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Moral Ambivalence, Religious Doubt and Non-Belief among Ex-Hijabi Women in Turkey

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Abstract: This article investigates religious transformations in contemporary Turkey through the case of women's unveiling. Drawing on 10 in-depth interviews with university-educated urban women who have recently stopped wearing the veil, the article examines their experiences and their motivations for unveiling. It asks to what extent and in what ways Muslim women's decisions to unveil are a reaction against the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) shift towards electoral authoritarianism and Islamic conservatism. Some practicing Muslims, particularly youth, have withdrawn their support from the government because of its political authoritarianism and its abandonment of Islamic ideals relating to justice. Since the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the AKP has come under critical scrutiny, both economically (e.g., increasing youth unemployment rates, widening income inequality, the shrinking middle class, clientelism) and sociopolitically (e.g., gendered social welfare policies, pro-natalist campaigns, the discourse on creating a pious generation). However, although the current political atmosphere plays a significant role in women's unveiling, the article also discusses women's personal and theological motives. The article elaborates on how ex-hijabi women contest both Islamist politics and Islamic orthodoxy regarding female religiosity and how these women reinterpret dominant gender norms.

Keywords: (un)veiling; moral ambivalence; religious doubt; non-belief; Islam; Turkey

1. Introduction

In March 2018, İhsan Fazlıoğlu, a renowned professor of Islamic philosophy, made some statements about headscarf-wearing students who identified as deists or atheists but remained veiled due to familial and societal concerns. His statements sparked a public debate about whether Turkish youth—particularly those from devout Muslim families—were losing faith in Islam (Fazlıoğlu 2018). The debate was expanded by the results of a study on the religious convictions of Imam Hatip (religious vocational secondary schools) students, conducted in the religiously conservative city of Konya. The study confirmed that increasing numbers of young Muslims were leaving Islam (Milliyet 2018). However, the head of Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs, Turkey's highest religious authority), as well as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its partner, the Nationalist Action Party, denied that deism and atheism were on the rise among youth, and described the debate as a defamation campaign against the young (Bianet 2018b; Diyanet 2018; Yenişafak 2018). In subsequent months, numerous interviews with young people appeared online, testifying the religious transformation of Turkish youth. The interviewees offered diverse narratives: some described their personal journeys away from Islam (BBC 2018; Medyascope 2018); others explained how they used historicist, leftist and/or gender-egalitarian interpretations to made peace with Islam (Bianet 2018d). Some said that their strict religious upbringing had produced a personal backlash against Islam (Bianet 2018a), while others related their disenchantment with Islam—namely its widespread Sunni interpretation—to the political, economic and social injustices experienced under the Islam-friendly AKP (Bianet 2018c; EkmekveGül 2019; Medyascope 2020).

The debate underwent a new twist when ex-hijabi women began sharing their stories of "transition" from veiled to unveiled. First, the online platform *Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin*

(You Will Not Walk Alone) published the anonymous stories of young women who had decided to unveil. The platform aimed to generate a sense of solidarity among women with similar experiences (Çatlak Zemin 2019). Media and public attention peaked when ex-hijabis used the social media trend of the "10-year challenge" to announce their decision to unveil, posting photographs of themselves from the time when they were veiled beside current photographs showing them unveiled (BBC 2019).[1] This time, public intellectuals with different ideological orientations entered the debate. The pro-AKP newspaper *Yeni Şafak* presented conservative Muslim views. Several intellectuals stated in this newspaper that it was women's own decision to wear, not wear or remove the veil, and the public should respect those decisions. Yet, they also noted that international media outlets (such as BBC Turkish or Independent Turkish) treated unveiling stories as stories of liberation. In doing this, Muslim conservatives were issuing a warning, some even claiming that such stories were fabricated by "outside forces" (Albayrak 2019; Kaplan 2020; Kılıçarslan 2019). Ironically, secularist intellectuals in the pro-Republican People's Party newspaper *Cumhuriyet* agreed with the pro-AKP intellectuals' conspiracy theory that online reports about the removal of the veil were from unreliable sources (T24 2019).[2] At the opposite end of the spectrum, Muslim feminists and reformist Muslim scholars offered a more balanced view to argue that the young were dissatisfied with Turkey's religious pedagogy. They claimed that digital media gave young and educated Muslims easy access to alternative religious interpretations, which helped them to develop critical perspectives on classic Islamic texts and Muslim practitioners' religious discourses (Böhürler 2017; Öztürk 2019).[3] Muslim feminists particularly emphasized the AKP's neoliberal and Islamically conservative body politics, which, they contended, led young Muslim women to distance themselves from traditional interpretations of Islam (Sönmez 2019).

