

# The Alevi Opening: Concept, Strategy and Process

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## ABSTRACT

*The Alevi, with their varied discourses, are in the midst of a deep intra-comunal debate as to how they will sustain their historical identity, institutional structure and rituals. This study analyzes the problems of Alevi that are mainly shaped along the processes of rapid modernization and social transformation. It also explains the parameters of the ongoing "Alevi Opening" with a focus on the logic and outcomes of the Alevi workshop series. These workshops that brought together the government and the representatives of the Alevi community can be viewed as an effort to learn, understand, and deliberate problems of Alevi citizens. In this framework, the Alevi were brought together to conceptualize and formulate their arguments and ideas into a coherent discourse. The Alevi workshops are therefore an attempt to ease the acceptance of Alevism by all sections of the society and to accelerate the realization of a profound process of empathy.*

The Justice and Development Party (The AK Party) government has been taking noteworthy steps in order to open the necessary channels for an honest and sincere exchange with the Alevi community as part of its democratic opening initiative. For this it organized a series of workshops, bringing together the government and Alevi stakeholders. The process was successfully completed in January 2010. Based on the statements by the participants and the observers, we can assert that these workshops are a historic beginning for the 'rapprochement' between the Alevi and the state as well as the Alevi and the Sunnis.

## A Bundle of Problems

The AK Party government has, on various occasions, shared with the public its view that there is a need for a series of steps to limit the discrimination suffered by the Alevi com-

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and the state (and the government) with the goal of eventually eliminating the problems that concern the Alevi community. Because the Alevis have endured discrimination, wrongdoing, and injustice, the main objective of the 'Opening' is to carve out a larger space for the Alevis within Turkish society and give them equal status on par with other citizens both materially and psychologically. Overall, these recent efforts have fostered new partnerships between the Alevis and the general public.

The Alevi workshops, which brought together the government and the representatives of the Alevi community, are forums for dialogue enabling the Alevis to express and share their grievances with the state and the general public. Indeed, the challenges the Alevis face can no longer be resolved through "quick" and ineffective fixes, minor legal "amendments," short term, superficial solutions, or financial transfers of "donations." These tactics – more often than not – only worsened the situation. The only way that the 'Opening' initiative can reach its full potential is if it is actively supported by the state. However, it is equally true that such an initiative needs a societal consensus as well as a common understanding.

Protecting and strengthening the will to coexist, eliminating human rights violations, accessing the richness of religious, ethical, and cultural values of all Turkish citizens are the required measures to fight against discrimination and create a common feeling of belonging. Each of these measures is equally important. And we must find a common ground that will enable us, as a society, to integrate anti-discrimination efforts into our daily lives. For this to happen we must look towards what we have in common and the future that we will share by adopting effective communication, good will, and patience.

### **Participation and Search for a Concept**

This is what has been done in the Alevi workshops to which over 400 participants took part in 7 meetings. It was essential that the participants significantly represent the diverse positions held by their respective communities. And that they were encouraged to voice their views. This was why the Alevi and Sunni participants, occasionally, engaged in an aggressive and emotional dialogue. We

cannot solve the current dilemmas if we do not hear and respect the ideas of our societal counterparts, even if at first they may appear as socially unacceptable, frivolous, completely hypothetical or even far-fetched in their demands.

Here, each participant could even express the views of a particular faction within his representative group. Special attention was paid when the list of invitees was prepared so that the views of the opinion groups rather than organizational networks would be reflected. Large Alevi groups had to be invited to the meeting. Within these large groups, the diversity of their opinions and discourse had to be brought forth. The purpose of the workshops was not to merely engage in a friendly exchange of ideas with the major groups or with a single representative of a group. What was important for the workshops to function in a healthy way was not to exclude the diversity of profound opinions. Overall, we can comfortably state that the participants fully represented the Alevi community and sensitivities in Turkey. In the same way, the diversity of the Sunni population's views as well as the state's positions were also expressed, as this was all part of the process.

