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Vortrag im Oberseminar

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Rival definitions of Turkish Islam:

The Fethullah Gülen movement and Alevi activists in conflict

Montag, den 30. Januar 2012, 18.00 – 20.00 Uhr

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One of the things that distinguished the Fethullah Gülen movement – the most remarkable Turkish Islamic movement, which has established schools active in around a hundred countries worldwide – from other significant contemporary Islamic movements is that almost all of its public activities are non-religious or explicitly ‘secular,’ but are inspired by a deeply pious inner attitude. The cultivation of this inner attitude, through a combination of traditional interiorizing techniques and more modern disciplining methods, is another distinctive trait of the Gülen movement. The movement has been remarkably successful in both of these aspects; a loyal and disciplined body of core members, bound together through a complex process of mutual consultations, initiates a wide range of activities in which more peripheral members and non-members appear to be the most prominent actors. ‘Tolerance’ and ‘dialogue’ have become keywords in most activities of the movement. Although true friendship appears only possible between core members, there is an insistence on engaging with others, including highly secularized Turks as well as Christians and Jews.

The combination of these outward-directed and interiorizing practices have enabled the Gülen movement to function comfortably in secular-liberal societies and have made it palatable to major segments of Turkey’s secular political elite, no doubt also thanks to the movement’s strident Turkish nationalism. Whereas previously secular-minded Turkish politicians perceived especially the heterodox Alevi minority as potential allies against an Arab-oriented Islamist resurgence (without ever, however, empowering this minority), the Gülen movement has emerged as a more promising vehicle to save the country from Arabizing influences while at the same time projecting Turkish influence into the wider world. The Gülen movement and the (co-opted part of the) Alevi movement appeal so some of the same symbolic values: ‘tolerance’ (*hoşgörü*), ‘serving’ (*hizmet*), and the Central-Asian and Anatolian mystical tradition. The dialogue with the Alevis, in which the Gülen movement has begun to engage, has been perceived by major sections of the Alevi community as an assault and concerted effort to redefine and change the face of Alevism.

In my talk in München I shall focus on the ‘interior’ aspects of the Gülen movement and on the encounter with Alevism.