Public opinion surveys supported the religious transformation thesis. In the previous decade, the number of headscarf-wearing Muslim women had remained almost unchanged (52% in 2008, 53% in 2018). However, there was a slight increase in the number of non-hijabi women (34% in 2008, 37% in 2018) (Konda 2018). While cases of unveiling received great attention, it was not young people's appearance but rather their mindset that underwent a marked change. For example, the number of women who agreed with the statement "a married woman should get her husband's permission to work outside the home" dropped significantly (50% in 2008, 35% in 2018), and disapproval of cohabiting couples dramatically declined (42% in 2008, 33% in 2018) (Konda 2019). There was a slight rise in the number of people who describe themselves as deists or atheists, although non-believers still comprised a small and hidden group in Turkey (ibid.).

These changes might be regarded as perplexing because they occurred during the almost two decades of Islam-friendly AKP rule. Since its rise to power in 2002, the AKP's Islamically conservative social policies had been the subject of controversy. Notable examples included the gendered character of its social welfare policies (Buğra 2012), the "three children" campaign (Dedeoğlu 2012), the expansion of Diyanet's role in gender and family policies (Adak 2017), the discourse of creating a pious generation (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017), and the rise in the numbers of Imam Hatip schools and Islamic theology departments (Ozgur 2012). It is, therefore, significant to ask to what extent the AKP's efforts to promote Islamic ethics and values in public and private spheres affected the views and performances of Muslim youth. In particular, this article explores the extent to which the AKP's religiously motivated social policies influenced headscarf-wearing Muslim women who have recently stopped wearing the veil. The article examines not only their sociopolitical motives but also their personal and theological motives for unveiling.

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1   In this popular trend, Facebook or Instagram users juxtapose two photographs of themselves taken 10 years apart. The trend began as a way to share how (and how much) the user's appearance has changed over time.

2   See Van Nieuwkerk (2018b) for a similar conspiracy theory about unveiling in Egypt.

3   See Bunt (2018) on how the Internet has changed Muslim practitioners' views of local Islamic authorities.

The article is based on 10 in-depth interviews conducted in 2020.[4] I conversed with ex-hijabi women about their families, upbringings, educational journeys, careers and marriages. To explore their motivations for removing the veil, I first asked them how and why they had embraced the veil in the first place. Then I asked them to outline the factors that had triggered their decision to unveil. Several newspaper interviews and blog entries are available about headscarf-wearing women who had recently decided to remove the veil; to expand on my interlocutors' accounts, I also draw on these secondary sources.

My data does not include narratives from ex-hijabis who live in the provinces or who have no tertiary education or career prospects. Thus, although my ex-hijabi interlocutors provided varied experiences of (un)veiling in relation to social class, religious and ideological upbringing, parents' education, and city of birth, this article does not claim to offer an exhaustive typology of (un)veiling in Turkey.

I start with a discussion of the headscarf controversy since the 1980s, with particular emphasis on the AKP era. Second, I introduce a theoretical framework derived from anthropologists of Islam, who began in the 2010s to conceptualize Muslim subject-formation processes, not in terms of coherency or consistency (Mahmood 2005; Fadil 2009; Van Nieuwkerk 2013), but in terms of flexible processes (Deeb and Harb 2013; Liberatore 2017), moral ambivalence (Schielke 2009a, 2009b, 2015), feelings of imperfection and moral failure (de Koning 2013; Jouili 2015; Kloos 2017), skepticism and doubt about religious truth claims (Pelkmans 2013), and moving into a phase of non-belief (Cottee 2015; Enstedt 2018; Schielke 2012; Van Nieuwkerk 2018b). Then I briefly introduce my interlocutors, particularly their veiling stories. This helps me to evaluate their motivations for the unveiling. In the subsequent sections, I discuss my interlocutors' motivations for the unveiling: religious symbol fatigue, rejection of family pressure, refusal to see the veil as a prerequisite for female religiosity, and religious doubt and non-belief.