As this type of discussion forum process is a novel experience, we cannot reject many of the claims and even accusations that are being advanced. For centuries, there has been prejudice and deep-seated suspicions against the Alevis. Although there have been previous attempts to address this question, no tangible results were obtained. Also, the will to engage in this discussion by opening up the floor to such diverse declarations and views demonstrates that there is no secret agenda or an attempt to employ "social engineering" projects.

Another noteworthy feature of these workshops is that the Alevi grievances were treated in such a way that no particular judgment, value, or opinion was privileged or avoided, and every opinion group was treated objectively. Relying on pre-made prescriptions and top-down perspectives with "assimilationist" intentions was not an acceptable approach. It was expected of the invitees to bring their knowledge and experience within the format of a mutual dialogue. In fact, during the sessions, no datum except the participants' knowledge, experience, and discourse was taken into consideration. All these exchanges were made on the basis of empathy, compassion, and in good faith.

Although, at the outset some Alevi organizations expressed their concerns regarding the planning of the workshops. This forum could not, realistically, respond satisfactorily to all the objections, and their rationales. It is quite difficult to judge from these objections who is trying to be at the forefront of their group; who is putting their political gains first; who is simply acting without thinking;



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who is choosing to remain outside because of their personal views; and lastly, who is truly not in touch with either history or today's realities. Nevertheless, the goal was to try and ensure that the state listened to the negotiations between various parties on a variety of issues and that the Alevis' demands made common sense in the eyes of society. Critical thresholds can only be met through this kind of mutual respect<sup>1</sup>.

However, there were attempts to undermine the workshops. These were part of a smear campaign to unsettle and discredit the participants. Actions included: digging up an individual participant's personal past all the way back to their birth registers in order to use anything in their past against them, attempting to decipher the "hidden" intentions of participants by investigating the subjects of the sessions, preventing some participants from being involved, and fabricating stories that can only be qualified as "back alley politics." These unscrupulous attempts reveal that certain individuals still live in a world closed to discussion, as their minds are filled with fear and deep-rooted prejudices. The initial tendency at the beginning of the workshops was to regroup around partisan views, which is usually the culture of such deliberations. Yet, surprisingly, the participants rose above this kind of conduct and made observations based on shared human experiences, which is an indication that there is room for positive change.

## Analysis of the Situation

The results of the workshops have allowed the main concerns of the Alevis to surface, which will lead to a constructive response from Turkish society as a whole. Workshops conducted within the framework of the Alevi Opening attracted a serious amount of attention. These workshops can be viewed as an effort to learn, understand, and deliberate. In this framework, the Alevis were brought together to conceptualize and formulate their arguments and ideas into a coherent discourse. The results of the whole process along with all the workshops will be reported as a road map by the project coordinator.

The attention gained by the workshops is very important. Above all, these meetings prioritized tolerance of diverse voices over the usual *modus operandi* of problem solving by imposing a set language. The real expectation from the workshops, by including different proponents in the discussion and widen the sphere of consultation, was to integrate both knowledge and emotions into the debate.

Some of the criticisms about the length of the process are being voiced by those who are convinced that the Alevi issue is a simple matter. According to this viewpoint, the Alevis' demands are obvious and many Alevi organizations are in clear agreement about their demands on this subject.

When the minutes of the workshops are made available to the general public, it will be clear that the Alevis do not have a unified discourse. At a cursory level, this can also be said about other faith groups. However, when it comes to Alevism, the existing diversity is problematic. In the past, difficulties emanating from diversity within Alevism have always been treated as a weakness or a flaw. Instead, these difficulties should be confronted and treated comprehensively. Here, the real problem surfaces when there is a discussion as to what the Alevis need as a community. The diversity of "Alevisms" encompasses beliefs that are so divergent from one another they may not be viewed as Alevism. Today, it is not well understood that one of the most challenging issues the Alevis face in the future is the "issue of continuity." This stems from the diversity of views among Alevis themselves of the role of Alevism. There are those who would like to establish Alevism as a purely religious group, and there are also those who would like to transform it into a completely secular movement. In short, there is disagreement on whether Alevism is a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, or an ethno-religious structure.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion begins with, "what is Alevism?" The contentions over the definitions of Alevism run very deep and this sensitivity carries the risk of bringing Alevism and Alevis themselves into a state of permanent uncertainty. It is still not

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known what kind of arguments Alevism will use to overcome their centuries-old problems. The expectations about how the Alevism's demands, which are constantly voiced through the fear of losing their identity and assimilation, will be met are still uncertain.

