factor" as an instrument to improve efficiency of public programmes. As Vincent Dubois (2009: 235) affirms, the approaches aimed at introducing the human factor often result in "the fake realism of the reproduction of 'real-life' experiences and of the social engineering of public policies".

In the light of this methodological choice, I opted to go beyond sequential (Kingdon 1995; May and Wildavsky 1979) and strategic (Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993) approaches to policy analysis and to rely on Dubois' (2009: 221) critical policy ethnography as in between policy interpretations and the analysis of public policies aimed at filling the "democratic gap" by taking into account human experiences. This approach is particularly telling in the case of the Diyanet's bureaucracy as it invites paying attention to how officers in administration playing a key role in defining a policy (Lipsky 1980). Civil servants, indeed, not only "implement decisions made at the top level, but they also make decisions themselves on individual cases. Even though they do not make major decisions, they can always use their discretion in the orientation of their practices and the definition of their attitude. Concrete public policy is *in fine* the sum of these decisions, practices, and attitudes" (Dubois 2009: 222).

While women represented four per cent of the Diyanet's personnel in 2004, they made up 16 per cent in 2015. In Istanbul, when I started my fieldwork in 2013, out of the 123 preachers, 54 were women. In 2018, 122 women and 193 men were on duty (Maritato 2018; 2020: 112). For the first preparatory month, I worked at the Istanbul

*İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi* (Centre for Islamic Studies, ISAM) library established by the Turkish Diyanet foundation (TDV). Located in Istanbul's Üsküdar district, the library is a benchmark for those scholars interested in Islamic studies.

The first time I met a Diyanet vaize, I was indeed neither in a mosque nor in a prayer room, but rather at the ISAM library. In her early thirties, Emine was completing her PhD in theology and working as a vaize in Şanlıurfa, Turkey's Southeast. That week she was in Istanbul to meet with her supervisor and to attend some Diyanet's training seminars organised for preachers. It was through in-depth interviews and informal conversations at the ISAM's canteen and cafeteria that I managed to gain confidence to expand my network of contacts. Emine was soon introducing me to two of her friends and colleagues working in Istanbul mosques.

The "triangulation" (Olivier de Sardan 1995: 12), the necessity to differentiate the number of interlocutors, sometimes resulted in a frenetic chase after people, which could last for days. However, time after time, I understood that, while introducing myself, the strategy of "dropping" the names of the people whom I had met before was something more than "bowing and scraping". Sometimes, at the end of a meeting, my interlocutor called and arranged another appointment with a colleague within a few days, or even a few hours. This resulted in me having to travel from one end of Istanbul to the other. In a couple of months, I was able to organise ethnographic observations in Istanbul's different neighbourhoods located in the following municipalities: Beşiktaş, Üsküdar, Bahçelievler, Kadıköy, Güngören, Başakşehir and Beyoğlu.

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At times, I felt that a meeting would lead me to nothing "interesting" for my research. On other occasions, I was able to understand almost immediately the "relevance of the information" I obtained. In this seesawing mood, I had the impression of "wasting time". However, it was exactly within these unpredictable situations, when meetings protracted into one or two hours more than expected, I experienced the deepest conversations as well as that "gossip, jokes and other informal speech-acts" (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004: 267) which characterises ethnography as a method.

Bottom-up approaches privileging a view from below and/or from within encourage an inclusion of the ordinary to grasp the most of how politics are performed in the everyday (Awesso 1993; Bayart, Mbembé, and Toulabor 1981; Bayat 2009; Dubois 2010; Lipsky 1980; Scott 1987; White 2002).<sup>10</sup> These scholars pay attention to the everyday and to a wider range of "street-level" actors (citizens, consumers, lower bureaucrats, activists, shopkeepers, etc.) who, instead of impersonally executing norms, have agency and are integrally and personally involved in policy implementation. According to this scholarship, to approach politics from the study of the everyday and the ordinary allows to single out forms of "everyday resistance" and to assess to what extent and how people in their everyday lives can undermine power (Bayat 2009; Scott 1987). This work's ethnographic approach proceeds in a different direction and casts light on everyday politics as the locus where power relations are replicated and enforced via multiple actors and institutions.

