

## Articles (Theme)

# RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING AND THE 'FANTASTIC' TELE-UNIVERSE OF ADNAN OKTAR'S A9 TV

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## Abstract

Currently, religious broadcasting in Turkey is flourishing. Despite the variety it offers, religious broadcasting remains an under-investigated topic compared to other religious media. This paper analyses a particular form of religious broadcasting, televangelism, with particular reference to Adnan Oktar's television channel A9 TV. I argue that Adnan Oktar's televangelist practice stands at the margins of religious broadcasting and differs from other Islamic televangelists in various ways. I analyse both the visual and discursive characteristics of Oktar's televangelist practice.

## Key Terms

televangelism, religious broadcasting, cult, popular Islam, Turkish television.

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## DİNİ YAYINCILIK VE ADNAN OKTAR'IN A9 TV'SİNİN "FANTASTİK" TELE-EVRENİ

### Öz

Türkiye'de dini yayıncılık bugüne kadarki en parlak evresini yaşamaktadır. Ancak diğer dini medyadan farklı olarak ve sunduğu çeşitliliğe rağmen, hala yeterince incelenmemiş bir alandır. Bu makale, dini yayıncılığın formlarından biri olan televanjelizmi, Adnan Oktar'ın A9 TV kanalına yakından bakarak çözümlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Adnan Oktar'ın televangelist pratiğinin dini yayıncılığın marjinde durduğunu ve diğer İslami televangelistlerden birçok yönüyle ayrıldığını savunuyorum. Bu makalede, Adnan Oktar'ın televangelist pratiğini hem görsel hem de söylemsel açıdan çözümlüyorum.

### Anahtar Terimler

televanjelizm, dini yayıncılık, kült, popüler İslam, Türk televizyonu.

### The Relevance of Studying Religious Broadcasting in Contemporary Turkey

The rise of Islam in the current global political context is an evident phenomenon. As pointed out by Kılıçbay and Binark (2002) more than a decade ago, Islam has gained a new form of visibility in the popular realm in Turkey, and they distinguish two particular aspects of the popularisation of Islam: 'the emergence of Islamist media and the rise of new consumption patterns' (p. 497). Although Islamic media—radio, newspapers and magazines in particular—have gained academic scrutiny in Turkey (Arat, 1995; Kılıçbay and Binark, 2002; Azak, 2013; Meşe, 2015), Islamic broadcasting still remains under-investigated despite its over a decade-long history (Öncü, 1995; Erol Işık, 2013; Yörük, 2014). This paper explores the long-neglected topic of religious broadcasting through the case of Adnan Oktar's televangelist practice on A9 TV.

One can distinguish three main forms of religious broadcasting in Turkey. The first is public broadcasting. Currently, the TRT Diyanet channel, which is run by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, is distinguished in terms of the ways in which it promotes the official understanding of Islam. Secondly, there are stations such as TGRT, Kanal 7, and Samanyolu TV, commercial channels which, at the beginning, had Islamist undertones but then became more explicit by employing, for example, veiled presenters or having religious talk shows and dramas. While TGRT has been closed down for financial reasons, the administration of both Kanal 7 and Samanyolu TV has recently been passed to a public trustee which has imposed some changes to the channels' policy because of the on-going tension between the current government and the Fettullah

Gülen movement running the stations. Thirdly, there are the devout religious channels operating through satellite broadcasting such as Mehtap TV, Dost TV, Hilal TV, and Semerkand TV, each related to a different sect, organisation or Islamic movement. All these stations are explicitly committed to Islamic values and strongly emphasise the oral tradition in Islam and the power of preaching, talk, religious sagas, pious tales and *sohbet* (conversation), which will be discussed in more detail below.

The rise of religious broadcasting in Turkey can be placed within the broader context of the commodification of religion, and the emergence of new religious movements and their use of internet and satellite broadcasting technologies. Even though these both stem from the fact that Islam has gained more visibility in the public sphere during the last fifteen years in Turkey, religious broadcasting must be distinguished from the rising pious content on television in general, e.g. in dramas, children's programmes and talk shows. This is because, unlike the piety exhibited on mainstream television, religious channels can be regarded as a form of thematic broadcasting with a particular commitment to religious themes, values and topics.

