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We Can't Even Call Them 'Dead': On Köken Ergun's *Heroes*

A rather bizarre question introduces the Turkish President's TV commercial for the 2015 centennial of the Gallipoli Campaign (also known as the Battle of Çanakkale) in World War I: "Have you ever heard the martyrs' voice?"[1] This inquiry ensues as the only one presented by an unidentified, non-diegetic male voice in the advertorial, and prompts a number of citizens from various backgrounds and geographies to look dreamily into the distance: despite the voice's preference for the much less common Arabic plural for martyr (*şuheda*) acting as a collective noun in Turkish (hence, the singularity of "the martyrs' voice"), staged flashbacks to these citizens' male relatives responding to their commander(s) with their names and hometowns implicate a *multiplicity* of martyrs' voices. In fact, these imaginary[2] soldiers who served in the Ottoman Army during the First World War not only hail from Asia Minor, but also strategically from the present-day disputed Kurdish territories of Erbil and Kirkuk, with one Christian Ottoman subject from Istanbul thrown into the mix for variance. (In order to achieve its galvanizing potential, the rollcall ends on a soldier from Sakarya with an amputated arm and an overly zealous stutter.)

A strange plurality. Though their names, localities and demeanours are very different from one another, they become united with the same militaristic litany—a fervent bid for the commander(s) to give them orders: "*Emret komutanım*!" Just as in the unfolding of the rollcall, the descendants of these soldiers striving to hear their forefathers' voices turn into metonymically expanding fragments of a 'nation' with unmissable national heritage sites, such as Mimar Sinan's Selimiye Mosque in Edirne and the fairy chimneys of Capadoccia serving as contemporary backdrops. A similar push-and-pull between individual specificity and communal projection characterizes the remainder of the presidential advertorial, but this time with a particular reliance on Islam as *the* common denominator: the second half begins with a soldier's recitation of the morning call to prayer from the Gallipoli Peninsula, oddly broadcasting not towards a congregation but towards a sea littered with battleships. But battalions on the hills behind him have heard the call nonetheless; they raise their hands to their ears in order to enunciate God's greatness, and subsequently lower them for the *qiyaam* (standing prayer).

During these first two movements of the prayer, interspersed with scenes of soldiers leaving the trenches to fight, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's voice is heard for the first time, uttering another sentence in which the word "voice" is prominently featured: "We are the lowered voices" (*Biz kısık sesleriz*). The word "*biz*" (we [are]) precipitates with a brisk crescendo at the beginning of the sentence—one of Erdoğan's signature rhetorical moves—but his tone of voice drops and stabilizes for the rest of the sentence, bringing with it a rather quick phasing out of the call to prayer in the background. Now, accompanied only by an occasionally soaring and falling chorus, Erdoğan launches into a long list of exhortations to God, the first one being; "Do not leave minarets without a call to

prayer, my God."[3] Overall, his increasingly booming voice stitches together three types of related imagery: war re-enactments, ritual praying and individual mourning. The century-long sustenance and survival of *a community of faith* is underlined by the seamless blending of the movements of the 'martyrs' and a present-day all male congregation at a mosque in order to achieve a full arc of *sujud* (prostration). Finally, the regimented, synchronised praying ripples into collective and closeup views of individuals leaving flowers and praying with hands turned towards the sky, mostly alone, at the memorial graves of their loved ones. Only when the disembodied voice finishes its last exhortation ("Do not forsake us, without love, water, air, and the homeland, my God!"), does its owner appear on camera, praying among others, at the Çanakkale Martyrs' Memorial. Inevitably, it begins to snow.

