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Can the Alevis Speak? The Politics of Representation in Early Writings on Alevism

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This study historicizes and contextualizes the contrasting representations of Alevism in the early writings of Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge, a Protestant missionary, and Baha Said Bey, a Turkish activist and researcher. Both Trowbridge and Baha Said undertook extensive research on Alevi culture in the early twentieth century. Though their works appear to be “benevolent” endeavors, giving voice to the Alevi subaltern, by first studying the political and cultural backgrounds of Trowbridge and Baha Said, this article exposes the cultural and ideological motivations that influenced their studies. It then focuses on how these political concerns are expressed in representations of Alevism. Given the dearth of postcolonial and critical perspectives on Alevism, investigating the praxis of representation can help trace overtly political concerns beyond their scholarly treatments. Based on Gayatri Spivak’s theorization in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” this paper scrutinizes how these writings negate the agency of Alevis and portray them as waiting for salvation by external proxies – be they Western missionaries or the Turkish government.

Keywords: representation; historiography; Alevism; Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge; Baha Said Bey; Committee of Union and Progress

Alevism¹ has become the locus of an intensifying academic industry, which has grown even more pronounced since the so-called Alevi Revival of the 1990s, a period marked by increased self-awareness among Turkey’s Alevis. The burgeoning scholarly work on the subject has become a substantial academic field in its own right. This new-found academic interest has brought to the fore the first generation of scholarly works on Alevism, penned by Western missionaries and Turkish nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, these writings are treated in subsequent works as transparent reflections on Alevi culture without being systematically and critically reviewed (Karakaya-Stump 2002, 301).

In order to contribute to a more discerning treatment of early writings on Alevism, this article focuses on the works of Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge and Baha Said Bey, which are often cited as representations of, and verbal interventions into, the vernacular life of the Alevis. Although Trowbridge and Baha Said both studied Alevi-Bektashi² culture in Anatolia during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, they arrived at vastly different conclusions. Relying on a comparative textual analysis and postcolonial theory, this article challenges the authoritative voice projected in such works and demonstrates that political concerns affect different observations of the same phenomena. Despite their different representations of Alevism, this

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article also reveals a point of convergence: both authors claim to give a voice to the Alevis, thereby stripping them of any agency and portraying them as waiting for emancipation.

Portrait and proxy

Though not adequately acknowledged in the field of historiography,³ theorizations and critiques of the concept of representation have resonated across cultural and postcolonial studies (Said 1978; Hall 1997; Spivak 1999). As a semiotic projection, representation mediates knowledge and values. Moreover, what is significant to note is that representation “exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy” (Mitchell 1995, 21). A representation cannot serve as an exact substitute for the reality because, by re-presenting a phenomenon, one recontextualizes and filters it by including some elements while excluding others. Through such mediation, the world is reconstructed according to various (individual and collective) interpretive frameworks.

Representations – from artistic depictions to news and scholarly analyses – cannot be divorced from political and ideological questions and demand interrogation. The political aspects of scholarly representations have been extensively scrutinized by Edward Said, founder of postcolonial thought, in his pioneering work, *Orientalism* (1978). There, Said deconstructs the West’s “authority” to represent the Orient and draws out Orientalism as a long-standing discourse that has enabled the West to “manage and produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively” (2). This pursuit of knowledge was not only making the Orient available and familiar to the West on the latter’s own terms, but also distancing it by imagining it as absolutely Other. Orientalism, according to Said, has been reinforced by scholarly works from post-Enlightenment British and French texts to current Anglo-American social studies, which have represented and constituted the Orient according to the West’s own subject position. This, in turn, promoted conditions for imperial exploitation. In this reckoning, unlike the Foucauldian relationship between knowledge and power (negating human agency), Said views Orientalist theory and practice as “willed human work” and as “a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns” (14–15).

In her groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988),⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pushes Said’s criticism further and questions the discursive practices of “First World” intellectuals who represent and speak on behalf of “Third World” indigenous subaltern groups. Spivak describes representation in her discussion of Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in which Marx focuses on the absence of class-consciousness among small peasant proprietors in nineteenth-century French agrarian society and concludes that, “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (Spivak 1999, 259). Spivak argues that representation, in Marx’s usage, has a double meaning, which is conflated and confused in English translations and discussions (with reference to the debate between Foucault and Deleuze): “[...] representation or rhetoric as tropology and as persuasion. *Darstellen* belongs to the first constellation, *vertreten* – with stronger suggestions of substitution – to the second” (259). While *darstellen* refers to “re-presentation” and standing in for, *vertreten* rather means political representation, and a total agency “to speak for” (256). Representation as “portrait” (or *Darstellung*, pl. *Darstellungen*) and “proxy” (or *Vertretung*) are related to each other (224).