This article uses a cultural perspective to understand the cult<sup>1</sup> of Adnan Oktar, offering a 'serious' approach to a phenomenon which has been much ridiculed. Employing discourse analysis method, I will focus on both visual and discursive aspects of Adnan Oktar's show, *Sohbetler*, which is very central to A9 TV's programme flow. The analysis includes fifteen randomly chosen episodes of the programme. *Sohbetler* has been broadcast on different time slots, and the length of the programme is usually over 100 minutes. In addition to watching *Sohbetler*, I also benefited from the transcripts of the show which are available on A9 TV's website. My aim is to discuss the ways in

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<sup>1</sup> There is a significant body of literature on cults and religious movements. Although it would be very useful, I am unable to discuss in-depth in this paper the ways in which to address Adnan Oktar and his group as a cult. Following Demetrah's (2003) delineation of the characteristics of a cult as (1) submission to charismatic leadership, (2) communal and/or familiaristic detachment, (3) fusion of private selves with collective identities, (4) control through socialised ideology and morality, and (5) affirmation through shared ultimate experiences, I argue that we can define Adnan Oktar and his followers as a cult. As a term, 'cult' has been overwhelmed by the negative denotations attached to it, and thus many scholars prefer to call such groups with the aforementioned characteristics as new religious movements. Beckford (2003, p. 27) draws our attention to the fact that particular qualities which have been attributed to cults such as 'exploitation, authoritarian leadership, harassment and abuse, systematic fraud and deception, violence and patriarchy' are also true for other legitimated forms of religion and religious collectivities. On the other hand, 'cult' (*kült*) has often falsely been addressed as 'sect' (*tarikât*) and has not widely been used in the Turkish context. I choose to employ the term 'cult' in order to emphasise its difference from a sect and also for etymological reasons as the term implies the significance of group formation and identity due to its 'semantic company' with the word 'culture'. This is in accordance with the cultural perspective that this paper provides for understanding the Adnan Oktar phenomenon: 'Thus, just as cultures can – and perhaps must – be regarded as cultic, cults – even more than most other collectivities – require an acute version of the same enveloping sense of the sacred that Durkheim finds in culture generally.' (Demetrah, 2003, p. 27).

which the cult of Adnan Oktar employs television as a platform to disseminate its particular values and principles derived from Islam by means of a particular form of televangelism. Islamic televangelism on Turkish television has shifted from the 'secular' perspective of Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (Öncü, 1995) towards a more devout Islamist one as exemplified by televangelists such as Ömer Döngeloğlu and Nihat Hatipoğlu. Adnan Oktar's televangelism on A9 TV, however, is particularly interesting as it stands where the marginal religious practice of a cult meets with the popular realm of television. Following Moll (2010, p. 20), I argue that television in contemporary Turkey can be regarded as a "technology of piety" where it weaves its magic through pleasures and subliminal framings', and as such has been a technology of nation-building in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 2004, p. 9), Turkey and elsewhere.

### **The Relevance of Studying Islamic Televangelism: Forms and Discourses**

Televangelism refers to 'a new form of religious broadcasting combining television and evangelism' (Musthafa, 2014, p. 14). Televangelism started in the USA in the 1960s where it was mostly related to local churches (Thomas and Lee, 2012; Howell, 2014), whereas today, it describes a diversity of religious practices on television across different religions including Hinduism, Islam and many others. In other words, 'today televangelism is a global, cross-religious phenomenon' (Thomas and Lee, 2012, p. 2).

According to Musthafa (2014, p. 15) 'the term televangelist refers to Christian propagators who take donations from wealthy followers (Hadden & Shupe 1987) while Islamic evangelism refers to the modern form of Islamic propagation of both religious principles and Islamic values in day-to-day life (Larkin 2008)'. Jameel (2013) adds that while Christian televangelism remains at the margins of broadcasting and is celebrated by a particular group of viewers, Islamic televangelism is gradually becoming mainstream and expanding its target audience. Indeed, Islamic televangelist practice has been embraced by viewers in many different countries such as Egypt (Moll, 2010, 2012), Indonesia (Muzakki, 2012; Howell, 2014), Malaysia, India and Pakistan; and further, the appeal of particular Muslim televangelists such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, known as the 'Global Mufti', and Amr Khaled now reach beyond national borders, creating a transnational sphere for the broader *Ummah* of Muslims (Moll, 2012; Sharify-Funk and Albarghouti, 2013).