The above description is only that of a four-and-a-half-minute long TV broadcast paid for by the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. It does not purport to encapsulate, even from a Turkish viewpoint, what artist Köken Ergun has playfully referred to as "a heaven of rituals" for the memorialization of the by now-fabled Gallipoli Campaign during World War I.[4] What it does, however, is expose the core attitude behind the ongoing refashioning of Turkish nationalism in the image of populist Islamism, entirely submerged in a hallucinatory denial of the ruptures—most notably, due to Republican reforms—with the Ottoman past. An image/imagination of the nation coalesces with the movement of not just one "solitary hero" but many—including the President himself—"through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the (representation) and the world outside", be it the battlefront, a stream of national landmarks, or the Martyrs' Memorial.[5] The ubiquitous undercurrent of Islam intimates individual membership in a collective entity larger than life, able to traverse centuries with defiance and triumph, thus "transforming fatality into continuity".[6]

Co-commissioned by the Australian War Memorial (Canberra), Protocinema (Istanbul) and Artspace (Sydney), Köken Ergun's film *Heroes* (2018), casts an ethnographic eye on citizens of Australia, New Zealand and Turkey who flock to Çanakkale (Gallipoli) every year in order to have a first-hand impression of the former battleground that has provided not just one but three modern nation-states with major founding myths. His methodology favours complete immersion over the upkeep of a so-called 'critical' distance, often necessitating him to literally follow in the footsteps of his subjects.[7] However, even in the throes of a desire to achieve proximity to, and thereby, to assert ownership over grand historical narratives, some of Ergun's subjects appear and sound bored, drained, indifferent, or otherwise completely disillusioned during the in-between moments when their feelings are not being agitated by what Australian historian Marilyn Lake calls "the manufacture of emotions" undertaken by the state and the tourism industry.[8] Unlike the nationalist literatures Benedict Anderson cites in *Imagined Communities* (2006), there are no "solitary heroes" to be found in *Heroes*: the 'real' heroes remain buried under layers of (usually misguided) representation, and their followers' participation in certain rituals of commemoration eventuates as a thinly disguised leisure activity, or a rather onerous school trip. Ergun's work makes this point very clear: a nation comes into being only with the temporary suspension of boredom and disbelief, transpiring here and there as a result of the performative gathering of a group of people for the same sites/sights.

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They venerate their ancestors so well.
Shouldn't we do better?

The rift at the heart of *Heroes*—the discursive and attitudinal differences amongst commemorative practices for the Ottoman and the ANZAC[9]—is made visible as early as the film's title which appears in both Turkish and English. *Şehitler* is not a lexical equivalent of "heroes"—it categorically means "martyrs". Indeed, Ergun has given the film two non-identical titles in Turkish and English, seeking a contextual correspondence instead of a linguistic equivalence. While "hero" retains a degree of genericness, *şehit* as one may expect, is loaded with the weight of death for a holy cause. Historian Tanıl Bora, among others, notes the shared Aramaic and, later, Arabic root of *şehit* and *şahit* (witness), denoting "those who have witnessed the miracle of the prophet and the supreme Truth."[10] "After the first witnesses," Bora writes, "others who braved persecution and lost their lives in the name and with the faith of this testimony were, too, considered 'witnesses'."[11] Undeniably, the perception of *şehit* has also been coloured by centuries of *ghaza*[12]—the practice of conquering foreign lands for the glory of Islam—during the Ottoman Empire, as well as by one of the five pillars of Islam, *kelime-i şehadet* (the word of testimony, known in Arabic simply as *shahada*), which requires the believers to profess their faiths by enunciating "there is no god but God (and) Muhammad is the messenger of God".

Given the weight of this term, a general semiotic confusion seems to underlie *Heroes*: confronted with the question of "what do you think of our martyrs?" one interviewee coming from Izmir replies; "There is nothing to say. I hope we will have the same honour [of being martyred] for our country, for our nation… We can't even call them 'dead'."

Similarly, when Ergun questions a New Zealand visitor if offering martyrs to war is as big a deal in her native country, the young woman responds, vigorously nodding; "Yeah, we've got quite a few Anzac heroes…"[13] On the other hand, achieving linguistic homogeneity around the act of commemoration holds the promise of maintaining *and* shaping a community, as one guide insists on not using the word *gezi* (trip, outing) in favour of *ziyaret* (generally visit, but here, a visitation or a pilgrimage), expressly announcing the main purpose of their journey as 'praying'. The strictures of Islamist conditioning, whether their source is a tour guide or the state rhetoric, are felt both at an individual and collective level: the same interviewee from Izmir admits, "the war could not have been won without *iman gücü* [the power of faith]," while a student from Konya, perhaps wishing to impress his classmates smirking by his side with a smart remark on camera, proclaims they will show the ANZACs that they have not forgotten Çanakkale with *takbir* (declaring "God is [the] greatest"). Otherwise, several school groups, including one composed of veiled young girls marching behind the revolutionary Syrian National Council flag and another from Tokat entirely clad in WWI Ottoman uniforms, appear in the film, chanting the *takbir* as they walk along the trails.