2. The Politics of (Un)veiling in Turkey

Veiling among urban Muslim women has been the subject of great controversy in Turkey since the rise of the Islamist movement in the 1980s. Although the practice never disappeared during the Republican period, and—unlike in Iran—Republican elites did not outlaw veiling, they employed pedagogic methods (e.g., balls, beauty pageants, magazine articles, radio broadcasts, anti-veiling campaigns) to promote a new national look for women (Adak 2014; Chehabi 2004; Çınar 2005). This new urban style was inspired by Western clothing habits, but it was not mere imitation. Instead, the ideal Turkish woman was portrayed as a "modern-yet-modest" (Najmabadi 1991), "veiling" her sexuality in the public sphere not by donning the veil, but "by deemphasizing femininity and projecting a "neuter" identity" (Kandiyoti 1997, p. 126). There was an absence of fashion for urban Muslim women who wanted to veil: head-covering remained largely non-urban, marking the wearer as provincial or rural.

As a result, women combining the veil with Western fashion were nowhere to be seen in the urban public spaces until the 1960s. The transition to multiparty politics and democracy in the aftermath of World War II, as well as the internal migration and urbanization accelerated in the 1960s, created a socio-political environment favorable to devout Muslims. In this period, though very few in numbers, young women with the distinctive urban Islamic look (i.e., a large square headscarf pinned under the chin which covers all the hair and the neck and is combined with a matching overcoat) began to enroll in universities. Due to the lack of specific regulations on the head covering, the headscarf-wearing students during the 1960s and 1970s did not have uniform experiences. While some pursued education with the veil, others were forced to unveil by university professors. Some transgressors were expelled from the college (Aksoy 2005).

Following the 1980 coup d'état, the National Security Council issued decrees outlawing the headscarf in universities and the public sector. The ban in the 1980s was in action on

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[4]　Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, some interviews were conducted through videoconferencing.

and off due to the then-prime minister Turgut Özal and his center-right Motherland Party (ANAP)'s efforts. The attempts to lift the ban were futile, but ANAP negotiated to moderate the regulations (e.g., allowing students to wear a *turban* or authorizing universities to impose their own regulations) (Çınar 2005, pp. 78–83).[5]

In the 1980s, the rise of the Islamist movement was the main reason why the headscarf issue was always on the political agenda. The Islamist movement caused a dramatic change in some urban women's clothing, as increasing numbers began to wear headscarves. In parallel with the process of economic liberalization and the emergence of devout Muslim male entrepreneurs, a market for urban Islamic attire developed (Gökarıksel and Secor 2010; Sandıkçı and Ger 2002). Although not all urban female veiling practitioners supported Islamist politics, the Islamist Welfare Party's (RP) success in the 1994 local elections and RP's becoming a partner in a coalition government in 1996 came as a shock to secular sections of society (Çınar 2005).[6] Secular Turks' fear of an "Islamist takeover" primarily targeted headscarf-wearing women studying at universities or working as public servants. The soft coup of 28 February 1997 aimed to impede the popularity of the RP; thereafter, the ban on the headscarf in universities and the public sector was strictly implemented (Barras 2013), and an unofficial ban in the private sector became more widespread (Cindoğlu and Zencirci 2008). The ban was justified on the grounds that the veil violated equal rights and the freedom of others. Veiled students were also accused of extremist opposition to the secularist regime and aspirations to replace democracy with theocracy (Arat 2001).

The ban on the headscarf did not diminish but rather increased public appearances of veiled women. Along with the members of Islamist politics, veiled women organized public demonstrations against the ban (Özyürek 2006). Some chose women-led grassroots activism to campaign against the ban, arguing that it violated women's citizenship rights to religious freedom, education and work (Barras 2013; Çayır 2000). These activists highlighted the gendered nature of the ban and aimed to draw support from secular feminist NGOs. The headscarf ban as an issue of women's solidarity, however, was a highly contentious topic. Particularly Kemalist and socialist feminists perceived the veil as a symbol of women's oppression. Thus, collaborating with women who 'consent to their own oppression', they argued, was against the idea of women's solidarity (Marshall 2005). Still, some liberal feminist platforms and liberal intellectuals sided with Muslim women activists and defended women's right to wear the veil (Amargi 2011; Arat 2004).