From a cultural perspective, one can distinguish particular dynamics that define the characteristics of Islamic televangelism. Firstly, the institutionalisation of Islam

within a particular country in which televangelist broadcasting takes place has a significant impact on the emergence of religious personalities as televangelists. Official institutions such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey and more informal forms of religious recruitment by Islamic groups, sects and organisations have led to different televisual practices of production and reception. Eventually, this means that different styles and different personalities from various backgrounds can appear on television in the form of Islamic televangelism. Secondly, the regulation of television broadcasting and conditions in the broadcasting market also have a significant impact on religious broadcasting. For instance, in Indonesia, the fall of the Suharto regime led to the deregulation of the media, and the search for innovation by private television resulted in the introduction of new genres in religious television programming such as talk shows (Howell, 2014, p. 237). Similarly, Echchaibi (2011, p. 92) identifies a break in the representation of Islam on Arab television due to a significant change in the conditions of television production, marked by the start of Amr Khaled's show *Words From the Hearth* in 2000, whereas before television studios had appeared as an extension of the mosque. Khaled's and his successors' pragmatic approach helped them to address everyday life beyond the *halal/haram* (licit/illicit) opposition and to appeal to a broader audience with their 'not simply preachy, compassionate, and inclusive, not punitive and exclusive, and critically embracing-not squarely denouncing the material world' (Echchaibi, 2011, p. 95). Thirdly, both the religious and televisual cultural context in which the programmes produced are also distinctive in terms of the form of the programme content. The last decade of Turkish television has seen the rise of piety in both the factual and fictional content in mainstream broadcasting (Emre Cetin, 2014) along with the appearance of new religious television channels in the Turkish television market. The rise of television as the 'technology of piety' evidently owes much to the broader social context in which Islamic values and practices become much more visible and popular in Turkey.

There are also significant consequences of employing television as the 'technology of piety' in return. Particular advancements in television technology has led to the increasing visibility of Islam as well as the diversity and fragmentation of Islamic representations on television. The new media technologies such as satellite television have led to the "'fragmentation" of religious authority in Muslim societies' as well as the audience (Moll, 2012, p. 22). Hence, the global phenomenon of televangelism implicitly indicates small groups of viewers who are geographically dispersed on one hand and a diversity of religious interpretations and authorities who appear on

television on the other. While the everyday televisual appearance of religious personalities challenges the authority of existing religious institutions, it also means the emergence of new religious authorities within the realm of popular culture. Sharify-Funk and Albarghouti (2013, p. 506-7) state that 'Muslim transnationalism has opened new doors for participating in public discourse, facilitating the emergence of new religious authorities that compete with the traditional ulama'. In a similar vein, Muzakki (2012, p. 60) regards this process of the increasing self-autonomy of religious authorities and the decreasing authority of religious institutions in Indonesia as a 'logical consequence of growing production, capitalization and mass marketization of Islamic ideas through the television industry'. This takes us to Göle's (1997, p. 77) argument that 'there is a compound relationship between the identity politics of Islamic communities and the global forces of consumerism and of market economics'. It is not possible to think of popular forms or everyday practices of Islam such as televangelism without any reference to the neoliberal market economy in which commodification and mediated forms of religion greatly appeal to pious people. Despite the assumption that Christianity is the religion of the 'visual' and Islam is the one of the 'oral', Moll (2010, p.3-4) argues that recent televangelist practices challenge this 'easy bifurcation', and currently, one must take the visual forms of preaching into account in order to be able to address the contemporary dimensions of the consumption and commodification of religion. Following this point, my analysis of Adnan Oktar's televangelist practice addresses both visual and discursive domains. However, it is important to note that the visual representation of Oktar's cult holds a particular significance among other Islamic representations on television as discussed below.

### **Studying Islamic Televangelism Islamic Cult and Televangelist Practice: Adnan Oktar and A9 TV**

It has been difficult to gain an insight into a religious cult because of its closed organisational form, except for the testimonials of previous members. But cults also aim to recruit more people in order to gain power and expand their field of impact, and in this way, new media technologies contribute towards the visibility of religious cults by making them more accessible to a broader public. This is the case with Adnan Oktar's cult. Adnan Oktar and his followers recruit through the Science Research Foundation (Bilim Araştırma Vakfı) which, since the 1990s, organises conferences, and publishes and disseminates Oktar's books, of which there are more than three hundred, on

Ataturk and creationism. Oktar was arrested in the late 1980s but was given immunity against criminal prosecution because of his mental illness. Despite this immunity, he has been sued by previous members of the cult, some of whom were celebrities. Adnan Oktar is known to recruit young, good-looking, well-educated and affluent people to his cult and to pursue an extravagant lifestyle with his members. The cult started their satellite broadcasting on A9 TV in 2011 since when Oktar and his ideas have held a central position in the channel's schedule. The channel broadcasts in Turkish although an English simultaneous translation is available online via the channel's webpage.

