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Patterns of Political Secularism in Italy and Turkey: the Vatican and the Diyanet to the Test of Politics

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Patterns of Political Secularism in Italy and Turkey: the Vatican and the Diyanet to the Test of Politics

Abstract

Rome and Istanbul have been for centuries the seats of two of the main religious centres of the western hemisphere: the Papacy and the Caliphate, entities with both significant spiritual and temporal power. During the 19th and the 20th centuries, these institutions underwent significant changes in a context of state secularization: in the case of the Papacy, there was a loss of temporal power and its ‘reduction’ to a mainly moral authority; the Caliphate, on the other hand, was abolished after World War I, succeeded by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a bureaucratic body under state control, founded in the era of Kemalist secularism. Despite these changes, today both institutions still play a significant role in the public life and public policies of the Italian and the Turkish republics. While the Vatican is able to influence the Italian public sphere and public discourse through both its influence on common people and its lobbying activities in relation to political decision-makers, in Turkey the Diyanet has become the main tool in the reshaping of Turkish society (both by the Kemalists and, later, by Erdoğan's AKP). This paper will analyze their influence on the two countries’ public policies in relation to religious pluralism and to family-related issues, to show how different ideas of secularism, institutional arrangements and historical paths have led to a very different role of the two institutions in the Italian and Turkish political system.

Keywords: Italy, Turkey, secularization, Papacy, Caliphate, power.

Introduction

Secularization – defined as the idea “that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society” (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 3) - is a multifaceted process. It involves politics (with “the emancipation of state apparatuses from religious bodies and values”), society (with people less and less referring to religion in their everyday life), and religion itself (with changes in the organization and identity of religious organization and their relations with the mundane world) (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016, 6). Secularization is today a very controversial concept, both because many regard it as inapplicable outside the western world or contradicted by the so-called ‘return of religion’, and also because some scholars question the
veracity of the concept itself (for a discussion on this point see for example: Casanova 1994; Huntington 1996; Stark 1999; Haynes 1997; Bhargava 2009). Yet, it is undeniable that political secularism has played a crucial role in the formation and development of contemporary European democracies (Kuru 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Political secularism, an “ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics or public life (or both)” is by nature a concept imbued with tension, because of its competition with religion for the control of the political agenda (Fox 2015:2). Based on the reification of the terms “religion” and the “state”, as well as the essentialization of secularism as ideology, this competition went hand in hand with the elaboration of taxonomies pigeonholing different typologies of states. Ahmet Kuru (2009:8-9) distinguishes between: 1) religious states; 2) states with an established religion; 3) secular states; and 4) anti-religious states. The classification is related to two aspects of the state: a) the religious or secular basis for legislatures and judiciary and b) the state’s favour or hostility toward religions. In this paper, we use two notions of secularism: the first one is “assertive”, where the state plays an assertive role in excluding religion from the public sphere, keeping it in the private domain and, thereby protecting itself from religion; the second one is “passive”, where the state plays a passive role, and does not prevent religion from engaging with the public arena. This distinction describes two models of secularism: the first one epitomised by the French state's determination to protect itself from religion; and a passive one, embodied by the United States' policies of protecting religion from the state. Describing the different kind of relationship between religion and the state, Rajeev Bhargava identifies three levels of connection and disconnection: 1) ends, 2) institutions and personnel, 3) law and public policy. While theocracies have a complete connection at each of the three levels, states with established religions have institutional disconnection (Bhargava 2009). Although secular states are disconnected from religion at each of the three levels, as shown by many typologies of church-state relations (Haynes 1997; Enyedi and Madeley 2004), not all European states have secularized in the same way. Particularly, although most European countries today officially declare themselves ‘secular’, some of them are marked by an institutional separation (insofar this is possible in the real world) between state and churches; others are instead marked by the presence of some kind of ‘established church’ and/or by other mechanisms of state control over religion. These institutional differences became particularly evident after the 1980s, with the ‘return of religion’ to the public sphere (Casanova 1994; Kepel 1991), bringing back the sacred as a relevant factor in most political systems. The fact that religious organizations can play an independent role or act as instruments of political power can imply very different consequences both in terms of role of religion in the public sphere and in relation to public policies. Assessed from this angle, political secularism is a socio-historical process, rather than an
ideology. Moreover, quoting Saba Mahmood (2009:836-837), "secularism is understood not simply as the doctrinal separation of the church and the state but the rearticulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance." This point is crucial since it helps us to conceptualise one of the main issues at stake in this contribution: the intertwined relation between power and religion is not only one of the conditions leading to the formation of the nation-state. As Talal Asad highlights, while “secularisation” is an historical process, “secularism” is a political doctrine (Hirschkind and Scott 2006:301-302). Therefore, the latter also epitomises to what extent and how religion might be embedded, becoming an instrument of governance (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2005) or an independent actor and influential power.