The contribution reflects on "the below" in political science, considering it as the object of study, and the field from which to extrapolate categories and analytical tools. This aspect is of seminal relevance, as it allows to include the notion of field in political science's theory as a concept distancing itself from both the "case studies" approach – aimed at observing a particular phenomenon in a specific setting, often to compare them (Eckstein 2009) – and the recently increase in including a "human factor" as an appendix of quantitative research. Politics from below is rather conceived as a process related to an inductive reasoning balancing the practical immersion in the research's fieldwork and the continuous reflection on the issues at stake.

### *Political Ethnography and the Field as a Political Dimension*

In structuring the fieldwork of my research, I employed political ethnography dimensions described by Dvora Yanow.<sup>11</sup> Yanow pointed out five dimensions to structure the fieldwork: (a) *setting*, (b) *timing*, (c) *exposure*, (d) *access*, (e) *being there and silence*.

Starting with the (a) *setting*, that is, time and place of observations, I attended preachers' sessions in local mosques, prayer rooms, Qur'an courses classrooms as well as various municipality cultural centres and conference halls. A typical vaizeler's weekly schedule consists of days of preaching at the local mosques or at conference halls, days for studying/preparing sermons or attending seminars and days for listening and answering to women's and families' request for appointment to deal with personal concerns at the Family Offices (*Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Büroları* AIRB) situated in local Mufti Offices. Finally, all the Istanbul vaizeler are required to work in turn at the call centre of the Hallo Fatwa 190 (*Alo Fetva 190*) service answering to requests coming from women (Maritato 2015). Concerning time, the sessions largely occurred in time slots from ten to twelve in the morning; from twelve to two in the afternoon; from two to four in the afternoon. Two of the preachers also gave sermons from six to eight and from five to seven in the evening for working women. Most of the vaizeler with whom I was in contact gave two or three sermons per week. Both sermons and seminars were on average two and a half hours long.

As for the (b) *timing* of my research, for practical purposes I divided it into time periods: the first from mid-March to the beginning of July 2013; the second during the month of Ramadan (from 10 July to 7 of August 2013), the third from mid-August 2013 to February 2014; finally, from 2015 till 2018 I spent four months.

Dividing the work into time periods helped me organise the fieldwork and alternate it with formal semi-structured interviews, often repeated, which I conducted in Ankara at the Diyanet Head Office, Department of Family and Religious Guidance (*Aile ve Dini Rehberlik Daire Başkanlığı*) and the Direction of Religious services for women and families. A total of 29 interviews were conducted with Diyanet-related Associations and Foundations, Religious experts and Diyanet's personnel.

Concerning the fieldwork's (c) *exposure*, I selected different Istanbul's neighbourhoods;



these were in the central or peripheral areas, inhabited by a young population or foreigners, characterised by the presence/absence of well-rooted religious communities. Moreover, the location choice was also the effect of "iterations" and the inter-connections of meetings and events: for instance, I was really determined to select the Istanbul Fatih Municipality, which is considered one of the areas where religious communities are the most active. However, just a few months after I started my fieldwork, the vaize who was working there became vice-Mufti of Istanbul and I was not able to get in contact with the new vaize in the transition period. The final choice seemed to me heterogeneous enough and I started conducting daily observations in three Istanbul Municipalities: Beşiktaş, Üsküdar and Bahçelievler. After the month of Ramadan in August 2013, while maintaining the three main fields, I reduced the time of observations to include other districts and thus meet with more preachers. In the last six months, the observations were more diffused across the city's different neighbourhoods, each lasting not more than three weeks. I attended a total of sixty preachers' sessions.

Considering (d) the *access*, to "gain access" to the field implied several doors open in terms of the necessity of relying on spaces of informalities and gaining the trust of people.