Headscarf-wearing women coped with the ban in diverse ways. Some chose to unveil to remain in higher education or the job market. Some preferred to be part-time veil practitioners, removing it at the entrance to their school or workplace. Some quit their jobs or their education. The headscarf ban also led to a braindrain of veiled women, mainly to Europe and the USA.

It was in this context that the AKP achieved electoral victory in 2002. For pious sections of society, what brought the AKP to power was not just the financial crisis of 2000–1, but also the aftermath of 28 February. Women who had suffered from the headscarf ban hoped it would be ended by the newly founded, Islam-friendly AKP. However, it was

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[5]　For the exact chronology of the ban, see: (Benli 2011).

[6]　Drawing on Salwa Ismail (2006) and Cihan Tuğal (2009), I refer to Islamist politics, or political Islam, as a modern political project which not only aims to insert itself into political, but also the social and cultural spheres. Islamism generates a coherent Islamic narrative through appropriation of religious symbols, signs, and ideas from Islamic traditions. Even though Islamist politics is thought of as positioning itself against secularism, following Asad (2003), I read binary categories of "the secular" and "the religious" are modern discursive constructions to mediate and shape people's identities. Thus, both secularism and Islamism refer to dynamic, relational, and context specific political processes, their meanings are always constructed and constrained by power relations. It is not the Qur'an which determines Islamism, but rather the socio-political context which decides its contours. Therefore, Islamism has the ability not to oppose secularism, but instead to adapt to changing conditions through appropriation, negotiation, and absorption (Ismail 2006; Tuğal 2009). Hence, I do not analyze the rise of political Islam in Turkey in regard to the contention that Islamization aims at total change in the legal system in favor of Sharia law. Instead, for the Turkish experience, it would be more accurate, following Tuğal's argument, to emphasize the secular state's absorption of Islamism into neoliberal conservatism.

only after the AKP's third term in office that the ban was gradually lifted between 2010 and 2016.[7]

The lifting of the ban was a slow and tedious process. This was first because of the secularist backlash against the AKP's early attempts to abolish the ban. The 2007 election of President Abdullah Gül made his veiled wife Turkey's first headscarf-wearing first lady. This was followed in 2008 by efforts to lift the ban in higher education, resulting in a closure case against the AKP.[8] In 2010 the ban was abolished *de jure* for university students only. Although secularist attacks made the AKP reluctant to lift the ban in all sectors at once, the 2010 constitutional referendum made the AKP more immune to secularist challenges. Nevertheless, the AKP continued to use the headscarf ban as political leverage to maintain the support of its devout Muslim electorate.

The most telling event was Muslim women activists' "No Headscarf, No Vote" campaign during the 2011 general elections. These activists had long lobbied for the abolition of the ban. This time they asked the political parties to nominate headscarf-wearing election candidates. Although the AKP presented itself as the "patron" of headscarf-wearing women's rights, it did not support these campaigners and indeed dismissed them as "self-interested women", "seditionists" and "feminists" (Kütük-Kuriş 2016). In response to these accusations, some campaigners "confessed" that they had made a mistake; to deploy Jalal's (1991) useful notion, they chose the "convenience of subservience" to the AKP's male-governed party politics. These events exacerbated the binary opposition between "good" and "bad" Muslim women, providing the AKP with an effective discursive tool to create and regulate political friction within Muslim women's organizations. This discursive regime was especially beneficial in terms of the AKP's monopoly over women's civil society activism.

In its first two terms, the AKP collaborated with both secular and Muslim feminist activists to reframe the woman question according to the principle of gender equality (e.g., the 2001 and 2004 reforms to the Penal and Civil Code) (Ilkkaracan 2007). However, as the AKP moved away from the European Union accession process, the emphasis on gender equality was replaced by gender justice (or equity) (Kandiyoti 2019)—a notion based on the thesis of complementarity between women and men—thus bypassing women's demands for equality. The AKP accelerated the process in 2013 with the foundation of the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), a government-supported non-governmental organization vice-chaired by President Erdoğan's daughter. Some Muslim women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) took the same path and began acting as AKP-directed organizations, to use Molyneux's (1998) characterization. These developments led to the marginalization of not only secular women's NGOs but also Muslim feminist NGOs that critiqued the complementarity thesis from within Islam. Thus, since 2013, those aligned with the AKP's Islamically conservative gender policies have played an active role in women's issues from domestic violence to divorce, maintenance payments and empowerment.