Unfortunately, none of the Alevism demands has been clearly understood by other faith groups. Because of this lack of empathy, Alevism have been harshly judged and given labels based on the patronizing attitude of other faith groups. Religious groups that insist on seeing Alevism as “*Rafizis*,” “perverted,” and “heretical” have always held the view that they are themselves “orthodox” (meaning followers of the “Truth”) and the Alevism are “heterodox” (meaning followers of the “False”).

It should not be forgotten that the Alevism too have always placed themselves at the fringes of mainstream belief systems. With a new sensitivity deriving from competition and tension, demands to reshape Alevism too rapidly will not create an opportunity for a healthy rethinking of the tradition. Search for a quick solution and enthusiasm to meet a few basic demands may seem meaningful emotionally. However, when it comes to the future of Alevism, this kind of rashness will damage the important steps to reconstruct a faith.

The Alevism, with their varied discourses, are in the midst of an intra-communal debate as to how they will sustain their historical identity, institutional structure, and rituals. The following Alevism expectations, which range from re-structuring of the *dedes*' spiritual leadership to employment of the *dedes* as religious employees, from planning of *cemevis* as places of worship to the demand for an apology by the state for all the injustices done to them, represent the range of Alevism demands.<sup>3</sup>

Modern researchers, who treat Alevism as a modern representation of Alevism oral culture, tend to view Alevism as imbued with tradition but divorced from theology in its historical evolution. Efforts to either strip Alevism of theology or to create a new theology for Alevism based on political and religious discussions perpetuate and even deepen the current dilemma.

### Hesitations and Reactions

The majority of Alevism have found the ‘Opening’ to be meaningful. However, certain Alevism groups are very hesitant or have even expressed great anger towards

this same process. The majority have emphasized that they would extend to the government the necessary support for the 'Opening.' Even though those who are responding negatively are marginal, we should still try to understand and evaluate their positions. This is why we must not neglect or overlook the historical and social structures of the Alevi communities, as they may hold the answers to the resistance among certain Alevi groups.

The traditional structure of the Alevi has been thoroughly transformed by modern conditions

Today, questions as to what Alevism really is and how it should be defined are no longer an issue concerning only the Alevi community. The Sunnis and even all other Turkish citizens are directly concerned with this question. Both the limitations of viewing Alevism with a Sunni perspective and the efforts to confine it to a single definition from among different Alevisms clearly pose problems. Because of this, Alevism with its historical and theological tradition should be treated by distinguishing the differences deriving from the Alevi diversity. As is the case with the intention to assimilate Alevism into Sunnism, the intention to break Alevism off from the general Islamic referential framework is part of a political agenda. There is a dual tendency to either equate the concept of God with Sunnism itself or to distinguish the Alevi "God" from mainstream Islamic thought. Both are problematic approaches. This conflict stems from the kind of thinking that tries to confine Alevi within a well-defined space, making it difficult to recognize the reality of Alevism.

### **Alevi and the Problems Related to the Modernization Process**

The discussions on Alevism are not purely theological and theoretical, but also have important social ramifications. The Alevi are confronted with the new realities of modern culture. Changes in conceptions of the world, religion, rituals and thought indicate a rebirth of Alevism. But these differences have opened the door to theoretical studies that are often superficial and lack depth. In the process of modernization, the Alevi did away with their traditional authorities, and now they are using knowledge in a more modern manner in finding a solution to their religious and social problems. This modern approach has impacted the behavior of the Alevi, who are now profoundly connected to modernity.