At this juncture, Spivak notes the dialectical relationship between representation as portrait and proxy: “The staging of the world in representation – its scene writing, its *Darstellung* – dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes,’ paternal proxies, agents of power – *Vertretung*” (264). It implies that, within any attempt to represent a group politically, there is a concomitant semiotic process whereby that group is depicted in a particular way. *Darstellung* constitutes disempowered groups as coherent political subjects and redefines them in line with

the values attached to the proxy-cum-savior. Accordingly, in order to acquire agency or gain some recognition, disempowered groups are supposed to subordinate themselves to the voice of their proxy, who will “speak for” them.

Representations of Alevism as self-proclaimed emancipatory projects

Without falling into the trap of assuming a fixed and essentialized identity for Alevi, the concept of representation provides a more fluid approach, allowing for mobility and the possibility of reading otherwise. By taking Spivak’s theorization as its point of departure, this study proposes that early writings on Alevism are examples of *Darstellung* that help constitute specific proxies. Imbued with power relations, these portraits are not immune from being implicitly value-laden, like any scholarly representation, and also reveal the critical assumptions and values of the researchers. While Spivak’s approach enables us to identify the appropriations and distortions behind the universalist claims in early writings on Alevism, more vitally, it allows us to question how these scholars constitute themselves as speakers for the subaltern Alevi subject. Alevi are thus silenced and represented as being in need of external intervention for emancipation.

These scholarly writings demonstrate the efforts by which Alevi are made “legible” and objectified in order to be “read” by others. This textualization constitutes a universalized, fixed identity. Among the early writings, this study examines the representations of Alevi by Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge and Baha Said Bey, an American missionary and Turkish activist–researcher, respectively. In their ethnographic studies, Trowbridge and Baha Said examine the Alevi in nearly the same period and geographical area, both collecting their data by interviewing or observing Alevi. However, they arrived at different conclusions.

The case selection is significant for two reasons. First, Trowbridge’s study, which focuses on the Christian impact on Alevism, and Baha Said’s study, which accords a special place for Alevism in the Turkish ethno-religious imaginary, are not random selections. Rather, they are typical examples of two scholarly perspectives, each exploring Alevism as part of a larger religious context. Trowbridge’s study does not contradict others of the time and reflects the common approach of Western observers, who portray Alevi as proto- or crypto-Christians. For instance, Protestant Minister George W. Dunmore (1857, 220), who arrived in Turkey in 1852, presents the Kızılbaş as respecting the Bible and disguising themselves under the mask of Islam due to political pressures. When it comes to Baha Said, he is not alone in projecting the Alevi as bearers of a pure Turkish culture. Nationalist imprints can also be observed in Alevi studies by other early republican scholars, such as Ziya Gökalp, Fuad Köprülü, Hilmi Ziya Ülken, and Yusuf Ziya Yörükkan (Ateş 2008, 78; Azak 2010, 142–143). Beyond offering a critical reflection on the specific writings of Trowbridge and Baha Said, studying these two researchers can offer additional insights into the literature produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A second reason for this article’s focus on Trowbridge and Baha Said is that the central concerns of their works reverberate in subsequent studies on Alevism. In the literature on Alevism, despite occasional shifts in discourse, “the underlying concerns about boundaries and differences have been surprisingly stable until today” (Dressler 2013, 39). Yuri Stoyanov’s study (2010, 268) illustrates how contemporary literature on Alevi-Bektashi culture in the Balkans and Turkey appears to “resurrect the thesis of a formative Christian heterodox/heretical impact on Kızılbaş culture (and to some extent on Bektashism) in its early and uncritical version,” much like Trowbridge’s account. On the other hand, Baha Said’s writings, associating Alevism with pre-Islamic Turkish culture, “constituted the basic reference texts of the nationalist historiography on the Alevi issue” (Ateş 2008, 77). This representation of

Alevism as the authentic projection of secular Turkish culture was widely circulated and championed in Turkey against the rise of political Islam in the 1990s (Erdemir 2005, 938–939).

Given the constant references to Trowbridge and Baha Said in recent Alevi studies, their treatments demand further critique and scrutiny. As Afer Karakaya-Stump (2002, 301) states, what is important and essential “is to try to understand the [political/ideological] concerns and limitations of their writers.” Approaching these works as representations can help tease out the embedded meanings conveyed by the authors of these texts. Moreover, while delving into the subjectivity resonating throughout their works, it is crucial to recognize that both negate the agency of the Alevis. The following section deals with how both Trowbridge and Baha Said offer *Darstellungen* of Alevism in a way that portrays the Alevis as parallel to the values of “paternal proxies” and in need of saviors.

A missionary from Antep: Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge

Among Western observers, it was American missionaries who first entered the world of the Kızılbaş-Alevis in Anatolia and studied their religious particularities extensively (Kieser 2002, 395; Dressler 2013, 31). For these early observers, the motivation to enter the “Bible lands” stemmed from their deep adherence to millennialism, which prophesies the second advent of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The required steps to that end include “the fall of Islam,” “worldwide evangelization, the struggle for global Christian unity, and the restoration of Israel” and make their interest in the Near East “self-evident” (Kieser 2010, 16). In 1810, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was founded in Boston with the aim of promoting millennial aspirations of evangelism, and deployed two missionaries to Izmir (in Western Anatolia) in 1819 (41). Just before setting sail, Levi Parsons, one of these missionaries, declared his intention to “Destroy the Ottoman Empire and nothing but a miracle will prevent the Jews’ immediate return from the four winds of heaven” (Marr 2006, 83).