Women's multiple trajectories of (un)veiling in Turkey need to be analyzed against this social and political backdrop.

3. Conceptualizing Muslim Women's Unveiling

Feminist scholarship on the Middle East has given central importance to the role of the veil in Muslim women's subject-formation processes. Some early studies depicted Muslim women as passive onlookers in masculine power regimes due to the veil (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1975; Moghissi 1999); others overemphasized the veil's subversive potential against secularist and colonial regimes and saw Muslim women as empowered subjects

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[7] First, the ban at universities was lifted *de jure* in 2010. In 2013, the ban on veiled lawyers and civil servants was abolished. Following the 2013 democratization package, four female AKP representatives entered parliament wearing the veil. The ban on veiled judges was abolished in 2015, and on police officers in 2016.

[8] The Constitutional Court rejected the attempted legal action.

(Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; Göle 1996; Arat 2005). However, later sociological and political-economy approaches established that headscarf-wearing Muslim women are not a homogeneous group: there is great variety in their perceptions of Islam and the veil, depending on their differing affiliations (e.g., class, education, generation, occupation, geography, ideological alignment). The literature shows that not all veil practitioners sympathize with political Islam, and not all of them explain their motivation for wearing the veil on religious grounds (Zuhur 1992). Religious and cultural values often intertwine, and some women embrace the veil to maintain social respectability (Abu-Lughod 1986). Social class has received special attention since upper- and lower-class women have different motives for adopting the veil (e.g., social status, entry into the job market or educational institutions) (El-Kholy 2002; Macleod 1991; White 1994).

Although this wide body of work has shown that political affiliation, class belonging and cultural values are no less significant than religious factors in women's decisions to wear the veil, the turn to piety in the early 2000s reclaimed the relationship between religiosity and the veil. Mahmood (2005) famous work on female piety examined Muslim women's self-realization processes in terms of their obedience to external authority, i.e., God. In this context, the veil and other religiously driven performances (e.g., daily prayers) are disciplinary acts to cultivate "better" Muslim selves. In other words, for Mahmood, the veil as bodily performance constructs the "good" Muslim woman.

Mahmood's emphasis on piety and Islamic norms as strictly constitutive of Muslim female subjectivity has been severely criticized by a number of anthropologists of Islam (Bangstad 2011; Deeb and Harb 2013; Kloos 2017; Schielke 2009b). They contend—and I agree—that Muslim subjects have various and often conflicting aspirations, even if they try to live pious lives. These aspirations include being economically successful, pursuing educational activities, participating in sports, experiencing romantic love or enjoying leisure pursuits. These scholars have demonstrated the ways in which Muslim subjects (re)negotiate the norms of Islamic piety to achieve such objectives. Thus, instead of focusing on the cultivation of the "perfect" Muslim, these scholars investigate how Muslim subjects live with imperfection and ambivalence, which are innate to the human experience. The role of piety in Muslims' lives cannot be denied, but these scholars define piety "as a process [. . .] rather than a rigid process of climbing a ladder of faith" (Deeb and Harb 2013, p. 156). They focus not on pious perfection but on moral flexibility in Muslim subjects' discourses and practices.

Building on these recent anthropological engagements with moral flexibility and ambivalence, I argue that women's unveiling is not necessarily related to a decline in their religious convictions. Multiple factors inform Muslim women's decisions to unveil, just as they have myriad reasons for veiling in the first place. The adoption of the veil does not necessarily indicate the achievement of "perfect" piety; not all ex-hijabis turn away from piety. Here, I draw on Pelkmans's (2013) notion of religious doubt as an internal process of the mind, referring to individuals' questioning of religious truth claims and their search for alternative religious knowledge. For Pelkmans, religious doubt is not the opposite of religious belief; it is co-constitutive of belief. In the case of the unveiling, some women may begin to feel uncertain whether the veil is mandatory in Islam. Some may further doubt traditional interpretations of Islamic sources that put women in a subordinate position. Thus, in this article, unveiling refers to Muslim women's religious transformation—a dynamic, nonlinear, open-ended process.