In *Heroes*, rituals and representations are shown to be inextricably enmeshed, often performatively crafting new traditions—as well as discourses—for a 'New Turkey.' In the very first sequence of the film, Turkish scouts don red vests with the words "GRANDPA, I AM HERE", perform the ablution, let an older woman smear henna on the side of their heads to the soundtrack of the *sela* prayer. Inspired by none other than the Dawn Service held by the Australians and New Zealanders,[14] this ritual takes the liberty of linking various, largely unrelated tropes around (Islamic) death. Customarily sung outside the regular call to prayer times in order to invite the believers to an Eid, Friday, or funeral service, *sela* was 'revived' by, and is most readily associated today with the recent failed coup attempt on 15 July, 2016 when President Erdoğan instructed *sela* to be broadcast from every mosque in Turkey as a call to arms.[15] The popular and largely demilitarized Turkish metaphor for children—their mothers' "hennaed lambs" after boys being sent to the front like animals marked by henna for sacrifice during the Eid-al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice)—is, in turn,

literalized *and* re-militarized on the bodies of youth, as the *sela* prematurely announces their eventual death as martyrs to the Battle of Gallipoli.[16] During the day, other teenagers dabble in more overtly theatrical representations: in one such performance, an 'ANZAC soldier' behind the trenches reveals his fear of being captured alive and subsequently tortured by Turks. In between dodging bullets and shooting back, another 'soldier' assures the first that no such thing would happen to him, as "Turks are a heroic and noble people." Indeed, during a moment of ceasefire seasoned with a *zeybek*-like score, an 'Ottoman soldier' carries a 'wounded ANZAC' back to the enemy's trenches.

The centrality of heroism and virtuosity to Turkish culture—a trope shared with older, secular Republican rituals—is thus fastidiously reinforced by formal and informal performances. Just like the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Turkish government seems to have taken a shine to theatre as a vehicle for inspiring a nation,[17] since *Heroes* is punctuated by several of the many state-commissioned theatrical acts on the Battle of Çanakkale, running every fifteen minutes, from March through to October, with professional actors. As Ergun notes himself, the success of these tearjerkers lies in their inclusivity—the emphasis on the sacrifices of *both* men and women, as opposed to the almost exclusively male, militaristic protagonists of (earlier) hardline Republican celebrations. For instance, in Ergun's earlier document of a nationalistic ritual *I, Soldier* (*Ben Askerim*) (2005), an officer confesses to a stadium full of people how soldiers also grow hungry, become exhausted, and fall in love (but when they do, they "love like a man"), only to arrive at the punch line of his speech, that "a soldier does not die, and cannot be killed." Entirely delivered in roars, this extended declaration of exceptionality is addressed only to an upcoming generation of soldiers, including young men who neatly perform athletic feats on the field during his longer pause. Differently, the plays documented in *Heroes* prominently feature women as constantly crying wives left behind by future martyrs. In many scenes, separation of newlyweds and the breakup of budding families take precedence over military manoeuvres and other historic events in a bid to highlight the greatness of sacrifices of both genders. These plays most significantly carve out spaces for women, and by extension, families to exist in the myths of Turkish nation-building: the impact of their familial sentimentality remains legible on the faces of their audiences.

Other state-sponsored theatrical acts, such as the one concerning the iconic story of Corporal Seyit Ali, strive towards singling the heroism of Ottoman soldiers as the *exceptional* manifestation of an innate strength. Charismatically—and certainly over-animatedly—pacing the stage back and forth, the actor playing Corporal Seyit Ali recounts how he managed to carry a 215kg artillery shell on his own to the gun emplacement. Despite claiming not to know how to take aim, the only other fellow soldier left alive does as instructed by Seyit Ali, and shoots the gun, "hit[ting] the giant ship from the helm." The next day, when his commander asks him to lift a shell again for a photograph, Seyit Ali is not able to perform the task, but, nonetheless, delivers his famous quip: "If I find myself in the same situation, I will lift that shell [again] without hesitation!" By overlooking the fact that Seyit Ali's battery was actually able to hit the British battleship HMS Ocean only at the third attempt, a dramatic—if not mythical—aura of precious uniqueness is created around the historical event.