This paper tries to develop this point by analysing the cases of Italy and Turkey. The two countries are particularly relevant in terms of relations between religion and politics, because not only they were for centuries two of the main political centres of Europe and the Mediterranean world, but also the seats of the area’s two main religious institutions: the papacy and the caliphate. However, with the construction of the modern secular state, the two institutions underwent significant changes: in the case of the papacy, with the loss of any significant temporal power; and in the case of the caliphate, with the abolition of the institution, later replaced by the Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), a state agency directly controlled by the government (Gözaydın 2008; Berkes 1998). The paper will show how different institutional development has translated into different patterns of activity of the two religious organization in the domestic public spheres of Italy and Turkey, with the Vatican acting as a powerful independent player, and the Diyanet playing the role of a transmission belt to convey to the population the idea of religion of the power elite (with a secularist outlook during the 20th century and today, after the rise to power of the Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party, with an increasingly pro-Sunni Islam attitude). The second part of the paper will show what this different role means in terms of advocacy and influence on public policies in relation to two particularly sensitive issues for religious organizations: the family, and the treatment of religious minorities.

The Vatican State and Italian Society between Autonomy and Inference

The Vatican was for many centuries not only the main religious power in Western Europe, but also a very powerful power broker among European powers. In the Italian peninsula, it enjoyed an even stronger leverage because it directly governed a large portion of central Italy through the Pontifical
State. It was only with the revolutionary movement of 1848 and the process of unification that led to the establishment of the Italian Kingdom in 1861, that the Vatican lost most of its territories. This process ended in 1870, when the conquest of Rome relegated the Vatican’s power to a small portion of the city. Moreover, the authorities of the new national state were inspired by secularist ideologies: they introduced the separation between Church and State, revoked most of the Church’s privileges, banished several religious orders, abolished ecclesiastic tribunals, and created new institutions such as civil marriage and a secular public education system (Verucci 1999).

As a consequence, the Pope refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the new state, and retired within the Vatican as a voluntary political prisoner. With the encyclical, Non Expedit (1874), the Church prohibited Catholics from participating in the Italian state’s political institutions and promoted abstention from voting. At the same time, the Church reacted to this challenge by mobilizing energies at the grassroots level, through the promotion of Catholic associationism in order to try to re-conquer society from below (Menozzi 1997; Lyon 1967).

Both this Catholic involvement in civil society, and the rising threat of the Socialist movement at the political level were crucial in inspiring the papacy to soften the Non Expedit (in 1905, with the permission to vote for Catholic candidates, wherever there was the risk of the election of a ‘subversive’), and then to utterly revoke it in 1919. Not by chance, this year also marked the birth of the first real Catholic political party, the Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI) led by Father Luigi Sturzo. The party, although promoting cornerstones of the Catholic perspective such as religious freedom and the family, was officially secular, without systematic connections to the Vatican and aiming at representing different social classes (Moos 1945; Almond 1948).

Although the party was rather successful in the 1919 and 1921 elections, the Church was ready to disavow it in exchange for an agreement with the new Fascist regime (The Patti Lateranensi, 1929), which recognized Catholicism as state religion and gave back to the Church some of its prerogatives (Coppa 1995). However, the relation between Church and Fascist regime was also, at times, quite tense, especially because of the competition for youth’s indoctrination.