Deeb and Harb's (2013) "alternative fatwas" and Liberatore's (2017) "mosque hopping" are illuminating here. These scholars suggest that Muslim women have the moral flexibility to choose among different Islamic interpretations instead of following one particular scholar. For veiled women who are considering unveiling, this flexibility is highly significant: before making their decision to unveil, most of my interlocutors had engaged with various Islamic sources on female piety. Of course, the search for new insights does not necessarily yield answers to one's questions (in my interlocutors' case, the question of the veil). Pelkmans (2013) regards religious doubt as an unsettling state of mind that

pushes individuals towards resolution and certainty. Nevertheless, some of my interlocutors were still unsure whether the veil was a religious requirement. Here I follow McBrien (2013, p. 254), who argues that "prolonged doubting pushes subjects towards resolution, which allows a return to non-reflection, to everydayness, a situation in which they feel at relative ease or peace in the world". I also draw on Schielke's (2009a, 2009b) use of moral ambivalence and imperfection to examine cases where Muslim subjects simply learn to live with ambiguity and complexity.

However, we should not rule out the role of self-perceived moral failure as a constitutive element in Muslim subjectivities (de Koning 2013; Jouili 2015; Kloos 2017). Kloos (2017, p. 2), for example, studies feelings of moral failure as an "ethically productive rather than devastating" experience and discusses the flexible and creative ways in which "Muslims deal, in thought and action, with the problem of sinning" (Kloos 2017, p. 24). This framework helps us to understand ex-hijabi women who continue to believe that the veil is mandatory but learn to live with their own religious lapse.

As noted above, removal of the veil does not necessarily entail the abandonment of Islam. However, some of my interlocutors engaged doubtfully with traditional as well as more egalitarian Islamic interpretations, moving into the process of becoming non-believers. Because religious transformation processes are open-ended journeys, the exit of some ex-hijabis from Islam should also be analyzed. Drawing on scholars who examine how cycles of religious doubt can bring loss of faith and how ex-Muslims manage their departure from Islam (e.g., Cottee 2015; Enstedt 2018; Schielke 2012), this article also discusses some ex-hijabis' strategies for managing their newly acquired non-believing selves.

4. Ex-Hijabi Women: Not a Homogeneous Group

As stated above, there was intense media coverage on the case of women's unveiling. Moreover, I myself am a headscarf-wearing woman since my early teenage years, and I have recently heard various third-person stories of unveiling from friends and family. As a researcher, I also had interlocutors from the previous ethnographic study who decided to unveil. Thus, at the time, I decided to embark on this research, I was already aware that women from a different class, family and ideological backgrounds decided to unveil. I intended to show this variety in my research. Yet, I also knew that being a veiled researcher would have both its merits and limits. After all, ex-hijabi women were being judged by different groups. To them, speaking about their decision with a veiled woman would be an uncomfortable experience. There was also the possibility that they may feel that I would empathize with their hardship. Moreover, as a veiled woman, I had the contacts not easily available to a "secular" researcher. With the assistance of family members, friends, colleagues and interlocutors from my previous fieldwork, I began interviewing my interlocutors. Hence, it was thanks to the support given by this wide social network that my ex-hijabi informants had little in common except their decision to unveil. They displayed differences in social class, religious and ideological upbringing, parents' education, and city of birth.

Despite this diversity, my informants, who were aged between 23 and 41, all had undergraduate degrees. Some had also pursued Masters or doctoral degrees. Another similarity was that even though some had been raised in small Anatolian cities, all informants had received their tertiary education in metropolises (in Turkey or abroad). Upon graduation, all had decided to settle in metropolises to increase their employment opportunities. They were now white-collar employees with good career prospects in fields ranging from diplomacy to psychology, engineering, the arts, media and film. Despite their diverse social class positions and/or religious and ideological upbringings, they had developed urban and upwardly mobile lifestyles, arguably thanks to their educations. Their last commonality concerns their political affiliations. One interlocutor declared that she was pro-AKP. Another mentioned that her early support for the AKP had faded since the 2013 Gezi protests. Some also mentioned that they disapproved of the AKP's market-friendly approach because they felt that neoliberalism went against the Islamic ideal of justice.

Although most interlocutors felt the need to distance themselves from the AKP, they also stated that they did not support any of the opposition parties either, except one interlocutor who supported the People's Democratic Party.[9] When asked, they instead expressed their political views in terms of women's equal rights and individual freedoms.[10] This resonates with polls indicating that Turkish youth are undergoing a religious and political transformation (Konda 2019).