It should be noted that Adnan Oktar was a media phenomenon before his television broadcasting because of the scandalous legal cases involving his previous followers such as models and a medical professor and the professor's family. It was not only the usual moral panic and public anxiety that generally frames cults but also these legal cases that provided interesting stories for the mainstream media. While Oktar has been subject to various accusations of the economic, psychological and sexual abuse of his followers in Turkey, he has also come to the attention of the media abroad because of his commitment to creationism and his dispute with the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins.<sup>2</sup> Hence the public profile of Adnan Oktar is a complex one born out of litigation, accusations, speculations by various parties, controversial ideas on evolution, and a lavish lifestyle.

Such as his peculiar public profile which is very different from other sect leaders and religious authorities in Turkey, there are several ways in which Oktar's religious broadcasting is different from other forms of Islamic televangelism. For instance, unlike Amr Khaled or Nihat Hatipoğlu, Oktar does not give long talks on Islam or the Koran to male Muslims gathered in a studio or a hall. Oktar's televangelist practice takes place in a home-like studio where he gathers together a gender-mixed group of his cult members to have a conversation with them. He does not answer questions from a hall full of people like Zakir Naik, nor does he discuss his interpretation of the Koran with a presenter such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi or Yaşar Nuri Öztürk. Neither are the topics discussed by Oktar limited to Islam but vary as he comments on current affairs and contemporary politics. This largely stems from the fact that Oktar is a cult leader rather than an *Imam* in the conventional sense of the term, and that he holds neither an

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2008/aug/19/richarddawkinsisusedto> and <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2008/dec/22/atlas-creationism-adnan-oktar-harun-yahya>

officially or socially recognised religious status that would enable him to preach and discuss Islam in a conventional way.

Interestingly, however, there is a particular feature of Oktar's televangelism that resembles a Christian televangelist: his obsession with Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. Oktar has written several books from a creationist perspective to demonstrate the fallacy of Darwin's theory which have been translated into various languages and are donated free in Turkey and abroad to public schools, libraries and individuals.<sup>3</sup> He has organised various conferences in Turkey and abroad to publicise his books and disseminate his anti-Darwinist ideas. This is echoed in his television broadcasting where he and his followers provide 'evidences of creation' from the Koran and 'scientific sources'. The credits of his primary programme on A9 TV, *Sohbetler with Adnan Oktar*, visualizes anti-evolutionism in the form of a stone that smashes the statue of Darwin after it has passed through the museum of (anti?-)evolution.

Newspapers that depicted the scandals in the past, and lately his television broadcasting, have contributed a great deal to the making of the public image of Adnan Oktar and his followers. Rather than an Islamic cult, Oktar's cult is more reminiscent of a hedonistic subculture where its members indulge themselves in conspicuous consumption and various sorts of worldly pleasures. In the following sub-sections, I shall look at both the discursive and visual construction of this televisual 'universe' which embodies Oktar's public persona and his Islamic cult.

### ***Turkish-Islamic morality and the utopian notion of unification***

The programme schedule of A9 TV, which defines its main broadcasting policy as 'serving the settlement of peace in Turkey and in the world with the unifying style of Turkish-Islamic morality', is predominantly based on talk-shows and documentaries. Not surprisingly, despite the thematic diversity of the talk-shows, including politics and various aspects of everyday life, the discursive framework is constructed from the perspective of a Turkish-Islamic morality. It is a moral standard that is to be achieved through Turkishness and the Koran (despite the challenges of modern life), and the pursuit of the ideal of Islamic unification or *Ummah*. Oktar and the participants in *Sohbetler with Adnan Oktar*, along with the presenters in *Başkent Birlikleri* and *Birlik Zamani*, largely endeavour to make contemporary links with the Koran in order to interpret current affairs and problems from the perspective of Islam. Similar to other

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-islam-creationism-france-idUSTRE74F3GC20110516>

contemporary Muslim preachers, they mediate 'between tradition and modernity as well as the spiritual and materialistic' (Musthafa, 2014, p. 15). This is where Oktar's anti-Darwinism comes into play: he and his followers often claim that contemporary discoveries and inventions attributed to modern science are already mentioned in the Koran, and hence science does not contradict religion but is rather evidence of its relevance. If one reads the Koran properly, a person can find anything that they look for in order to make sense of the contemporary world.