In 1830, when an agreement between the USA and the Ottoman Empire secured preaching rights for Protestants, the ABCFM gained an expansive territory from the Balkans to the Near East over which to spread their teachings. Nevertheless, missionary activities gained momentum only after 1848, when the Ottoman Empire recognized Protestants as a separate religious community or *millet*. This status was later confirmed in an imperial edict in 1850 (Bayrak 2004, 284–285).

Despite pragmatic shifts in ABCFM’s target groups – from Muslims and Jews to Near Eastern Christian minorities – proselytization remained an “original and immediate aim of the missionary project” (Dressler 2013, 36). The early missionaries were confident that their struggle would bring about an apocalyptic achievement. Still, they recognized that it was just as difficult to spread Protestantism among Sunni Muslims as it was among Jews. Moreover, Ottoman law punished apostasy from Islam and conversion to any other religion. Therefore, non-Muslim people living in the Ottoman lands and, in part, heterodox Muslim communities were targeted. American missionaries saw Alevis as an “open door to ‘reach [Sunni] Islam’” in the next stage (Kieser 2001, 92).

The initial missionary perceptions of Islam were based on observations in cities such as Istanbul, where orthodox Sunni culture dominated. Life in Alevi villages was quite remote from what the missionaries had witnessed before (Karolewski 2008, 435). Villages without mosques, women not totally concealing their hair, and men with beards and moustaches in non-Sunni fashion were quite peculiar to them. American missionaries seem to have been “deeply touched by this ‘unique people,’ its whole-hearted hospitality, its fine tenderness during the *djem* [religious assembly] and its persistent wish to be instructed by the

missionaries” (Kieser 2002, 395). Kieser (2001, 94) refers to these early encounters as “a long-lasting love story between Alevis and Protestants,” something unusual for missionaries who took a dim view even of other Christian sects at the time.⁵

Alongside this affirmative approach, the most distinctive thesis in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writings of American missionaries⁶ was the depiction of Kızılbaş-Alevis as “being proto- or crypto-Christians, and/or descendents from ancient inhabitants of Anatolia” (Dressler 2013, 38–39). To reach this conclusion, the early missionaries had essentially focused on the similarities they observed in theological underpinnings. This representation of Alevis as proto- or crypto-Christians contributed to the cause of the missionaries in two ways. First, it served the missionary agenda and legitimated their activities (Stoyanov 2010, 265). By spreading Christian teachings, the missionaries assumed they were helping Alevis return to their “original” identity. Second, because missionary reports mostly addressed their home institution, missionaries could attract more funding and investment through depictions that drew strong parallels between Alevism and Christianity, which might suggest that conversion was possible.

Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge was just one missionary among many who traveled from village to village in Anatolia, reporting his observations. The Trowbridges were an established family and had been among the first to arrive in America. They made their home in one of the first settlements in New Haven, Connecticut. Stephen’s father, Tillman Conkling Trowbridge, was first appointed to Istanbul by the ABCFM and then to Antep, a city in south-eastern Anatolia, as President of Central Turkey College. The family book, published in 1908, describes Tillman Conkling’s dedication: “His whole soul was wrapped up in the college, which he believed would surely become a great instrumentality in Christianizing the whole Turkish Empire” (Trowbridge 1908, 610).

His son Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge was born on May 28, 1881, in Antep. In 1895, he traveled to the USA to study at Princeton University and completed his degree in 1902. After studying for the ministry at Hartford Theological Seminary, he served as an assistant to Dr S. P. Cadman in the Central Congregational Church of Brooklyn, New York, and then as Minister of St Paul’s Chapel. Trowbridge married Blanche Louise Horton in Brooklyn on June 21, 1906, and returned to Turkey for missionary purposes shortly thereafter. The young couple received their commission from the ABCFM through the Central Congregational Church of Brooklyn and arrived in Antep⁷ on December 6, 1906. While making their home in Antep, they carried out missionary activities in central Anatolia. Trowbridge was responsible for “touring the villages and remote towns of the field to preach the Gospel and cooperate with the churches which have been founded in twenty various centers” (Trowbridge 1908, 663).

In 1909, Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge’s article, “The Alevis, or Deifiers of Ali,” was published in the *Harvard Theological Review*. His research later also appeared in 1921 in *The Muslim World*. It relies on findings gathered through frequent, in-depth interviews with a teacher who the author claims is well known. Trowbridge’s reflections on his own educational background make his missionary aspirations far from secret to the reader. He ends the 1909 article with a quote attributed to Jesus: “There shall be one flock and one shepherd.” This reveals the schema of both the writer and the article, which is quite typical in its representation of this religious group as proto-Christians (Trowbridge 1909, 353). Specifically, this article revolves around two theses: (1) Alevism is a religion apart from Islam and (2) Alevism is closer to and resembles Christianity more than it does Islam.