This exceptionalism and fetishization of uniqueness also pervades the informal, albeit no less dramatic 'performances' within Turkish-language guided tours of Çanakkale/Gallipoli filmed by Ergun. Exalting and emphasizing the Turkish nation's power of faith (*iman gücü*), virtuosity (*asalet*), and even cleanliness with over-the-top moralizing deliveries, the leaders of these tours stand in marked contrast to the Australian and New Zealand guides, who rather dryly dispatch facts to their groups, sometimes even reading from a sheet of paper. The attitude of the former fits most

For sure he does,
and he loves like a man!

he can not be killed;
soldier is immortal.

squarely with a worldview best exemplified by the presidential spokesperson İbrahim Kalın's book *Akıl ve Erdem* (*Intelligence and Wisdom*) (2013), in which he stipulates that "civilisations have unique aspirations, [and that] these [aspirations] are transmitted with 'religious and national codes' [*din ve millet kodları*] carried through by tradition."[18] Tanıl Bora succinctly summarizes this worldview as "we are [just] different."

From this self-admission, the beatification of martyrdom is, indeed, just a short stone's throw away: *martyrdom is* (*also*) *just different*. In one guide's particularly impassioned portrayal of a fictional Ottoman mother, the latter avers that she did not let her son touch roses growing up, because they had thorns. It turns out, however, she is all too ready to make a sacrifice and give her son up for the cause, "lest the infidel step on this blessed land, lest the foreigner wrap his whip around our throats, lest they stamp upon the graves of our martyrs, lest our calls to prayer be silenced." Then, it follows that in a conservative Islamist understanding, the smallest, most fundamental unit of the society is *not* the family, but the *martyr*. Literary scholar and art theorist Zeynep Sayın suggests: "*Cemaat* [congregation, community] renders itself visible in death, and death, in *cemaat*."[19] If so, this society has become a cult of purposeful deaths for the sake of ethno-preservation, and as is the case with many cults, you cannot call the object of sublimation what it actually is. *We can't even call them* '*dead*'.

In conversation with Ergun, historian Marilyn Lake observed that there is no such emphasis on mothers' sacrifice from the Australian/New Zealand perspective, and notes that the former, having acquired the right to vote in 1902, overwhelmingly voted against conscription in two WWI plebiscites (1916 and 1917).[20] Though these plebiscites appear to be mostly unknown today, ambivalence and scepticism still characterize at least some of Australians' and New Zealanders' attitudes towards the causes of the Gallipoli Campaign, including that of the young woman interviewed by Ergun: referring to the ANZACs, she opines "so many people died, no reason." Curiously, holding this view did not prevent her from coming all the way to Gallipoli and becoming tearful at the rollcall of names of the soldiers who lost their lives. If there is a certain *plenitude* to the "purposefulness" of the Ottoman martyrs, the ANZAC deaths are marked by a *hollowness* (of *raison d'être*) that often goes unmentioned or ignored, but, in fact, these are two sides of the same coin, embossed by nation-building, or rather *nation-binding*.[21]

In his essay 'Anzac Day: How did it become Australia's national day?' historian Mark McKenna writes Anzac Day returned to prominence in the 1980s at the same time Australia Day (the official national day)—marking the British colonisers' arrival at Sydney Cove—was coming under public attack by the Aboriginal protest movement.[22] The mass pilgrimage to Çanakkale in modern Turkey is cited by Ergun as an even more recent phenomenon championed by the government of Erdoğan's AKP (Justice and Development Party), in order to rival the mythologies of the War of Independence (1918-23) centring around the Republic's founding figure of Atatürk.[23] Just as the "demise of ex-servicemen and women… made it easier for recent generations to commemorate war in their own image"[24] on the ANZAC side, i.e. a festive event with a laid-back atmosphere,[25] the Turkish government appropriated Çanakkale for its own purposes—primarily, an urgent need to create a space for an affirmative stance on an ever-growing number of officers killed fighting Kurdish revolutionaries in the east. And, above all, as Bora acknowledges; "We also know the title of martyrdom facilitates the acceptance of deaths, especially young deaths, and helps deal with the loss. It is a title that embraces the pain of loss with honour, with pride."[26]