As far as Alevism is concerned, the experience of modernity is quite important as an indicator of the current transformation of an oral tradition. The Alevi experiences, in the context of modernity, show how a culture can become alienated



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from its religious roots. In parallel to the transformation of traditional structures, Alevism, too, became subject to a series of serious changes.

Considering the main benchmarks of this change, what is clear is that the traditional structure of the Alevism has been thoroughly transformed by modern conditions. The religious, linguistic, and cultural codes of the community have been turned upside down. Alevism has been experiencing a process of a comprehensive transformation because of modernization. The most fundamental consequence of the modernization process for the Alevism is that their traditional cultural heritage and values have undergone a serious jolt. The “secrets” of Alevism, so to speak, have been revealed. Alevism, shaped by the authority of secrets, has now been damaged. Many of the basic features of Alevism’s existence, foremost among them *dede-ism*, have faced a loss of imagery and content. Still, it is not possible to argue that Alevism is set to disappear. What is at stake here is a transformation of Alevism, and an emergence of various Alevisms. It is also clear that the conditions, which would allow for a single answer to the “which Alevism” question, are gradually disappearing.<sup>4</sup> This situation can be connected to many reasons such as the attraction of urban life, immigration, political turbulences, and cultural disintegration. In the end, traditional features of Alevism are consistently being weakened. Paradoxically, it is now possible to speak of “a modern Alevism.”

Within the context of modernity, they are re-interpreting their history and institutional structures in search for answers that could be functional. The urban and rural realities of Alevism today are paving the way for the emergence of many new Alevisms that are diverse and different from one another. Unfulfilled political demands, the position of the state with respect to Alevism, and the Sunni arguments and approaches have played an important role in this differentiation.<sup>5</sup>

Although, modernity has enabled the Alevism to engage in the public sphere, it has also caused additional challenges. The awareness of this dilemma reminds us of the syncretic structure of Alevism and leads to confusion as to what direction the future of this community will take. This is, indeed, the main problem today. One of the first questions is what kind of a tradition will be engendered given the opportunities of modernity. This is not an easy question based on the Alevism’s history, sociological reality, and sensitivities. And this is an important question because it opens up the discussion to determine how modernity affects Alevism and then to address the current fragmentation of the Alevi community.<sup>6</sup>



## Areas of Opportunities

The Alevi 'Opening' has drawn a lot of public attention because of the complex challenges the Alevis face, the determination to obtain results, and its novel method. Some of the steps that are likely to be taken are as follows: improvement of the conditions of the *cemevis*, elimination of the obstacles before the status of *cemevis* as houses of worship, public acknowledgement and appreciation of the leading Alevi men of faith by the state, and strengthening of the role and status of these leaders. Because the Alevis feel that they have historically faced discrimination, Alevis have always been perceived by other social groups as well as the state as a weak link. Historical discrimination forced them to be content with very little socially and politically. Thus, there is a certain degree of exhaustion on the part of the Alevis, which can be overcome by respecting their human rights.

The expectation of those who initiated this opening was that the Alevis would not shy away from accepting these steps. But some Alevis regarded these steps as "political maneuvers" and "manipulations," believing that the government was attempting to politically co-opt the Alevi community. The result of this confusion and mistrust was that Alevis were under the impression that they could not sit at the negotiation table with the state, and especially with the AK Party government. This was aggravated because certain radical Alavi groups were competing with each other. They used themes, such as loyalty, treason, exploitation, and hope, to criticize at every opportunity the 'Opening' process and the related workshops initiated by the government. Those who supported the process were accused of allying themselves with the political power. They went so far as to claim that the state wanted to remold the Alevis. The Alevi people were called upon to protest openly against the potential consequences of this process.