As an Italian woman, not married and not Muslim, my presence in mosques' women sections raised questions and curiosities, but never suspicion. When I attended the meetings, I did not experience any sort of obstacles: all the vaizeler introduced me to the Qur'an teachers, the women attending their sermons, to Müftülügü's male employees, and the mosques' imams as a researcher interested in attending their class. The same occurred in the Ankara Head Office where, from the first time I went, the method of "dropping names" helped me in fostering networks and mutual confidence. Finally, since the beginning, women have shown me their enthusiasm and hospitality in different ways: offering me food, inviting me to participate in afternoon excursions in the city's tourist places, chatting for hours in the kitchens after the meetings or giving me gifts at the end of the month of Ramadan celebrations. I always informed the preachers of my arrival taking appointments. After the first meeting, I then attended with no further authorisations as the mosques and the municipalities' cultural centres are public places easy to find and to access. The knowledge of Turkish language allowed me to communicate and to access meanings which could have been lost in translations. In this vein, relationality implies an ethnography which is based on relationship with participants and knowledge as a co-building process rather than an act of extracting data from "the field".

Finally, the last dimension (e) *being there and silence* refers to personal experiences in the field. The months of observation were mainly devoted to approaching and becoming familiar with the preachers. Informal interviews and moments of socialisation were combined with mutual confidence building. Although at the time I introduced myself as a PhD student interested in knowing about vaizeler activities, my research, personal

beliefs (not being Muslim) and family background were also objects of questions and long conversations while drinking tea or having lunch after the meetings. That time spent with preachers and women attending seminars and sessions in mosques were of relevance to include participants of the research and to observe from within and dismantle knowledge production rooted in a dichotomous view of an omnipotent state *versus* victim society.

### **Investigating the Meanings of a Policy: Women, Religion and the State in Turkey**

Having considered the role of ethnography in approaching politics from below, time is to turn from the methodology to the epistemology of the concept. This brings back to the research question: to what extent and how are the fieldwork constituting the *below* and the formulation of analytical categories mutually shaped? That is, in other words, concretely how could we address politics from below?

Clifford Geertz (1983: 130-131) defines "textualisation" as "a prerequisite to interpretation", that process through which "unwritten behaviour, speech, beliefs, oral traditions or rituals, come to be marked as a corpus, a potentially meaningful ensemble separated out from the immediate discursive or performative situation. In the moment of textualisation, this meaningful corpus assumes a more or less stable relation to a context, and we are familiar with the end result of this process in much of what counts as ethnographic thick description". According to the author, the difficulty of the latter lies in the fact that "what we inscribe (or try to) is not raw social discourse, to which, because, save very marginally or very specially, we are not actors, we do not have direct access, but only that small part of it which our informants can lead us into understanding" (Geertz 2003: 159).

While attending the preaching sessions, I was writing the first-hand version of my notes on small handbooks, and I could not record the sermons. In processing my notes, I followed a threefold chronological structure (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Firstly I considered the "description", what was seen and heard (who, what, when, and where) in the field: it consisted in a report of what the interlocutors said and did. The second time processing my notes, I focused on the "inferences". The details emerging from the description raised doubts and questions (why do they behave in this way? Are there other possible explanations?). Finally, the third, the "context", mainly referred to the feeling (how?) I experienced while observing. Once back from the field, rewriting the notes consisted in isolating macro issues and recurrent topics (Yanow 2007: 411-413). Data interpretation lasted about one year; it was arduous and full of restarts, leading to what Jim Thomas (1993: 43) defines a "*defamiliarization* process in which we revise what we have seen and translate it into something new". Ethnographic observation also encourages reasoning and heuristics in the elaboration of conceptual understanding of power relations regulating policies (Wagenaar 2011). In this sense, politics from below is not a *residue* of previously formulated theories, which are *tested* or confronted to

reality; it rather challenges the meanings of power dynamics conceptualising politics as first and foremost the way norms and customs are inhabited in the everyday. This approach relies on informality to navigate the indirectness and arbitrariness of power relations and draws on a fieldwork which is not the object of intense extractive dynamics of data creation.