Indeed, many of the future Italian political leaders grew up politically within Catholic associations such as Azione Cattolica and the FUCI. The new Democrazia Cristiana (DC) party, created underground in 1942, became in the following decades the hegemonic power of Italian politics, and the point of reference of most Catholics until a pronounced political crisis in the early 1990s. Although the new party was also officially secular, and developed a ‘catch-all’ outlook (Ozzano 2013) its ‘associational nexus’ was evident, with the Church (and the powerful and widespread
Catholic associational network) playing the role of a powerful mobilization resource for the Catholic vote, but also, at times, a source of tensions for the party (Scoppola 2006).

In the meantime, both Italian society and the Vatican underwent momentous changes: the former experiencing secularization processes (with very contentious moments such as the legalization of abortion and divorce, both involving popular referenda); the second updating its view on crucial points such as democracy and the role of laymen (among other issues) after Vatican Council II (1962-5). Catholic civil society also developed further with the birth and growth of new powerful religious movements such as Communion and Liberation and the Focolare movement (Faggioli 2008; Garelli 2006). Despite these changes, the DC managed to keep hold of power, also thanks to strategic alliances with centre-left parties, until a major corruption scandal, Tangentopoli, swept away most of the Italian political class in 1992-3, making possible the rise to prominence of new conservative and right-wing forces such as Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) and the Lega Nord (LN). The approval of a new electoral law which assigned most of the parliamentary seats according to a first-past-the-post system, and the restructuring of the Italian political system in bipolar terms, also seemed to preclude any possibility to re-create a single, centrist Catholic party (Giorgi 2013).

New, smaller Catholic parties were thus created within both the centre-left and the centre-right coalitions, while also mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties often included strong Catholic wings, and new political entrepreneurs tried to exploit the Catholic vote. At the same time, this situation paved the way for a new role for the Catholic Church, which, through the so-called ‘cultural project’, promoted, since the mid-1990s, a ‘re-Christianization’ of society from below, and cast itself as an autonomous power broker in Italian politics (Garelli 2007; Magister 2001).

A State Agency Governing Religion: The Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)

In 1924, one year after the proclamation of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) abolished the Caliphate, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Foundations (Şer’iye ve Evkaf Vekâleti) and, by the Law 429, established the Presidency of Religious Affairs, Diyanet İşleri Reisliği (hereafter the Diyanet). The latter is an administrative unit, not a Ministry, attached to the office of the Prime Minister and represents one of the emblems of Turkish secularism, or better laicism (in Turkish laiklik).

Ahmet Kuru defines Turkish laiklik as “assertive secularism”: religion was not eradicated, but subordinated to the state and absorbed into its revolutionary mission.” (Kuru 2007:582). Although
the laiklik constitutes one of the core principles of Kemalism, the Republican foundation ideology, the radical state elite “sought to adapt the religion of the majority into a new religion of the Republic as an instrument in socialising well-disciplined Republican citizens” (Berkes 1998: 495).

In accordance with Act 429, the Diyanet was given the mandate to a threefold duty: 1) to execute services regarding Islamic faith and practices through its religious officials; 2) to enlighten society about true (doğru) religion, that is Sunni Hanefi school of interpretation, and 3) to manage the places of worship (today about 90,000 mosques all over Turkey).

According to Gözaydın, the Turkish state has arranged the Diyanet so that the people could accept an Islamic identity in line with the construct of the state itself (Gözaydın 2009:278). In this sense, the Diyanet bears the values and concerns of both the Kemalist ideology and Islam. This is the reason why merely to consider Turkish secularism as a state’s assertive attempt to tame and control religion does not paint the whole picture. This mission was accompanied by the intent to transform religion into a set of “rational beliefs”, an adhesion to new moral values, which have been often described as “Turk Islam” or “Kemalist Islam” (Türkmens 2009:383-384) that is a “rational” religion, far from superstitions and false beliefs.

Therefore, the Kemalist state exerted a double influence over the Diyanet: on the one side, the agency was the tool through which operating a re-Islamisation based on an official Islam (Türkmens 2009) to the detriment of sectarian interpretations of Islam, like Alevi Muslims, Sufi orders (tarikatlars) and religious communities (cematlars); on the other side, the Diyanet epitomised a the Kemalist elite’s will to tame religion. However, such a state control over religion should be attentively assessed to avoid one-way explanations relegating Diyanet’s bureaucracy to the role of an uncritical yielding actor (Sakallioğlu, 1996: 236). Diyanet’s role and functions were anything but static and evolved according to the political opportunities structure shaping the power relations in Turkey.