But one sober note, the Alevi community leaders always emphasized certain demands in terms of their expectations from the state and the political power. This catalog of demands remained constant, including a share from the state budget for their clergy, recognition of *cemevis* as houses of worship, either the abolition of religion classes or the inclusion of Alevis in these classes in the public school curriculum. Ultimately, these demands should be met because secularism implies that the state needs to treat all faiths equally.

## Political Criticism

It is common knowledge that Alevis have historically experienced discrimination. However, the problem today resides in the internalization of this discrimina-

tion by the Alevi themselves, which we can be described as a “learned despair.” Their insistence on voicing their demands, their search for a discourse, and their demand for equal citizenship did not find an appropriate outlet. Instead, they find themselves wedged between a mythical/romantic ideal and limited representative institutions. The reaction by the Alevi to this mentality not only produced tensions but also triggered a sentiment of anger. Any attitude, suggestion, or discourse geared towards securing the Alevi’s permanent existence in these lands was suppressed.

Alevi are known for having a fragmented organizational structure, diverse rituals, and uncertainties about their practices of faith. In this context, some of the fundamental tasks for Alevi are the following: rebuilding their historical memory, formulating a strong set of cultural references instead of ephemeral searches, recreating their rituals, and rethinking Alevism.<sup>7</sup> All these efforts have to be carried out, being fully aware that the Alevi are geographically dispersed, there are many contradictions within the “community discourse,” and new ideas are continuously rejected. As long as rural Alevi remain distant from the political debate that would allow their traditional world to integrate into the public sphere, these efforts will be mishandled by inflexible ideological groups, which operate counter to the Alevi community’s best interests. Moreover it should be noted that referring to another community as the “other” and the thinking that flows from this type of frame of mind leaves little room for “self criticism.”

To overcome strong pockets of resistance, the array of choices offered by the democratic platform is essential for the Alevi to improve their lot. The Alevi’s traditional rhetoric that distinguishes groups outside of their community seriously limits their ability to hear the opinions of others. The Alevi community as well as all other communities in Turkey are all equal citizens. As such there is need for reconciliation, not only regarding their respective religious beliefs but also their expectation in building a common future.

How are we to understand the challenges the Alevi community faces when we look at the process from the outside? The state had not taken a serious step to remedy the situation for the Alevi. It was unavoidable that insufficient and unqualified initiatives would result in suspicion and a negative attitude towards any new attempts. However, as far as the declarations of the government are concerned, the state was determined to take considerable steps in this matter. And if there were to be a beginning in this process, the conception of a productive dialogue could be the first step. The government resolved to take these steps not when it was politically weak and in need of everyone’s votes, but, on the contrary,

at a time when it was politically strong. From the perspective of those who were anxious to reach the goal, there was no other choice but to evaluate the current situation in a cool-headed manner. The choice presented to the state was to either emphasize an oppositional discourse filled with dissent, and objections or to search for an ethical dialogue that would allow for a serious consultative consciousness.

The Alevi ‘Opening’ and the workshops created an avenue to find the optimal way to express the Alevi community’s concerns

The fact of the matter is that neither the state nor the AK Party government, prior to the workshops, had a well-thought out discourse that would resonate with the Alevis. In this context, the need to find ways to bridge the communication gap was limited to what had already been tried. The Alevi ‘Opening’ and the workshops created an avenue to find the optimal way to express the Alevi community’s concerns. The general feeling after each workshop was indeed very positive. Alevis had started to ask themselves serious questions as opposed to agendas prepared for them. The consequences of certain statements, which were purely responses to popular expectations, were overtly political. Some of these expectations are as follows: allocation of state funds for certain foundations and associations, participation of state officials in the Hacı Bektaş Veli ceremonies, abandoning of the speeches of “if loving Ali is Alevism, then we are all Alevis” and implementing affirmative action in order to recognize Alevis’ religious and cultural identity. All these attempts were initial temporary solutions and they were not actually based on a profound rhetoric or even on in-depth thinking. Instead, they were temporary political measures.<sup>8</sup>

This discussion between the State and Alevis is not only necessary but also an integral part of deliberative democracy, which is becoming more commonplace around the world. It would be both a virtue and a task for the State not to try and control this unique community but instead to include them in a new dialogue. Deliberations should reflect an ethical approach that prioritizes the desire to speak to one another, full disclosure by everyone, accommodating all voices, conversation, empathy, and shared gains.