Coming back to the Diyanet's decision to increase the number of female preachers employed all over the country, the crucial issue should thus be framed as: what does this policy *mean* in contemporary Turkey? This question is related to the 1990s' interpretative turn in policy studies, which has been mainly theorised by Dvora Yanow (2007: 409) as based on three main characteristics: "word-based methods and writing, researcher reflexivity, and the exploration of multiple meanings and their ambiguities, especially in policy contexts in which contention over the policy issue under study is common". Being informed by a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and other attendant philosophical presuppositions, this approach differs from the paradigm considering "policy a process in which government solves problems" (Colebatch 2006: 17). An interpretative approach to policy analysis, then, is one that focuses on the meanings of policies, on the values, feelings, and/or beliefs they express, and on the processes by which those meanings are communicated to and "read" by various audiences (Yanow 1996: 8-9).

102 Within this frame, politics from below is bearer of a new conceptualisation of politics: it promotes a shift from considering the ordinary people as *actors*, not as mere *spectators*, and their everyday practices as political. This shift signifies a configuration of a new physical or symbolical space and the conflicts occurring within this space, which is the core of Jacques Rancière's (2009: 24-25) philosophy: "[p]olitics indeed, is not the exercise, or the struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience [...]. But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voices. For all time, the refusal to consider certain categories of people as political beings has proceeded by means of a refusal to hear the words exiting their mouths as discourse".

Therefore, to investigate the Diyanet's gender perspective and how it matters, I started from listening to the vaizeler's sermons, interrogating their role and their quest for legitimation and authority within the Turkish religious realm. In so doing, the vaize's in-between position as both a civil servant and a religious scholar obliged me to historicise their profession relating it to both the evolution of Turkish secularism and the 1980s and 1990s female participation in Turkish Islamic movements and parties. The latter housed female militants' claims for the right of wearing headscarf in public institutions (Adak 2014; Arat 1998; 2012; Göle 1993; Kandiyoti 1991). The headscarf issue "almost became a trope to denote the problems intrinsic to the foundations of the republic and its secular regime" (Saktanber and Çorbacioğlu 2008: 517; Turam 2007). In 1982 the veil was banned from universities; during the 1980s it was partially lifted. However, in

the aftermath of the 1997 military coup<sup>12</sup> and, particularly, the so-called "28 February process",<sup>13</sup> women were fired or expelled from universities because of the headscarf. The new structure of political opportunities in the early 2000s caused by the raise to power of the AKP, entailed a veritable amnesty for devout women who were re-integrated in the state bureaucracy (Ayata & Tütüncü 2008). In 2010 the ban was officially lifted from the universities and in 2013 in all public sectors except for the military (ban lifted in 2017). Considering these women's high qualifications in religious studies, the Diyanet was naturally one of the state agencies where they applied the most for jobs (Maritato 2015; 2017; Tütüncü 2010). After a seminar in Güngören Municipality, the preacher and I went to sit in a café nearby the mosque with another woman employed as Qur'an teacher. She introduced herself as a graduate in physics who could not teach and work because of the veil and took a second degree in theology which allowed her to work. When I asked how she feels years after this decision, she said: "it is like this. But I am fine with my role of Qur'an teacher, I like my job now. It has a good balance between life and working hours".<sup>14</sup>