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A Turkish scout song recorded on Ergun's film features rather bizarre lyrics: "Spread the sand that covers the earth/Not grass they are, but your grandfather's hair/Listen, [its] wind is the voices of martyrs." In fact, the lyrics are taken from a 1912 poem by Mehmet Âkif Ersoy—an iconic Islamist poet who also composed the words to the current Turkish national anthem. Here, similar to Erdoğan's presidential advertorial, it is implied that the martyrs can be *heard*: the fantastical suggestion of their audibility opens up a plane of projection and association for the youngsters, ready to be colonized by *another* voice—whether it is Erdoğan's disembodied preaching or not. The exhortation to hear martyrs' voices is, indeed, the pursuit of full admission to a community,[27] and provides the structuring logic for Ergun's most remarkable autographic intervention. Instead of creating multi-channel juxtapositions of dialogue with complex choreographies as in some of his previous works, in *Heroes*, the artist simply extends the audio track of one scene to a preceding or succeeding another, and lets it subtly linger, uprooted from its original image. This leakage does not usually present itself as a jarring incongruity; rather, it helps bolster a comfortable yet artificial sense of continuity emblematic of neo-Ottomanism, for "neo-Ottomanism repeats that which has never happened, designs a past that never was".[28] After all, collective psychosis, coupled with a knack for forgetting, allows anything to become familiar, *audible*, and even tangible one day.

Notes

[1] Fatih Özdemir, 'Çanakkale Zaferi'nin 100.yıl reklamı–Recep Tayyip Erdoğan–AK Parti', YouTube video, 21 July 2016; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aCcjSHYBBY

[2] I cannot, of course, vouch for the fact that people in the advertorial cast do not actually have relatives who have passed away during WWI. The first person to appear in the video appears to have a rather unofficial looking certificate for an ancestor's martyrdom

[3] Other exhortations include, "The minarets are without illuminated messages [*mahya*]; do not forsake the sky, without [its] Milky Way"; "Do not leave the homeland that has been shaped by Islam without Muslims"; and "Give us power; do not leave the battlefields of jihad without heroes."

[4] Köken Ergun, 'Köken Ergun in conversation with Prof. Marilyn Lake', Artspace Sydney, 23 April, 2018; https://soundcloud.com/artspace-619083596/artist-talk-koken-ergun

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York: Verso, 2006, p. 30

[6] ibid., p. 11

[7] The artist states on multiple platforms that, after a preparatory phase of embedding himself in guided tours without filming, he documented more than fifty tours in Gallipoli

[8] Marilyn Lake, 'Köken Ergun in conversation with Prof. Marilyn Lake', op cit.

[9] Historically, ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) is an acronym devised by Major General William Birdwood's staff in Cairo in early 1915. It was used for registering correspondence for the new corps, and a rubber stamp was cut using the letters A.&N.Z.A.C. After the landing at Gallipoli, General Birdwood requested that the position held by the Australians and New Zealanders on the peninsula be called "Anzac" to distinguish it from the British position at Helles, at the southern tip of the peninsula. Permission was also sought to name the small bay, where the majority of the Corps had come ashore on 25 April 1915, "Anzac Cove". The letters now were upper and lower case, indicating that the original acronym had already found a use beyond that of a military code word or corps designation. Since that time, "Anzac" and "ANZAC" have been used interchangeably. "Anzac" has become a modern day usage for events such as Anzac Day, Anzac Centenary and references to the Anzac "spirit". There are strict regulations for the protection of the word; see https://www.dva.gov.au/commemorations-memorials-and-war-graves/protecting-word-anzac. New Zealand has similar protective regulations

[10] Tanıl Bora, 'Şehitler ve Şahitler', *Zamanın Kelimeleri: Yeni Türkiye'nin Siyasî Dili*, Birikim: Istanbul, 2018, p. 186

[11] ibid.