### **How to Resolve the Alevi Problem**

It would be more appropriate to perceive the Alevi ‘Opening’ as a beginning. Thus, it is necessary to eliminate the general tendency of seeing Alevis as a problematic, disputed, and complex group. Instead, Alevism should be understood

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through its own genuine definitions, criteria and nuances, without disregarding its historical claims.

Alevism should be considered within its traditional as well as its modern structure. However, what is more important is to unearth what kind of theological and historical formulations Alevism is based

on. It is a choice of methodology, which should not be neglected, to obtain an accurate idea of this phenomenon, so it can be discussed and debated. Unfortunately, the contributions of religious sciences to scholarly research on Alevism have not been able to play an effective role in enabling a genuine opening. The way in which Alevis are seen through the lens of a sect or a singular perspective is unproductive. Thus, Alevism should be treated based on how Alevis see themselves.

We should, once again, underline that the Alevis have not always been able to voice their opinions and beliefs. Hiding their beliefs has been among their main strategies in various places and time periods. Seeking to put the blame for ostracizing this community in Turkey would be difficult and counter-productive.

Undoubtedly, this requires entering into a new contact with history, theology, and the reality of modern life. In this context, the difficulty in arriving at a perspective that every Alevi would agree upon is obvious. It is also clear that this might be caused by both the traditional and modern structures of Alevism. However, as long as the sincere intention is to reach the truth and obtain reconciliation, harsh arguments can air longstanding grievances, clarify positions, and lead to mutual understanding.

## Conclusion

Today, the Alevi issue is being treated in a different manner. The subject is being discussed and watched carefully, not only in Alevi neighborhoods but also within the larger Turkish society. This process is initiating new discussions. There is an increasing effort to understand Alevis with greater attention. Cautiousness is being replaced by curiosity and fear is being replaced by care and attention. Unexpected and unprecedented developments are taking place. Alevis see that Sunnis can considerably contribute to the solution of their problems. And the Sunnis appear prepared to embrace the Alevis. Thus, the Alevi opening has increased expectations in an unexpected way.

The Alevi workshops are an attempt to ease the acceptance of Alevism by all sectors of the society and to accelerate the realization of a profound process of empathy. They have already enabled society-wide discussions on Alevism and created a climate of compassion, care, and tolerance embedded in the very codes of Turkish society. Thus, many of the Alevi demands are being treated as fair expectations by the general public. A conviction and a choice of words sensitive to the culture of the Alevi community require taking advantage of different tools, possibilities, and opportunities. Alevis, who have long been held hostage to framing their grievances within a certain perception of history and terminology belonging to a specific worldview, are considering the viewpoints of others and broadening their own perspectives.

The fact that a community shaped by neglect historically is, today, seeking ways of remedying their situation is a promising development. These opportunities were created because knowledge was acquired, which permitted a rapprochement between the communities.

The value of these new opportunities should not be underestimated. There are a lot of reasons to be optimistic. Perhaps for the first time, Alevis are experimenting with how it is to come out of their individual history. The nature of Alevism, shaped by a history of discrimination, deprivation, and injustice, is being transformed by a new roadmap opened to new experiences. Alevis are not only going beyond their own history but also coming to terms with the histories of others. A renewed effort to put forth a genuine discourse and history of the Alevis is being strengthened through the diverse discussions fostered by the Opening process.

With this new process, we can conclude that certain beliefs, organizational structures, and cultural convictions will be discussed and debated first among the Alevis, and then, among the general public. As much work is left to be done, it is necessary to prepare for level-headed negotiations and serious discussions on how Alevis will own up to the challenge of taking their destiny into their hands and how they will sustain their relationship with the realities of the world they live to ameliorate their own existence.

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