Since Oktar's programme is very much engaged with contemporary politics in Turkey, the Kurdish question is the basic topic of his conversation with his followers in which he employs a Turkish-Islamic unification framework. This framework is not original and is no different from what is known as the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Oktar often quotes the Koran while discussing the Kurdish question, and in doing so equates the members of the Kurdish organisation, the PKK, with atheists and polytheists. In a way, he re-interprets a contemporary question within the light of Islam.

Both the name of Oktar's main programme, *Sohbetler*, and the programme's style that resembles a forum in which the members have the right to participate 'equally' but respectfully to the leader and other participants, indicate an alignment with Islamic oral tradition and the term *sohbet*:

The term *sohbet* is used in modern, every day Turkish to mean 'conversation'. But in classical sources it has a more nuanced meaning of companionship, including shades of fellowship and discipleship (Trimingham, 1998: 311). There is a sense among Sufis that companionship is linked intimately to conversation, and conversely that conversation engenders companionship. The term '*sohbet*' itself derives from the same Arabic root as the word '*sahaba*', companions, and the terms participate in the same semantic extension. *Sohbet* is what, by definition, companions do. The figure of the companion in Islam is modelled on the Companions of the Prophet, those who were closest to the Prophet during his lifetime, sought out and frequently kept his company, and strove to assimilate his teachings. The Companions' significance can hardly be overstated, since it was they who transmitted the *hadith* and the Quran before these were written down and compiled, ensuring a critical structural role for companionship and face-to-face speech in Islamic disciplines (Silverstein, 2007, p. 43).

That is to say, *sohbet* operates as a way of conveying the sense of belonging to a community and strengthens the ideal of companionship. It is important to note that

talk-show is the television genre that fits best with the Sufi tradition of *sohbet*. Unlike that of Amr Khaled or Zakir Naik, Adnan Oktar's televangelist practice is based on conversation rather than preaching. This is also evident in his friendly and humorous way of talking to his followers unlike the style of his much more 'serious' counterparts. However, in practice Adnan Oktar's *sohbet* is not a conversation amongst equals as his followers are rather submissive and disapproval or criticism of the leader is out of question in this 'harmonious' group.

Oktar's emphasis on Turkish-Islamic morality and the unification of the *Ummah*, which is a reflection of 'high morals', can be taken as an implicit criticism of the current practices of Islam. Oktar's cult presents itself as the ideal form, a constructive kernel, upon which Islam can rejuvenate and update itself in accordance with the complexities of the contemporary world. Oktar often criticises the misdeeds of radical Islamic groups and addresses them as orthodox Islamists who are unable to grasp the prerequisites of the contemporary world:

You need to explain the traditionalist Islam in order for them [people] to see its danger. Extensive caution must be taken [against traditionalist Islamists].  
*Sohbetler*, episode on 22 March 2016.

It is important to highlight that there is no place for what Oktar calls 'orthodox Islamists' in his utopian notion of unification since Islamic unification can include those who are good Muslims although yet unaware of the true ways of practising Islam.

For Oktar, the utopia of unification can come true with the leadership of a *Mehdi* (a saviour) who will come to earth in order to establish an Islamic order, an implicit reference to Oktar himself as the saviour of the *Ummah*. This implicit claim is not specific to Oktar but is adopted by many sheikhs and cult and sect leaders in Turkey. It can be regarded as a desire for religious authority especially where the leader lacks any formal or traditional forms of religious education. In addition, the *Mehdi* as saviour invites the fantasies of a male hero who is the forerunner of heaven and eternity. Notably, utopian notions are not specific to Oktar's televangelism. For example, during the uprisings known as the Arab Spring, Amr Khaled, Mustafa Hosni and Moez Masoud were to 'frame Tahrir Square as an exemplar of a "New Egypt", a utopian space where free expression, social equality, gender parity, religious harmony and an overall sense of order and organization reigned for 18 days' (Moll, 2012; 2013, para.1). But unlike the revivalist notions of utopia by Egyptian televangelists, Oktar's discourse is in accord with A9 TV's main broadcasting policy that promulgates the notion of Turkish-Islamic

morality, and he is deeply committed to the conspiracy theories of Turkish nationalism as he accuses British Intelligence, the PKK and communists of organising hidden plots against Turkey. These appear very often in his programme and his social media pronouncements:

For instance, if Norway is divided, it won't be a big problem. But Turkey is the brain of the universe of Turkishness [Turkic countries], it is connected to them with an organic bond. If Turkey dies, the universe of Turkishness dies. It is also the brain of the Islamic universe [Muslim countries]. If Turkey dies, the Islamic universe would be ruined. *Sohbetler*, episode on 13 January 2016.

### ***Visual extravagancy and creating the pornographic race of women***

Oktar's *sohbet* programmes and other talk shows on the A9 TV channel take place in an extravagantly decorated studio where the members of his cult often serve as the 'décor'. That is not to say that Oktar's followers do not participate in the *sohbet* or actively engage in creating the atmosphere of the programme, rather it is argued that the members of the cult are diligently prepared to contribute towards the visualisation of the sumptuous atmosphere of the programme through their lavish attire. Oktar admits that this worked-on visual image serves a particular purpose:

For instance everything is lavish here... Bottles, glasses, furniture and so on... This is to cheer people up... Men are handsome for instance, women are beautiful [here]... People already see ugly faces, many of them in many places... Ragged people, desperate people... *Sohbetler*, episode on 7 December 2015.

The lavish lifestyle promoted by the cult is also evident in the dress style of Oktar and his followers. Unlike other Islamic televangelists, Oktar wears stylish, expensive suits and encourages his followers to do likewise. He often comments during *Sohbetler* on the clothing of the members and also on the make-up of the female followers, and praises 'tasteful' choices. In this regard, the sexuality of the female members is not something that men must resist or deny, but rather is part of the 'aesthetic' of life and its beauty:

They don't think that joy, fun can exist together with religion (Islam). Religion and laughing, religion and low-cut dresses, religion and art, religion and painting, religion and sculpture, namely anything nice in life cannot be thought as part of religion, they believe. (...) Religion is a system

which gathers all the beauties in life. There is joy in religion, there is fun in religion, there is music, ladies feel comfortable... Women (can) wear low-cut clothes, if she wants to; if she wants, she covers her hair, no one can interfere with one another. *Sohbetler*, episode on 18 March 2015.

In accordance with its extravagant visual quality, Oktar's *Sohbetler* plays out through a rather 'grotesque' format. Oktar expresses his opinion on a contemporary political topic, then plays a song from his laptop to his followers who tap, clap or dance, after which one of the followers provides 'evidence of creation' based on an example from the plant or animal kingdom, followed by a video in which the followers re-stage a scene from a Turkish melodrama for entertainment, and so on.

What is distinctive about Oktar's Islamic cult is the fact that female members of the cult are unveiled and frequently have an artificial look with their silicon gel lips, breast implants, bleach-dyed hair and extravagant make-up. Many of the previous and current members of the cult are known to be professional models. Addressed as *kedicikler* (pussy cats) by Oktar, female members of the cult clearly flirt and make compliments to him both in the



Adnan Oktar's profile picture on his personal twitter account with an 'unusual' outlook as a religious authority.

Accessed at: [https://twitter.com/adnan\\_oktar](https://twitter.com/adnan_oktar)

programme and on social media while many of the female members flatter Oktar's physical appearance and call him 'darling' (*sevgili*). All of

this reinforces the fantasies of the *harem* and *houris* in heaven. One can argue that Oktar's community on television embodies the promise of heaven containing all sorts of earthly pleasures and opportunities available to Muslims who are willing to join them. The fruit bowl placed on Oktar's side table and the drinks in different bottles and glasses resembling those from which alcohol is served on the tables of the members also contribute towards the economy of pleasure provided by the *Sohbetler* programme. In

other words, Oktar's *sohbet* not only appeals to the heart and the soul but also aims at mobilising bodily pleasures.

Despite its liberal discourse on the value of women in society, the re-making of the female members' bodies through cosmetic surgery implies the strong will and control exercised by Oktar and the male members alongside the strong commitment of female members to the aesthetic criteria of the cult. While this cult trains souls and fills them with love of Islam on one hand, it also re-shapes the bodies of female members in particular on the other. In that sense, the female body marks the borders of Oktar's cult in terms of group identity and membership.