[12] The names of the first two Ottoman sultans are often evoked alongside the *gazi* title for their active participation in the *ghaza*. This title has been more or less secularized across the centuries, and simply denotes a veteran today

[13] Despite this affirmative response to the artist's question, John Simpson (Kirkpatrick), an Englishman known for bringing several hundred wounded soldiers back to safety on the back of a donkey, remains one of the few, if not only, comparably lionized 'hero' of the ANZACs

[14] Ergun, 'Köken Ergun in conversation with Prof. Marilyn Lake', op cit.

[15] Although *sela* is popularly also known as a supplementary prayer proclaiming jihad, i.e. an announcement of war against non-believers and a call for able-bodied males to join the cause, I was not able to verify this claim. Here, I am using the definition provided by the Turkish Language Association. *Sela* should not be confused with *salah* (though it may sound like a Turkified version of this Arabic-language word), which simply denotes the five daily prayers. The *sela* was broadcast again from 90,000 mosques throughout Turkey on the first anniversary of the failed coup attempt. Keskin Kalem Yayıncılık ve Tic. A.Ş., 'Darbe girişiminin yıldönümünde 90 bin camiden gece yarısı sela okunacak', diken.com.tr, 7 July, 2017; http://www.diken.com.tr/darbe-girisiminin-yildonumunde-90-bin-camiden-gece-yarisi-sela-okunacak/

[16] This term of endearment is often used today on a day-to-day basis without a military context (with the exception of mothers mourning for their martyred sons and romantic historical texts), and thus appears (or appeared until recently) largely removed from its raison d'être. The appropriation of *sela* for the commemorations of the Battle of Gallipoli also appears to be a distant echo, if not a mirror image, of Mustafa Kemal's famous command to the 57th Infantry Regiment in Gallipoli: "I am not ordering you to fight: I am ordering you to die."

[17] "Therefore we think that the only way to inspire Italy with the warlike spirit is through the theatre." Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, quoted in Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, London and New York: Verso, 2012, e-book

[18] Bora, 'Medeniyet denen...', *Zamanın Kelimeleri: Yeni Türkiye'nin Siyasî Dili*, op cit., p. 54

[19] Zeynep Sayın, *Ölüm Terbiyesi*, Istanbul: Metis, 2018, p. 58

[20] Lake, 'Köken Ergun in conversation with Prof. Marilyn Lake', op cit.

[21] In 1967, *The Australian* newspaper appears to have espoused a rhetoric strikingly similar to the exceptionalism of the current official discourse in Turkey: "Anzac Day expresses, as no other day or symbol can, something that we understand and nobody else can." Quoted in Mark McKenna, 'Anzac Day: How did it become Australia's national day?', *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds eds, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010, p. 148

[22] McKenna, ibid., p. 130. I derive this dichotomy, of course, from the representational realm of Ergun's film, fully aware of how vigorously Anzac commemorations are actually held and disseminated. *Heroes*, however, appears mostly preoccupied with the flat and disinterested delivery of Anzac history during private guided tours, as well as the younger generation's ambivalence towards this history

[23] Ergun, 'Köken Ergun in conversation with Prof. Marilyn Lake', op cit.

[24] McKenna, op cit., p. 128

[25] "Anzac Day had in any case long since ceased to be a day of solemn remembrance and become a festive event, celebrated by backpackers wrapped in flags, playing rock music, drinking beer and proclaiming their national identity on the distant shores of Turkey." Marilyn Lake, 'Introduction: What have you done for your country?', *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, op cit., p. 13

[26] Bora, Şehitler ve Şahitler', op cit., p. 186

[27] "Full admission to a community takes place not only through identification with its present visual tradition, but when one takes upon one's self that magnificent dimension which carries through tradition and the secret history of traumatic fantasies, transmitted only in between lines, thanks to half-dead spirits haunting the living and the voids, as well as the manipulations, of the [newly] opened symbolic order." Slavoj Žižek, quoted in Sayın, op cit., p. 43. Author's translation from Turkish to English. The quote comes from a book originally published in German: *Blasphemische Gedanken, Islam und die Moderne*, Berlin: Ullstein, 2015, p. 36

[28] Sayın, op cit., p. 113