Like other missionaries of his time, Trowbridge (1909, 340) positions Alevism outside Islam. This representation of Alevism as “a religion apart from Islam” is demonstrated by its contradictions with Sunni orthodox Islamic belief and practices within his framing. For instance, Trowbridge states that Muslims describe God by using negatives, through the denial

of all human notions, whereas Alevis describe God by referring to positive attributes and the great teachings of incarnation (345). In Trowbridge's portrayal, Alevis do not believe in paradise or houris (heavenly maidens), as taught by the Sunnis, and their understanding of jihad is one of inner war with the *kuffār* (sing.: *kāfir*, unbeliever) in their own hearts rather than an external manifestation (348–349). When it comes to practice, Alevis are depicted as not observing the five pillars of Islam, including reciting the *Shahāda*, a declaration of faith; praying five times a day; keeping the fast during the month of Ramadan; *Zakat* (almsgiving) and the Hajj (the pilgrimage), as incumbent upon every Muslim who is financially and physically able (351). Likewise, they are shown as not believing in sacrifice, except of a lamb when the Dede (the local religious leader) comes to the religious gathering (346–347). Moreover, the same article also notes that, unlike traditional forms of Islamic practice, no particular time or place is prescribed for prayer among the Alevis and there is no need for ablution. Praying to God is thus treated as spontaneous rather than ritualistic (346). Finally, when positioning Alevism outside of Islam, Trowbridge also hints at differences in social life. In this framing, whereas Sunni Muslims demonstrate a degree of acceptance of polygamy, according to Alevi customs, monogamy is incumbent, girls receive education, and gender equality is commonly respected (348).

While differentiating Alevism from Sunni Islam, Trowbridge further refrains from identifying any affinity to Shi'ism. For instance, he notes that whereas the Shi'a believe that atonement may be hoped for through Hassan and Hussein, the Alevis believe that it may be achieved only through Ali's spirit, "in the sense of intercession through Ali" (Trowbridge 1909, 341). When quoting the interviewees, Trowbridge also adds that the Shi'a believe Ali performed many miracles and that he was appointed successor and executor to the Prophet. However, according to Trowbridge, the Alevis regard Ali as "the spirit existing in all prophecy and as the incarnation of God" (341). Trowbridge eventually determines: "Here is a religion other than Islam, recognizing and accepting Muhammad" (352).

By disassociating Alevism from both Sunni and Shi'a Islam, Trowbridge situates Alevism as more closely resembling Christianity instead. The main similarity he presents is the belief in incarnation. In this argument, "God exists in his sovereignty (*mulk*). For this, a body (*jasad*) is necessary," so Ali appears as "the incarnation of God" (Trowbridge 1909, 341). Second, Trowbridge writes on the belief in the preexistence of Ali, which is similar to statements about Christ found in the Gospel of John. The belief was that, although every prophet was inviting people to the truth separately, they were acting "in form to [themselves], but in meaning to Ali" (343–344). Ali is preexistent, exists in the present, and can be seen by his own people through the Holy Spirit, which appears as a third similarity between Alevism and Christianity. Trowbridge quotes his interviewee, an Alevi teacher, describing the Holy Spirit "[...] as the light which shines into a room, the sun itself not being visible. But you cannot say that the light which we enjoy is the sun itself; it is only a result" (344). Finally, Trowbridge depicts Ali and Christ as similar in the Alevi and Christian belief systems, respectively, and states that, "Ali is essentially the same as Jesus" and, reminiscent of the atonement of Christ in Christianity, the Alevis believe that their sins will be forgiven through the intercession of Ali (341). Similarly, the life of Ali is compared to the struggles of Jesus and his disciples.⁸ At the end of the article, Trowbridge concludes: "By their own confession Alevis are closer to Christianity than to Islam. They expect an eventual compact with Christianity but not with Sunni Muhammedanism" (353).

Trowbridge not only establishes such similarities between Alevism and Christianity, but also juxtaposes some common beliefs. Quoting the teacher, he writes (1909, 350), "In the sense that the Son of God or God himself entered human life as Jesus of Nazareth and lived his divine life in Palestine, we do believe in the Christian incarnation." In this Alevi representation, Jesus is more

revered due to his self-sacrifice. In addition, Trowbridge reports (350) that Alevis believe in all inspired books in equal measure. “The five inspired books” as referred to in the article are the *Suhuf* (revealed to Abraham), Torah, Tehillim, Bible, and Qur’an. In the future, according to the teacher, “the two faiths [Christianity and Alevism] will unite at the point of justice, each relinquishing extreme positions” with the Sunnis “far behind” (351).

Trowbridge’s representation of Alevism as “a religion different from Islam, centering about the person and teachings of Ali” can also be observed in his 1921 article (1921, 253). In general, by portraying Alevism as similar to Christianity, he delegates a proxy to the missionaries, who could then return the Alevis to an assumed “original” faith.