Nevertheless, their differences in class position and religious and ideological upbringing are major factors, making their experiences heterogeneous. Consider Irem (34, single), who was raised in Istanbul's shanty district of Ümraniye by lower-middle-class parents who adhered to traditional Islam:

> After primary school I began wearing the veil. This was what my family expected of me, and it was normal to me too. [. . .] Due to the headscarf ban, my parents wanted me to attend the Qur'anic course run by Diyanet instead of formal state education. A year later, however, my mother supported me to return to school, fearing that I would end up like her with no secondary school certificate. This was the only support I could get from my parents. [. . .] I continued formal education by taking the veil off at the school gate. Tiring days, it was hard making friends at school, as many students had prejudices about veiled women. [. . .] I didn't want to have a similar experience at university. [. . .] I liked studying abroad. But my parents couldn't back me financially. I worked in low-level jobs to meet my expenses abroad.

Irem now works in diplomacy for an international organization, a position she attained after years of hard work without parental support. Another interlocutor, Ece (32, married), was born into a bourgeois family and raised in Istanbul's affluent Erenköy neighborhood by university-educated parents who adhered to Sufi Islam. Although Ece had had negative experiences at work due to her veiling, neither her veiling narrative nor her relationship with her parents was similar to Irem's:

> My religious upbringing was based on ethics and morals not necessarily defined by Islam but by the importance of *şahsiyet* [character] and *mahremiyet* [privacy]. Head-covering was not my parents' top priority. Modest clothing was always advised, such as non-décolleté outfits. [. . .] My mother doesn't embrace the veil in its strict sense. She wears the veil loosely [revealing her hair] and wears trousers with short tunics. You couldn't tell that she was a hijabi. [. . .] My parents never encouraged me to veil. By contrast, they disapproved of my decision. I entered a phase of growing religiosity soon after I lost my granddad. This coincided with my university graduation. I sincerely wanted to wear the veil. My parents warned me that due to the negative stereotypes attached to the veil, my job prospects would be jeopardized. I did not listen to them.

Nur (41, married) stands at the other end of the class spectrum: her father worked in a factory, her mother was a housewife, and both adhered to traditional Islam. Nur was raised in the Aegean city of Manisa until her family's move to Izmir, Turkey's third most populous city, which is famous for its mostly secularist residents. Echoing Ece's narrative, Nur's parents did not wish her to adopt the veil. Yet unlike Ece's early socialization into Sufi Islam, Nur's Imam Hatip education introduced her to Islamism. Soon she took up the veil:

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[9] This left-wing party is mostly supported by secular Kurds in Turkey. Recently, secular intellectuals, leftists, devout Muslim democrats and members of other minority groups have also become members of parliament for this party.

[10] For example, there have recently been heated debates about the "Istanbul Convention", a Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Conservative NGOs, some Muslim intellectuals and the leaders of Islamic *tarikats* (orders) have lobbied against the convention, claiming that it will break up the family and promote LGBT rights. Not only secular and Islamic feminist NGOs, but also the pro-AKP KADEM has sided with the convention, arguing that it aims to protect women's rights. In the wake of these debates, many of my interlocutors preferred to express their political views in terms of their support for the convention. I observed a similar attitude to the 2013 Gezi protests: many interlocutors noted that they supported these protests.

> I won the public boarding school exams, but my father didn't want me to stay away from home. While searching for a school, our next-door neighbour, a deputy head at an Imam Hatip school, suggested his school. I enrolled there and really liked the environment. There I encountered Milli Gençlik Vakfı [National Youth Foundation, the youth organization of the former Islamist Welfare Party]. [. . .] These were my radical years. I read all Sayyid Kutb's work. I willingly adopted the veil, wore a *pardesü* [long, loose overcoat]. My bodily attitudes changed. I abstained from shaking hands or hugging with male cousins. I quit listening to pop music. These were all sins [laughing loudly]. My change caused a furore among my relatives, if not my parents. They thought I was indoctrinated.

Nur continued her education at a theology faculty in the conservative city of Erzurum. However, the headscarf ban disrupted her graduation, and she had to return to Izmir. To earn a living, she worked in low-level jobs. She stated that some flexibility in her observance of the veil began during this period:

> It was not practical to wear a *pardesü* while you work long hours at a factory. It was too hot. Mum told me that you work for *ekmek parası* [bread and butter]. Allah forgives. I then began wearing trousers with tunics.