As a professional "academic" female preacher (Okumuş 2008: 345) the vaize represents only one aspect of a broader attempt to relocate morality in the public sphere. By inviting women to mosques and providing them with moral support and religious guidance (*irşad*), they also convey the image of a pious female bureaucrat who promotes Muslim values in all aspects of the everyday life. In this sense, far from being a mere provision of religious services, the state, through the Diyanet's mosques capillary dislocated all over the country, is repositioning its boundaries vis-à-vis religion and female religiosity (Aymes, Gourisse, and Massicard 2014: 30-31). State sponsored women preachers' activities indeed provide a standardised version of religious participation built on professionalised religious officers, an extended and pervasive notion of religious services which have been transformed as "moral and spiritual support" (*manevi destek*) to be dispensed also within the frame of secular institutions. Religious officers are nowadays providing religious services in orphanages, prisons, reformatories and recently also in state schools.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of these considerations, the renovated place of morality and the *moralising mission* the state seems engaged in invites to attentively examine the *below* as neither necessarily the bottom, nor a nest for subversion and resistance. Far from contestation, the Diyanet's female preachers show a daily example of how politics from below might alight on niches from where dominant values are diffused and consolidated daily. As members of the state bureaucracy preachers' activities are constantly controlled by the Diyanet's provincial and local offices which supervise religious services all over Turkey. The Diyanet's hierarchical structure and the country's ongoing authoritarian turn which has exacerbated since 2013 has deeply reduced women preachers' agency and curtailed any attempt to divert from the dominant discourse. As I could experience during this research, the current projects devoted to women and families have deeply

changed if compared to those established between the early 2000s and 2011 in terms of issues raised and discourses. At that time, Diyanet hierarchies cooperated with women from (Muslim) feminist platforms and civil society associations and promoted the inclusion of topics like gender, non-discrimination, and violence against women within sermons and Friday prayers (Maritato 2018). This was the case of the 2008 project "The Role of Religious Officers in the Fight against Violence against Women" (*Kadına Yönelik Şiddetle Mücadelede Din Görevlilerinin Katkısının Sağlanması*) carried out in cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Its aim was to train female preachers on what Islam commands regarding domestic violence and what kind of response preachers may give to victims of violence. Two years later, in 2010, the Diyanet also promoted a campaign "Stop Violence against Women" (*Kadına Şiddete Son*) and introduced in Friday prayers topics like women's right and gender equality in terms of education and employment. That role of Diyanet preachers as agents able to convey not only religious messages has been tamed and deeply transformed in the past decade reflecting an attempt to silence more progressive interpretations of Islam and gender relations. This change has not only distorted some of the original meanings constituting the ratio of this policy but also deeply transformed the services performed by religious officers. Diyanet has thus turned out to be an extremely useful tool to promote and propagate a religious conservative "gender climate" (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün 2017) in line with the government's discourse on the protection of the "traditional Turkish family" (Maritato, 2020:4). Furthermore, since 2016 the AKP gradual autocratic power grab also invested institutions and bureaucratic agencies like the Diyanet. This change reduced the non-partisanship of an official state institution and promoted voices more compliant with the government.

### Concluding Remarks

The chapter investigates politics from below through a methodological and epistemological perspective. It casts light on forms and meanings of politics from below conceived as a process balancing the practical immersion in the research fieldwork and the continuous reflection on and interpretation of the issues at stake. While attending the Diyanet's women preachers' sessions organised in mosques and municipal cultural centres, I experienced the ethnographic fieldwork as a methodology prone to approach the ordinary and describe the power relationships forging it. In this sense, ethnography allowed me to assess the vaize's profession at large, considering their in-between position of both religious scholars and civil servants. Although nowadays the lift of the headscarf ban has made devout Muslim women employable in the public sector, in the early 2000s the Diyanet acted as the first Turkish state institution diffusing the image of a religious woman involved in both religious and secular realm. However, the increase in religiously high-educated women employed by the Diyanet provoked concerns within both secular and religious circles. The former negatively considered

that more and more women wearing headscarves once graduated from religious high schools could access not only secular universities, but also high positions in the public sector. On the other hand, religious circles were confronted with the emergence of a new religious woman, who describe herself as "pious and modern", but also ambitious and determined to grasp the most from the new political opportunities structure emerging from the early 2000s (Maritato 2017).