Baha Said Bey and his notion of “national sect”

The Ottoman central government investigated Anatolia’s ethnic and religious makeup much later than Western missionaries and travelers (Bayrak 2004, 286). In fact, there is a relation of causality between these two, as evinced in reports dispatched to the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, who was uncomfortable with the increasing missionary movements in Anatolia. Abdulhamid II also expressed concern regarding a potential Armenian–Alevi alliance. The Islamization of Anatolia in resistance to missionary movements through the construction of mosques in villages and the appointment of Sunni Hanafi imams and preachers to these villages were two strategies adopted to stem this potential wave (Karakaya-Stump 2002).

Essentially, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) was the first to address Anatolia and, in particular, the Alevis. While deportation and population exchanges homogenized the ethnic and religious nature of Anatolia, the CUP still felt the need to investigate heterodox Muslim groups there (Zürcher 2005, 388). The reframing of Anatolia as “the last castle of Turks” underlies their endeavor to display their demographic superiority. Upon the advice of the Turkish ideologue Ziya Gökalp, Grand Vizier Talat Pasha assigned Baha Said Bey (1882–1939) the task of investigating Alevi-Bektashi groups in Anatolia. This project was “part of a broader ethnographic research program that needs to be interpreted in the context of the CUP’s politics of social engineering” aimed at fashioning Anatolia as a homogeneous Turkish land (Dressler 2013, 127).⁹

Yet this ideological motive did not negate more immediate concerns. First, the CUP was becoming increasingly anxious about missionary activities in Anatolia, which it viewed as separatist in nature. What motivated the CUP’s central committee to investigate propaganda in Anatolia were reports confiscated at ABCFM’s Anatolia College in Merzifon, a northern Anatolian province, which situated the Alevis in close affinity to Christianity (Kieser 2002, 402). More significantly, Baha Said worked for the Special Organization (*Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*), the CUP’s secret service, which was later succeeded by the clandestine Karakol organization, a network to ease the flow of resources to nationalist forces during the War of Liberation (1919–22). Baha Said also worked in the latter network, which benefited from the investigations he pursued in Anatolia. Baha Said’s assignment demonstrates that the CUP intended to “keep fighting at one base in Anatolia” in case World War I was lost (Görkem 2006, xii). In order to establish a military base in Anatolia, Baha Said and other CUP activists were tasked with assessing the loyalty of Bektashi-Alevi groups and learning more about the conditions in these areas, which had just experienced massive demographic and territorial changes. The same purpose was evident in the 1919 visit of Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the founder of modern Turkey, to Hacıbektaş¹⁰ to ensure that Alevi-Bektashi groups would fight on his side during the War of Liberation (Doja 2006, 444–445).¹¹

Baha Said was born in Biga, a north-western Anatolian province, and entered on a career in the Ottoman army. At the rank of lieutenant, Baha Said was forced to leave the army for

disciplinary reasons and made his living first as a teacher and later as a merchant. He also became a dedicated member of the CUP's central committee (Zürcher 1984, 81). From 1925 up to his death in 1939, he worked as an inspector for the National Air Force (Dressler 2013, 128).

Given the CUP's main concerns, it would be difficult to portray Baha Said Bey's investigations in 1914 and 1915 as purely intellectual; rather, they were guided by "pragmatic political considerations of social engineering, which demanded a better knowledge of the various religious and ethnic communities of the remaining Ottoman lands, and in particular central and eastern Anatolia" (Dressler 2013, 131). In his explorations, Baha Said (1918, 19) followed the principle that "our national assets will be understood through empirical findings, not through adopted knowledge" and prepared these reports on the basis of interviews conducted with locals and his observations in the field.

From Baha Said's point of view, the main reason for the investigation was his desire to respond to Western observers who asserted the affinity of Alevis to Christianity. According to Baha Said (1926a, 193), "there are such groups living within the borders of Republican Turkey that Christian communities do not hesitate to register them as their converts." In missionary reports, however, some Alevi groups are acknowledged as Turkified Greek Orthodox Christians, whereas others in eastern Anatolia were registered within the Armenian population. Baha Said writes (193), "[...] I started to publish to stand against this case as much as I could." However, he also notes that the Ottoman government reacted negatively to this study, which it perceived as the promotion of a "heretic" belief: "faithless children of the failed Turkish Hearths [clubs founded in 1912 to promote education and Turkish nationalism] are now making the propaganda of the Kızılbaş" (193). His censored writings would eventually be published in 1926 and 1927 in *Türk Yurdu* [Turkish Homeland], the journal of the nationalist Turkish Hearths.