Female members of Adnan Oktar's cult known as 'pussy cats'.

Accessed at:

<http://www.internetajans.com/magazin/kediciklerin-sirri-ortaya-cikti-rtuk-herseyi-acikladi-adnan-oktar-kimdir-h298936.html>

The centrality of the female body and sexuality in drawing the boundaries of religious practice is not specific to Oktar's cult. The veil has long stood as an indicator of the boundary of the public sphere in Turkey (Göle, 1997). However, Adnan Oktar's cult is peculiar in terms of the ways in which sexuality is regarded as a recruiting tool to attract potential members and to paint a positive public image. This is unlike the situation with other cult leaders, such as Müslüm Gündüz<sup>4</sup> and Hüseyin Üzmez<sup>5</sup>,

where sexuality and sexual conduct proved to be a challenge that led to the collapse of their religious authority as it focused light on the moral boundary between the inside

<sup>4</sup> On 26 December 1996, the leader of the radical Islamist sect, Aczmendis, Müslüm Gündüz was reported in the media to have committed adultery with Fadime Şahin in Istanbul. This incident was widely construed to be part of a pre-organised media campaign used to build public opinion against radical Islamists and to create a legitimate reason for the imminent military intervention on 28 February 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Hüseyin Üzmez, a columnist on the renowned Islamist newspaper, *Vakit*, was accused of raping a 14-year-old girl and arrested in 2008. The girl's mother was also charged because it was claimed that she forced her daughter to engage in sexual intercourse with Üzmez against her will. His release in 2011 caused uproar from women's and children's rights groups.

and the outside of the group and casted doubt on the leader's credibility to outsiders. This is where television operates as an efficient tool to assure a sense of transparency and provide a particular basis for legitimacy through visibility. That is to say, the extravagance and emphasis on sexuality complement the televangelist's discourse and invite the audience to share in a particular Muslim brotherhood (and sisterhood?) of sexual fantasies and pleasures through the pornographic body image of women.

### Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The Turkish broadcasting landscape has rapidly been transformed during the last decade and the change from an exclusively 'secular' television content, where religion is mostly remembered during Ramadan, to a more pious one in which Islam infiltrates its various genres is still on-going. In this paper, I have explored a cult leader's televangelist practice that is on 'the margin of the marginal' in the field of religious broadcasting in Turkey, rather than the more usual type of broadcasting embraced by a broader audience represented by someone like Nihat Hatipoğlu. Indeed, Turkish televangelist practice, as well as Turkish religious broadcasting in general, is awaiting the attention of further academic scrutiny.

Adnan Oktar and his cult indicate the shifting borders of religion, Islam in particular, towards more 'worldly' and hybrid forms and practices. One can regard this 'worldly' interpretation of religion which is fused by gradually increasing emphasis on sexuality and consumption as a way of secularisation and a form of adapting to changing social conditions with change of neoliberalism and globalisation. Whether it is taken as a way of secularisation or not, television plays an important role in dissemination of such religious practices towards a broader audience. The expanding Turkish religious broadcasting market remarkably illustrates the extent of which television becomes the 'technology of piety' as a platform for everyday encounters with religion as well as being a religious practice in itself.

It is also crucial to address the ways in which viewers receive and interpret televangelist practices. Thomas and Lee (2012) highlight that there are only a few studies on the viewership of televangelism. This is of particular importance in understanding the role of television, as the 'technology of piety', in the everyday engagement with religious practices and the construction of group identity for Muslims or more specifically of different sects. Jouli (2008) shows how pious Turkish women migrants in Germany deeply engage with religious programmes on Turkish television,

such as *Sır Kapısı*, and follow Nihat Hatipoğlu's programmes and buy his DVDs, in a similar way to Arab migrants who view the programmes of Amr Khaled. This would indicate that the Turkish televangelist practice also need to be re-considered in terms of transnationalism and diasporic cultures. Moreover, as Thomas and Lee (2012, p. 1) aptly put it, 'televangelism is no longer limited to television but is increasingly a new media phenomenon—amplified and shaped on social media sites and accessed by mobile technologies in ever more complex circuits of production, distribution, and consumption'. This is also the case with Adnan Oktar as he and his followers efficiently use social media accounts in line with their broadcasts. Hence, televangelism is no longer limited to television but is a media phenomenon, and Adnan Oktar is no exception.

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