All these considerations are connected to the second general remark: the role of interpretation and reasoning in politics from below. The daily observation of women preachers employed by the Diyanet informs about the spread of religious services and the redefinition of the religious in Turkey's public realm. It also inductively allows to alight on how Turkish secularism is daily forged and reshaped from below by the activities of religious officers. Finally, an interpretative approach to policy analysis addresses the multiple meanings linked to the actors and meanings related to the fostering of religious services in contemporary Turkey. It indeed interrogates the changing role of religious officers whose agency has been reduced to be spokespersons of Turkish government's religious nationalist discourse. Moreover, such an increase of religious services in terms of scope and scale speaks to the Turkish government's ongoing attempt to reframe morality and female religiosity while propagating a religious nationalist discourse within society. The AKP sacralization of women with familial roles by utilizing religious tropes occurred in a context of authoritarian backlash against women's rights and gender equality. While these attempts have been strongly contested in terms of secular/religious debate, the shrinking of secular spaces also went to the detriment of plurality, tolerance and freedoms *within* the religious sphere silencing and expelling more liberal voices.

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## Notes:

- 1 - For the research findings please see Maritato (2020).
- 2 - Constitutionally defined by the principle of *laiklik*, secularism in Turkey does not consider religion and state to be separate-but-equal entities; instead, it institutionalises instruments of state control over religion (Berkes 1998; Kuru 2007).
- 3 - Act No. 633/1965 on the Reorganization of the Presidency of Religious Affairs.
- 4 - In this context, I adopt the definition of discourse employed by Vivien Schmidt and Claudio Radaelli in their approach to Discursive Institutionalism: “[d]iscourse we define in terms of its content, as a set of policy ideas and values, and in terms of its usage, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication” (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 184).
- 5 - Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, *2022 Yılı Performans Programı, 2022*, p. 26.
- 6 - *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 7 - To live Islam or to “inhabit” it is a notion used by scholars who explored the veil issue and how women perceived and defined their covering. One of the explanations that I find most interesting is that the wearing of the headscarf is a sort of “permanently being in the mosque’s inviolable place”. On the issue see Ahmed (1992).
- 8 - Located in the municipality of Beyoğlu on the European side of Istanbul, *Istiklal Caddesi* is an outdoors shopping plaza; restaurants and pubs open all night long transforming the area into one of the city’s most popular places of entertainment.
- 9 - Conversation with the Beyoğlu’s vaize, field notes, 07.11.2013.
- 10 - See also Awesso A., Review of *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire: Contribution à une problématique de la démocratie*, by J.-F. Bayart, A. Mbembe, C. Toulabor, “Collection ‘Les Afriques’, Bulletin de l’APAD”, n. 5, 1993, p. 268, <http://apad.revues.org/3503> (last accessed on 8 October 2023).
- 11 - Dvora Yanow presented the fieldwork dimension during the cycle of seminars “Issues in Political, Policy, and Organizational Ethnography” held at the ECPR Summer School on Methods and Techniques, Ljubljana, 30 July - 3 August 2012.
- 12 - On 28 February 1997, the National Security Council declared 18 directives for the rehabilitation of the principle of secularism. What is known as the 1997 “postmodern Coup” banned the *Refah Partisi* in 1998, ushering in a period of control over religious associations and reinstated a strict headscarf ban in universities and public sector.
- 13 - “28 Şubat” period or process is the way pious Muslim women I met referred to the expulsions from universities and collective dismissals they experienced as consequences of the headscarf ban enforced after the 28 February 1997 coup.
- 14 - Field notes, *Uhud Mosque*, Güngören, 22.10.2013.
- 15 - Recently the pilot project aimed to send imams and preachers in public high schools in Izmir sparked debate as a further step against secular institutions like schools: Eertan N., *Turkey’s Conservatives Tighten Grip on Schools as Imams Appointed ‘Spiritual Counselors’*, “Al-Monitor”, 27 June 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/turkeys-conservatives-tighten-grip-schools-imams-appointed-spiritual-counselors> (last accessed on 8 October 2023).

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