Interestingly, though Baha Said Bey intended to refute Western propaganda demonstrating the Alevis' affinity to Christianity, he does not refrain from associating some Alevi institutions with Christian elements and other Christian influences. For instance, he interprets the Alevi belief and practice of waiting for the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, as just a "Jewish and Christian theory" (1926a, 206). Likewise, he argues that a belief in the Holy Trinity may have spread to the Bektashi order either through the multi-faith environment of the Ottoman Empire or through *devshirmes* (non-Muslim boys converted to Islam and educated for military professions) within the guild of janissaries. When establishing a link between the "Bektashi trinity" as "Allah, Muhammad, Ali," a motto in dervish lodges in the Balkans, and the Christian trinity of "Father, Son, Holy Spirit," Baha Said (1927, 338) views this exchange as "a probable and even necessary policy" for the Ottoman army to control territory with a large Christian population. In addition to this assumed interaction, his writings also note some similarities. Connecting the concept of *düşkün* (in Alevi catechism, one who commits major sins) to "anathema" in Christianity, Baha Said (1926b, 413) interprets the power of the top religious leader in Hacıbektaş to forgive the *düşkün* to "a sort of sacredness the Catholic Pope has." In another article, Baha Said (1927, 329) also argues that the concept of seclusion (*mücerredlik*) in some Alevi interpretations has no place in Islam, but instead resembles the culture of priesthood in Buddhism and Christianity.¹²

Again, although Baha Said's study is a response to the propaganda promoted by the missionaries that Alevis are "Christian hybrids," he refrains from trying to prove that Alevis are in fact Muslims. Instead, he argues that the Alevis are essentially Turkish and epitomize Turkish secular culture. In this regard, Baha Said frames Alevism as distinct from and superior to Sunni Islam, because it is situated as a national religion reflecting the "authentic" culture of the Turkish people.

By representing Alevism as distinct from Sunni Islam, the assumed incompatibility between Islam and secular Turkish culture takes center stage in Baha Said's writings. In this portrayal,

the key to political development for Turks was their national awareness; thus, the umbrella term *umma* (Islamic community) not only diminished nationalist fervor among Turks, but also led to its degradation: “Since Anatolian Turks became part of the Umma of Muhammad, they have had a lower status compared to the times when they had a Turkish identity” (Baha Said 1918, 22). In Baha Said’s representation, Sunni Islam is mostly associated with Arab culture¹³ and has historically been placed in contradistinction and opposition to a growing Turkish national identity. Baha Said (1926a, 204) describes pan-Islamism as “the international goal of the Arab,” unsuited to the national ideal of the Turks. Similarly, in his classification of secret religious sects into two groups, as of either Semitic or Turkic origin, he includes only Alevism and Bektashism in the latter ([1919] 2006a). This suggests that all other religious beliefs are of Semitic origin. The Sunni sects, especially the Mevlevis, are blamed for destroying Turkish identity. “How did the enchanting reed flute of *Mesnevi* melt that bright, national era when the Oghuz tribe lived in Anatolia?” Baha Said asks (1926a, 200). He also describes the followers of Mevlana Celaddiin-i Rumi as “poor Turkish people muddled with Persian and Arabic teachings” (201) and refers to the *Mesnevi*¹⁴ as “a Persian imitation” (Baha Said 1918, 29).

While Sunni tradition and Sufism were blamed for destroying Turkish identity, Baha Said celebrates Alevism as the true bearer of Turkish culture and states that the Alevis “preserved their Turkish identity, nationality, language, pre-Islamic customs in the form of a religion” (1926a, 208). Alevi lodges were to be “national salvation” hearths when pan-Islamism was the prevailing ideology and, when “the pure Turks, Turkmen, Yuruks and finally the most intellectual, intelligent, and enthusiastic Turks looked for a hearth to enjoy liberty, they found it in the Alevi lodges” (204). In this regard, Hacı Bektaş Veli is described as “the first and only genius of the Turks,” who managed to reconcile the ancient culture of the Turks with Islam (Baha Said 1918, 28). Instead of the reed flute of the Mevlevis, Hacı Bektaş could appeal to the Turkish people with the *saz* (a traditional Turkish musical instrument) and the Turkish language. In this representation, Alevism appears as the true successor to Turkish culture, implying that the Alevis should be reintegrated into society under the new Republic.

Baha Said (1918, 29; 1926a, 210) refers to Bektashism as “a national sect” (*milli mezhep*) and treats Alevi-Bektashi culture as a reflection of Turkish national identity. Special significance is then attached to Alevi-Bektashi culture by the newly founded Turkish nation-state. The popularity of Bektashi and Alevi cultures runs parallel with the reformist ideology of new political elites, who focus on severing ties with the Ottomans and tracing the roots of Turkishness (Doja 2006, 445). Baha Said Bey thus successfully positions the Alevis as supporters of the new state, while questioning the Turkishness of the Ottoman past. In this portrayal, the high officials of the Ottoman Empire were often of Croatian, German, Armenian, Circassian, and Albanian origin, and “earned their bread on the shoulders, with the swords of the Turks, yet dared to defame them” (Baha Said 1926a, 208). The Alevis, at one time insulted for being and living like Turks in the Ottoman Empire, now became valuable to the republican national identity: “We will see that this community, who protect Turkish identity with its existence, is the key element, [and] strongest pillar of our national conscience” (Baha Said [1919] 2006a). This interaction is portrayed as wholly beneficial to the Alevis because the new Turkey was to be founded on a secular-national basis: “Now the new Turkey, the Republic of Turkey, will enjoy Turkish unity. The Sunni-Alevi conflicts are buried under the ground with the abolition of the caliphate, and they are nothing but stories now” (Baha Said 1926a, 195). Summarizing his whole perspective in an analogy, Baha Said (206) depicts Ottoman rule as “the sultanate of Yezid,” famous for his cruelty against the descendants of Ali, and celebrates the establishment of modern Turkey as an end to Yezid’s rule. In this way, the new state is represented as blessed with a religious narrative for the Alevis.