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, the rise of the Democratic Party (Demokrat Partisi, DP) resulted as a first attempt to reinvigorate the presence of Islam in Turkish public sphere. Measures such as the decision to open the Qur’an courses, the reintroduction of religious lessons in the state schools, the opening of the Faculty of Theology in Ankara and the religious vocational school the Imam Hatip Okullari in 1949 testify a new role of religion in politics (Yavuz 2003:59-81; Türkmen 2009:386). Moreover, from the 1970s to the 1990s, the multiparty system led to the foundation and
the consolidation of pro-Islamic political parties\(^1\) representing an “Islamic” electoral basin.

While political entrepreneurs contributed to the mobilising of the religious conservative electorate, the role of religion in politics obtained a larger legitimacy. In this process, the Diyanet’s visibility and influence were fostered too. This occurred through the 1965 Act no. 633 on the Organization and Duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs where the duties of the Diyanet were stated as “to carry out affairs related to the beliefs, worship and moral foundations of Islam, to enlighten Turkish society about religion and to manage places of worship” (Gözaydın 2008:220)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the “return of religion in the public sphere” (Casanova 1994; Kepel 1991) and the diffusion of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis (Türk İslam Sentezi) as the official doctrine of the Turkish state both concurred in reshaping the place of Islam in Turkey’s national identity (Eligür 2010:93-102; Birtek and Binnaz 2011:14-18). The result was that in the 1980s the Diyanet’s role evolved again: from an agency embodying a domesticated religion to a ruling instrument in the hands of political power by which to diffuse religious conservative ideology among society.

After a military-led coup d’état in 1980, the Diyanet became a key state institution contributing significantly to the maintenance of the conservative status quo: Art. 136 of 1982 Constitution clearly states that the Diyanet is charged with the promotion of “national solidarity and integrity. Morality became not only a mandatory course included in the regular school curricula (Türkmen 2009), but also one of the ruling's instruments. The attempt to restore a muscled laicism willing to control religion and to relegate it to the private sphere resulted in a short parenthesis, 1997-2001, followed by fifteen years of religious conservative AKP rule.

As Sultan Tepe affirms, under the AKP, the Diyanet “[…] strengthened its relations to religious publics and the party’s domestic and international politics” (Tepe 2016:178). In the early 2000s, the institution engaged in a sort of catechism for society, diffusing an idea of a modern, rational, tolerant Turkish Islam. From 2003 to 2010, the at that time President of the institution, Ali Bardakoğlu, talked about religion as a “social phenomenon” (Bardakoğlu 2009) and invited Diyanet’s male and female personnel to engage beyond the mosques to diffuse morality and religious knowledge among society. Within the same period of time, Diyanet has become one of the biggest state agencies, currently employing about 120,000 people. Starting from 2010 and, particularly from 2013, the changing relations between the AKP government and one of the most

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important religious communities, Hizmet, led by Fetullah Gülen, has led to a redefinition of the Diyanet as a state agency tasked with defining what is “true” religion. This aspect is crucial and calls into question to what extent and how the Diyanet is a tool to propagate the AKP religious conservative ideology, but also to what extent the Diyanet is losing autonomy and pluralism.

**The Vatican and the Italian Political System**

As mentioned above, until the 1980s the Vatican could rely on a strong connection – although sometimes marked by disagreements and confrontational tones – with the DC party. With the demise of this latter, and the return of religion in the public sphere worldwide (Kepel 1991; Casanova 1994) – which someway provided more legitimacy to the role of religion in politics – the Holy See on the one hand had to face a plethora of political entrepreneurs willing to exploit the Catholic vote basin (Diamanti 2009); on the other, however, it had the opportunity to play the role of a powerful independent actor. This was also made possible by the wide popularity of the Church as an institution, also among many secularized people (Pace 2007; Diamanti and Ceccarini 2007).

The influence of the Church in the past two decades and a half (after the end of the so-called ‘first Republic’) has been wielded in several different ways. If we look particularly at the policy sectors of family and immigration/religious pluralism, at least three different modalities emerge.

The first one is direct lobbying of the Church hierarchies on policy makers. This was made possible by the presence of many self-professed Catholics among the political leaders of all major coalition governments, who were willing to tap the Catholic vote base. Catholic-oriented parties often enjoyed good relations with the Church hierarchies, which the Vatican could exploit to summon them in times of controversy. This was particularly true during Camillo Ruini’s presidency of the Conference of Italian Bishops (CEI) (1991-2007), when Ruini elaborated the so-called Cultural Project, aiming at restoring the Church’s influence on Italian society (Garelli 2006, 2007; Magister 2001). For example, between 2006 and 2007, during the liveliest phases of the negotiations on a draft bill legalizing same-sex civil unions, Monsignor Camillo Ruini and other high-ranking CEI cardinals had several meetings (despite a strong criticism from secular left-wingers) with Catholic leaders of the centre-left coalition such as Clemente Mastella, Francesco Rutelli and Prime Minister Romano Prodi himself. This lobbying activity, in addition to other strategies, managed to water down more and more the text of the bill and, ultimately, to block the project (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; Ozzano 2015).
Another modality of influence frequently used by the Vatican are appeals to public opinion (which can also be very influential in relation both to the press and the political system, given the wide circulation of such appeals). This kind of influence is made possible by the legitimacy and the credibility of the Church among wide sectors of the Italian population, also in times of advanced secularization, when, for example, mass attendance has dramatically dropped. This is shown by recent surveys of Italians’ most trusted institutions, which regularly show the Church around or above the 50% threshold: a result well above the European average, which further increased in recent years, thanks to Pope Francis’s popularity among many nonbelievers (Pace 2007; Diamanti and Ceccarini 2007; Martino and Ricucci 2016). This popularity is mirrored, and amplified, by a media system which is ready to report and emphasize statements by the Pope and other Church officials, as well as by politicians and other people commenting on them. Such processes were very clear, again, during the discussion on same-sex unions before and after the 2006 elections, when every Vatican statement was for at least a couple of days the main issue discussed by mainstream media and politicians (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). This does not mean that such statements were well received by all political forces, as shown by the strong leftist criticism against the Church’s interventions in the debate on same-sex unions. The same was true in relation to the official Vatican’s position on immigration and religious pluralism, which welcomes immigrants and is favourable to their inclusion in the Italian society. In this case, while the centre-left mostly approved, there was a strong right-wing criticism (voiced, for example, in the words of the leaders of the Lega Nord party) (Guolo 2011).

Finally, the Vatican is influential through the actions of Catholic civil society. Italy has been in the past decades a fertile incubator for many kinds of Catholic movements and associations, from wide umbrella associations and groups such as Azione Cattolica and Communion and Liberation, to smaller specialized associations gathering categories such as parents, entrepreneurs, teachers, medical doctors, and jurists (Faggioli 2016). This thick associational fabric grants the Church a twofold set of opportunities to intervene in Italian society. On the one hand, Catholic associations and charities are directly involved in social work. For example, associations such as Caritas are directly and significantly involved in providing many migrants with shelter, foods, drugs and other primary goods and services: an activity which is very often not appreciated by the political right, which would prefer all resources to be directed to poor Italians. On the other hand, the Catholic associational world can mobilize or be mobilized to support the Vatican’s position on sensitive issues, or to try to prevent the approval of undesired legislation. This latter was the case, for example, of the complex strategy deployed by Catholics in 2006-7 which ultimately managed to stop the attempts to legalize same-sex unions. Beside the above mentioned lobbying activities of the
Church, another crucial event was the organization, in May 2007, of a massive Family Day rally in Rome. This display of strength, which was framed by the Church and its media as the re-emergence of the ‘true Italian families’ to oppose a draft bill allegedly supported by organized lobbies and fringe minorities (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016) was indeed crucial to demoralize the supporters of the law, and to convince Catholic legislators to back down.