Lastly, it is significant to note that, when ascribing dignity to Alevism, Baha Said Bey adopts an apologetic discourse. In his reports, the Alevis are described as “‘broken hearted’ Turkish people” and “noble people who look sad with the sorrow of seclusion and loneliness” due to the discrimination against them ([1919] 2006b). “We just call them ‘Kızılbaş’ and then underrate them,” says Baha Said, also pointing out that orthodox Islam negates and even degrades the Alevis (1926a, 194). The apologetic approach manifests itself when Baha Said attempts to defend the Alevis in response to widespread attacks on them. For instance, one of the persistent myths about Alevis is that they participate in orgies after snuffing out the candles used in their religious ceremonies, *djem*. Baha Said responds by explaining that there is no gender discrimination at religious ceremonies; instead, decency rules the square of worship and such rumors are no more than “cheap slanders” (207). Elsewhere, Baha Said (1926b, 406, 408) states that the Turkish people have never lived as a “community of prostitution” at any time in their history.

In general, Baha Said’s works reflect the presuppositions surrounding his look back on pre-Islamic Turkic culture. While Ottoman rule and Sunni Islam are associated with the past and underdevelopment, the new Turkish state and Alevism are seen as the bearers of original Turkish culture. The Turkish state and Alevism are praised, with a closer relation between the two considered as both possible and desired.

Silenced Alevis in the early writings

In order to recognize the constitution of the Other in early writings on Alevism, this article has utilized Spivak’s theorization of representation. Spivak criticizes the way researchers present themselves as neutral and transparent when they speak for disempowered people. To this end, she pinpoints the double meanings of representation, which are usually conflated: portrait (*Darstellung*) and proxy (*Vertretung*). While portrait entails the depiction of a disempowered group as a single collective, proxy refers to the capacity to speak for, and the agency attributed to, this collective. Representation as proxy turns the subaltern group into an object of knowledge and portrays it in such a way as to subordinate it to the power of a paternal proxy. Accordingly, although scholarly representations are widely considered to be a transparent expression of the desires and interests of subaltern groups, they may well be a distortion in which the subaltern is redefined as reminiscent of and in need of a political proxy. As any proxy entails the act of portrayal, this, in turn, reinscribes the authorial centrality in portraits to gain proxy. It is this complicity of portrait and proxy that helps us unearth the power structures acting upon the subaltern. Once viewed as portraits, it becomes obvious that even scholarly works can be a manifestation of a power struggle and understood only in relation to existing power configurations. Competing representations of the same phenomenon serve different ends.

In the early writings, Alevism is not *sich darstellt* (Spivak 1999, 263), that is, it does not represent itself, but acts as the portrait created by researchers. More broadly, “In the Turkish Republic, Alevi self-representation [...] remained severely restricted” (Dressler 2015, 446). Dominant narratives of national histories rarely pay attention to the powerless or incorporate the perspectives of the silenced subaltern. At this point, both Trowbridge and Baha Said’s writings intend to be “benevolent” endeavors to give voice to the Alevi subaltern. Both construct themselves as speaking for the subaltern and come up with a text in which the interests of the proxies might not overlap with those of the subaltern. In their portraits of Alevism, both researchers do not hesitate to make universal claims and generalizations about Alevism, despite their engagement with a historically specific and contingent Other.

As another hint of the exteriority of the Alevi subaltern, Trowbridge and Baha Said also employ a binary logic and define Alevism against and in terms of its Other: Sunni Islam. They both contend

that Alevism is different from and superior to Sunni Islam. To this end, their writings also demonstrate a high level of confirmation bias and both researchers selectively include elements that favor their own perspectives on Alevism while ignoring others. In an effort to show the similarities between Alevism and Christianity, Stephen van Rennselaer Trowbridge limits his study to the abstract and focuses on theological aspects, whereas Baha Said broadly addresses traditions, customs, rituals, and conventions that emphasize Alevism's Turkish elements. Alongside constant negative assessments of Sunni Islam, Alevism is mostly celebrated for its affinity to what each researcher prioritizes: either Christianity or Turkish nationalism. While Protestant missionaries were quite unusually sympathetic to the Alevis, in Baha Said's representation, Alevism gains an ethno-romantic character as the vanguard of Turkish identity – which was lacking under Ottoman rule and which the new Republic was in dire need of.