Despite the effectiveness of the Vatican in conveying to the Italian population and legislators its point of view and policy preferences, the Church is far from being monolithic. This was very clear during the national and local debates about some mosque projects in the 2000s and 2010s. In this case, the Vatican had to mediate between very polarized positions among the grassroots clergy, which in some cases displayed strong pro-migrant positions – even granting parish spaces to the Muslim collective prayer – and in others participated in the Lega Nord anti-Muslim rallies (Bertezzolo 2011). This was also true, partly, at the hierarchy level, with conservative cardinals such as Giacomo Biffi arguing that immigration from Christian countries should be preferred to that from Muslim ones, or card. Severino Poletto opposing the idea of a minaret in his city; and progressive ones, such as Milan’s Archbishop Dionigi Tettamanzi, who supported the construction of mosques and openly clashed with the Lega Nord views (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; Guolo 2011).

Such internal divisions, if above a certain threshold, can however sometimes compromise the capacity of the Vatican to convey a single, official position; or, rather, suggest a lower official profile. This happened, very clearly, during some phases of recent discussions on mosque projects and in bill drafts aimed at limiting the use of some kinds of veil by Muslim women. It also occurred in the second phase of recent discussions on same-sex unions, during 2013-2016, when the Church was less open in its interventions, not only because Pope Francis had inaugurated a more nuanced approach to LGBT issues, but also because many high-level prelates, such as card. Carlo Maria Martini, had expressed some degree of support to the idea of legal recognition of same-sex partners (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; Ozzano 2016).

This internal pluralism, including the fact that the Church feels free to align with different coalitions and political forces (as shown above, the Vatican is aligned with the centre-right on family-related issues, and with the centre-left on immigration-related ones) clearly shows the independence of the Church from the positions of political parties. On the other hand, however, the opposite is not necessarily true.
The Diyanet and Turkish political secularism

Assessing the recent changes in the political influence over the Diyanet, we should go back to 2010, when, during the reforms concerning the ban of the Islamic headscarf, at that time Prime Minister Erdoğan asked the Diyanet to be consulted. Bardakoğlu, Diyanet’s President at that time, responded that by virtue of the constitutional principle of secularism it was unconstitutional to consult the Diyanet for political issues, adding that the headscarf is not a formal requirement of Islam. However, this institution’s claim for autonomy was not promoted by Mehmet Görmez who the same year succeeded at the Presidency. Moreover, in 2010 the institution underwent a structural reorganisation, by the means of Act No. 6002.

The 2010 Act is important because it legally shapes the organisation's structure requiring a reconfiguration of the departments and, most of all, a modification of the Presidency that has been ranked at the level of under secretariat. In particular, the office is now limited to five years and the same official can be appointed only twice. Also, the procedure for the appointment has changed. Before 2010, the President was appointed by the President of the Republic, upon the proposal of the Prime Minister. Today, the Religion Supreme Council (Din Üst Kurulu) selects three candidates for the Presidency and the Council of Ministers chooses one of these nominees, proposing his appointment to the President of the Republic.

Between 2010 and 2017 the Diyanet was raised to prominence as both a state apparatus and a ruling instrument. Because the Diyanet has a country-wide reach, it is able easily to propagate religious conservative ideology (Öztürk 2016). The 2010 bill in this sense promoted the creation of a Diyanet radio and a television broadcast (TRT Diyanet) aimed at reaching as many people as possible. If we consider the policies towards the family and religious pluralism, this aspect is crucial and it shows how the Diyanet’s has expanded its own domains of action.

The Diyanet’s involvement in family-related issues should be analysed in line with the AKP political discourse, which, since the early 2000s, has been imbued with conservative values stressing on the ideal “strong Turkish family” founded on three generations (the elderly, the parents and the children) as the best agent of social protection (Urhan and Urhan 2015:253; Bozkurt 2013; Bozçağa 2013).

2 The Religion Supreme Council is composed by a group of 120 individuals, including theologians, members of the Higher Council of Religious Affairs, and regional muftis. (Sunier et al. 2011:48)
The Diyanet has become the instrument through which the governments could diffuse the strengthening of a healthy family structure (Yazıcı 2012:110; Kocamaner 2017). Since the early 2000s, it set up projects inviting women to perform religious rituals in mosques and diffusing religious knowledge to female population (Tütüncü 2010; Maritato 2016). This was concretely implemented by ad hoc seminars and conferences in mosques and municipal cultural centres, but also by new offices like the Family Consultation and Guidance Bureaus (Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Bürolari). Established in 2002 and diffused all over the country, in these offices, religious officers work as family counsellors on religious issues, community issue, health issue, wedding and children education.

Moreover, during the last decade the Diyanet not only acted in compliance with the AKP government’s policies, but also raised to prominence the carrying out of projects within the frameworks of agreements with specific Ministries. This is the case with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry Family and Social Policies, whose collaborations allow religious officers to provide services in orphanages, prisons, reformatories, hospitals and women’s shelters. In the attempt to diffuse and reinvigorate an Islamo-nationalistic identity among population and particularly the new generations (Lüküslü 2016) the Diyanet is thus one of the state institutions most involved in many citizens’ everyday lives.

As already noted, the Diyanet is a tool and an opportunity for all governments in Turkey. This is because government can use the agency’s extensive network of mosques to diffuse its own ideas of values and morality among society: in the case of the current AKP government, this is a religiously conservative outlook. However, the institution is also the instrument by which governments control religion in its daily manifestations and in formulation of dogma. Being officially the embodiment of Turkish Islam, the Diyanet plays a tricky role vis-à-vis religious communities, sects and religious minorities. The state influence occurs in relation to a single religion, Islam, which is the religion of the majority of the population: the 1923 Lausanne Treaty regulates religious services of other religions. However, the Diyanet is included in the fiscal pressure of all Turkish citizens, either non-Muslims and/or non-religious people.

Moreover, as stated above, in providing religious knowledge the Diyanet relies on a particular tradition, which is the one of ‘official’ Sunni Islam and, more specifically, the Hanefi School of Law. Therefore, the Hanefi-centred nature of the Diyanet raises concerns vis-à-vis “other” ways to practice Islam in Turkey. In some circumstances, the institution of the Diyanet has acted as an “umbrella” institution, including also members of religious communities among its employees. This was the case from 1949 to 1965 when Qur’an teachers affiliated to the Süleymançı community
mostly operated in Diyanet’s mosques (Yavuz 2003:146). Similarly, during the 1980s, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis forced a unification of the religious nationalist camp to oppose leftist ideologies. From the early 2000s until 2016, when there was an abrupt schism, the alliance between the ruling AKP and the religious community (*Hizmet*) led by Fetullah Gülen entailed a common understanding of purpose and religious interpretation. However, when the relations between the two former allies started to deteriorate, the Diyanet sought to distinguish itself as the repository of “true” Islam and proceeded with attempts at standardisation and interpretation. In the aftermath of the July 15, 2016 attempted Coup, which the AKP considers orchestrated by the Gülen Community, this separation has been even stronger and a purge of religious officers recently concerned also the Diyanet.

A similar development occurred in relation to the Alevi issue. Estimated to be between the 10 to the 20% of Turkish population, the Alevi perform religious practices distinct from Turkey’s Sunni Hanefi majority. For decades, the Diyanet asserted a “denial of any separate ‘Alevi’ religious identity” (Gözaydın 2014:10). However, in the light of the Democratisation Packages of the early 2000s, and with the aim to meet the Copenhagen criteria propaedeutic for the European Union accession, the AKP government launched the so-called Alevi initiative in 2007 (Bardakci et al. 2016:97-128).

The process resulted in a mere symbolic attempt to enlarge rights of the Alevi population. This can be gauged if considering the cemevi issue, that is, the Alevi place of worship. The Diyanet’s leadership opposed the recognition of cemevi as places of worship on the grounds that the move would turn Alevism, into an independent religion, separated from Islam. The case raised debates

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3 Please see: https://world.wng.org/2016/08/turkey_s_post_coup_purge_rolls_over_religious_affairs_agency. Last consulted 17 September, 2017

4 About the Diyanet’s vision over Alevi population’s requests: please see the answer to 6 key questions dated 2008: 
http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/its-not-just-about-cemevis-diyanet-remains-the-

5 Alevi cemevi have been officially recognised as places of worship only in 2015 following the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) landmark ruling against Turkey. Please see: http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-discriminates-against-alevis-over-worship-places-euro-court-says-in-landmark-
and Alevi communities accused the Diyanet of acting as “the Vatican”\(^6\). The significant role played by the Diyanet in vetoing key issues like the recognition of cem houses alienated the Alevi community from the institution perceived as the emblem of a Sunni-Hanefi identity (Bardakçi 2015:365-366).