These representations undoubtedly serve the interests of specific proxies that may now speak for the Alevis. Trowbridge traces the genealogy of Alevism in Christianity and views it as a crypto-Christian religion. Through this portrait, he gains a proxy in his missionary activities. Baha Said, on the other hand, traces the ancestors of the Turks in Central Asia and locates Alevism as the true Turkish religion. In terms of the pan-Turkish ideology of the CUP and the later construction of the nation-state, this representation legitimizes not only the Alevis' political support, but also the new regime's approach to religion and secularism.

Most importantly, despite this fully positive appraisal of Alevism, a paternalistic discourse dominates both Trowbridge's and Baha Said's writings. Alevism is projected as incompetent and in need of a paternal proxy to reach its full expression: the missionaries or the new Turkish nation-state. In Baha Said's framing (1926a, 206), Alevis are even portrayed as "helpless." No agency is attributed to the Alevi community, which must be taken care of by someone else. Both representations rely on the assumption that Alevis are incapable of identifying what is in their own best interest. They are treated as an eccentric religious group, waiting in the middle of nowhere to be cultivated. Accordingly, they have the potential to become subjects once they collide with the proxy – be it Western missionaries or the Turkish government. Clearly, representation performs as disruption rather than exposure. Viewing scholarly texts as representations helps to make clear how different agencies may compete to redefine disempowered groups and how such attempts may provide the ground for new relations of domination by various proxies. Spivak's insights also tell us that scholarly writings, because of their claim to speak for the subaltern, may in fact keep silencing it. In this case, the Alevis are silenced not simply because they are ignored, but because they are spoken for.

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Notes

1. Alevism is a non-Sunni form of Islamic belief and practice that reveres Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. Being faithful to the chain of the Twelve Imams, Alevis also pledge allegiance to the medieval saint Hacı Bektaş Veli. Various sources estimate the Alevis to comprise 10–25% of Turkey's population (Erman and Göker 2000, 99).
2. Academic literature suffers from a terminological confusion in the use of Alevi and Bektashi (Yıldırım 2010). In the following pages, the terms Alevi, Bektashi, and Kızılbaş refer to various groups of those who revere Ali. This article mostly employs Alevi as "an umbrella term" encompassing all variants (Erdemir 2005, 938).
3. This also applies to studies on Alevism. As Dressler (2013, 272) states, "The study of Alevism has remained astonishingly unimpressed by postcolonial and poststructuralist discourses that pose critical

- questions in regard to the implication of modern ideologies [...] and their relationship to secular scholarship.”
4. Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” first appeared in 1988 and was later included in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). This article relies on the 1999 publication. For a revisionary rereading, see Spivak (2004).
 5. For several examples, see Kieser (2001, 94–100).
 6. The research and travel notes about Anatolia and Alevism produced by Western travelers and missionaries in the nineteenth century gave way to more systematic and scientific studies at the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century (Bayrak 2004, 278). Studies by Mehmet Bayrak, who compiled the pieces of work of this period, are a significant source (288–293).
 7. The Antep Center, established in 1848, was the ABCFM’s first headquarters within the borders of the Turkish mission. In 1913, as a result of the activities of the center, the number of prayer halls and Sunday communities in Antep reached 38 and 7580, respectively; in 1848, there had been only one church with six members (Yücel 2005, 170, 174).
 8. In this narration, Ali formed a special council with his best men and the General Council with all his followers. One of his pupils said to Ali, “Thou art God,” and Ali approved it (Trowbridge 1909, 342). Like the saints who spread Christianity, Trowbridge (342) mentions three men active in the spread of Alevism: Seyyid Jelal-ed-Din (Celaliddin-i Rumi), who founded the order of Jelali dervishes; Hacı Bektaş Veli, the leader of the Bektashi order; and Shah Sefi Sultan, who dominated Persia.
 9. This motivation becomes more meaningful if we consider the mass violence and deportation policies adopted with regard to the Armenian population in the same period, 1914–15, when Baha Said was assigned to investigate in Anatolia.
 10. Hacıbektaş, named after the medieval Muslim saint, Hacı Bektaş Veli, remains a holy site to the Alevi up to the present day. The town still hosts the largest annual Alevi gatherings.
 11. In 1925, this support would be left unpaid, with the closure of lodges, zawiyahs, and tombs, including the Alevi sanctuaries.
 12. Similar arguments were raised by Professor Hasan Reşit Tankut, who worked as the Coordinator of Turkish Hearths and the Directorate for Public Order of the Eastern Provinces from 1925. In his 1930 research, Tankut notes that “Alevi are always friends with Christians” and a Christian in an Alevi community would not feel alien at all (quoted in Bayrak 1994, 473). As an alternative influential trend, one should also consider the work of scholars such as Fuat Köprülü, who positioned Alevism as Turkish Islam (Vorhoff 1998, 32).
 13. Kazım Ateş (2008, 76) points to the anti-Arab and anti-Persian sentiments in Baha Said’s works, where Arabs are illustrated as “tricky, beggars” and Persians as “lazy, sycophant and insincere.”
 14. Ironically, for Baha Said (1926a, 205), “The *Mesnevi* was Alevi [in spirit] but its language and sound was Persian.”

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