When the AKP came to power in 2002, many envisioned that it would play a leading role in reconciling Islam and democracy by democratizing the Turkish state and the laïklik. This would have made it easier for pious Muslims to participate in secular democracy (Somer 2017:24-25). Fifteen years later, the silencing of Diyanet’s internal pluralism in favour of a blind orthodox Sunni-Hanefi Islam goes together with the diffusion of a religious conservative ideology and a Islamo-nationalist identity (White 2013). In this process, the Diyanet’s expanding role testifies not only to a renewed place of religion in Turkish politics, but also to the fact that the government employs this institution for its own ideological and ruling ambitions. In this context, it is interesting to note how in the past, Islamists criticized the Diyanet for being the instrument by which the authoritarian state could undertake a secularist and Turkish nationalist social engineering (Ulutaş 2010). Today, far from pursuing bottom-up and diversity-friendly policies, the AKP government is forging a Diyanet compliant with a homogeneous social transformation inclined to a more Islamized version of Turkish nationalism.

**Concluding remarks**

The paper focused on two institutions, the Vatican and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which are currently engaged in exerting influence in Italian and in Turkish society. However, we have seen that the two institutions are the results of very different views of political secularism, and, consequently, very different institutional arrangements and historical paths. In the case of the Vatican, the secularization process and the formation of the Italian national state meant losing virtually all the territories it previously controlled as a state, and many privileges it enjoyed in Italian society; however, it was able to retain its independence from the Italian state. In the case of the Diyanet, we see instead a state agency, established, as noted by Ahmet Öztürk (2016:620-622), with the primary purpose of ensuing the management and control of religion by Kemalist elites “as a fundamental ideological apparatus within the Turkish state.” This did not mean that the

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institution was completely deprived of a degree of autonomous influence on society and politics; however, its primary function was to be a belt of transmission to convey to society the ideology of the governmental power.

Such differences have provided the two institutions with a different degree of leverage on political outcomes, as clearly shown by what happened in the 20th century. During this time, the Diyanet was a tool in the hands of the Kemalist project, while the Catholic Church first managed to cope with the Fascist regime, and, after World War II and the return to democracy, enjoyed a privileged relation with the DC-led governments, with mutual benefits and influence. In both cases, the situation changed again between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. In Turkey, the rise to power of a conservative religious party such as the AKP did not change the function of the Diyanet as a belt of transmission between government and society. However, while in the previous decades the institution was used to spread a secular and rationalized, and later a nationalist Islam, now it became the tool for the re-Islamization and the moralization of society. On the contrary, in Italy, the 1990s gave rise to a more complex political system, with many political entrepreneurs and political movements (right-wing, conservative, centrist, and progressive) aiming at garnering the Catholic vote. On the one hand, this provided the Vatican with the opportunity to play an ambitious role and propose an autonomous agenda in the Italian political debate, without the mediation of a single party. On the other, it exposed the Church to attempts at instrumentalization as well as criticisms from different sides of the political spectrum.

This is particularly true because, as shown above, the Vatican has chosen not to follow the preferences of political parties, but to pursue its own political platform. This means, for example, that it proposes policies supported by the centre-left in relation to immigration and religious pluralism, and policies supported by the centre-right in relation to the family and sexuality. A situation that is very different from the Turkish context, where the Diyanet has been aligned with the AKP positions both on morality policies, and on religious pluralism, by reaffirming a Sunni Hanefi-centered vocation excluding not only other religious traditions, but even the Muslim Alevi minority.

To sum up, in the case of Italy a secularization process aiming at erasing the influence of the Church from the public sphere, but respecting the Vatican as an independent religious institution has led to a current situation marked by the Vatican as a strong independent political player in the Italian public sphere. On the contrary, in Turkey a vision of political secularism as submission of religious power to the state has led to a situation in which the Diyanet performs the role of belt of transmission to convey to the population the values of the ruling elite: secular until the last decades
of the 20th century, religious conservative today.

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