Nur returned to university following the AKP's lifting of the headscarf ban.[11] She now works as a religious education teacher in a state school and lives a middle-class lifestyle with her son and husband, who works in academia.

As Irem's, Ece's and Nur's stories demonstrate, my interlocutors had diverse veiling experiences in relation to their class belongings and religious upbringings. Special attention must be paid to the role of ideological upbringing, specifically the ex-hijabis' relations with political Islam. In Nur's vignette, her enchantment with Islamist politics was very telling. Although half of my informants noted that either they or their families had once or still now supported political Islam, their approaches to that ideology were diverse. Compare Pınar's and Bilge's experiences. Computer programmer Pınar (28, single), the daughter of lower-middle-class parents that supported political Islam, had been born and raised in Kocaeli, a city known as "Istanbul's industrial extension". Arts correspondent Bilge (29, single), a daughter of middle-class, university-educated parents, had been raised in Istanbul's historic and religiously conservative neighborhood of Fatih. Pınar said:

> My parents were political activists, supporting the Welfare Party. My social environment was all made up of people that believed in the *dawa* movement. [. . .] I attended Qur'anic summer schools run by Islamic orders as well as Islamist groups. I liked courses run by the latter, as their curriculum also involved sports activities and reading sessions. There I met many intellectual headscarf-wearing women. I was inspired by them, began reading salvation novels,[12] and decided to wear the veil at the age of eight. My mother, who wears a black chador, was not sure "whether I would bear the responsibility of wearing it at a young age". My father appreciated it.

Bilge's parents' approach to political Islam was different:

> My parents are devout practicing Muslims. I wore the veil at the age of 13. [. . .] At the time, there was the craze for being an active Muslim. The Welfare Party era. I remember attending their demonstrations with my parents. Listening to *ezgis* [Islamically "proper" songs] at home. However, my parents couldn't fit in under the authority of a group. For them the 1990s Islamist trend was a passing

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11 The AKP granted an amnesty to headscarf-wearing women who had quit university because of the ban. Many veiled women exercised this right.

12 Islamic salvation novels (*hidayet romanları*) emerged as a genre in the 1980s. They are famous for their dichotomy between modern and Islamic ways of life, which is constructed through a secular character who has the material means to pursue a prosperous lifestyle, but fails to find real happiness and contentment. By contrast, the pious protagonist strictly follows Islamic values and ethics, and therefore is immune to discontent in the modern world. Salvation novels are so-called because they always have happy endings: a secular female character usually adopts an Islamic way of life—often symbolized by her donning the veil—and thanks to this transition, she finally finds the meaningful life she has sought (Çayır 2007).

thing. [. . .] I will also never be an exemplary hijabi. I never wear a *pardesü* or
a long tunic. I wore a turban [revealing the neck]. [. . .] My parents did not
criticize my style much. They were attracted to Sufism later. My father said "this
is a journey, a road. Just take it".

Sema's (23, married) parents' view of Islamism differed from both Pınar's and Bilge's
parents. A master's student in the arts, Sema was raised in a lower-middle-class household
in the eastern Marmara city of Sakarya. Her Islamist parents questioned mainstream Sunni
Islam and became politicized through the writings of revolutionary Shi'a figures such as
Ali Shariati. Sema narrated her upbringing:

I was born to Islamist parents. My father has secularist parents, but he became
attracted by Islamism to the extent that he changed his secular-sounding name
for an Islamic one by a court ruling. But his Islamism is critical of Sunni Islam.
He criticizes the neoliberalization of Islam, and therefore the AKP. So do I. Even
so, I studied at an Imam Hatip school. These were lonely years, because my
parents' view of Islam radically diverged from the official Islamic discourse at
school. To show my school friends I was different, I would carry Shariati's books
under my arm.

Pınar's, Bilge's, and Sema's experiences of political Islam show that even families who
adhere to political Islam had a diverse and changing understanding of Islamist politics. Just
as their parents had contending views of political Islam and gave various performances
of religiosity, my informants had also acquired their own "unique" understandings of
Islam and politics, which greatly differed from the way they had been brought up by their
parents. As discussed below, some even decided to leave the faith altogether.

5. Motivations for Unveiling

5.1. Fatigue from Muslim and Secular Gazes

The most recurrent answer to my interview question about unveiling was, "I no longer
want to represent Islam; I'd like to represent only myself". Since the veil is perceived as
the symbolic marker of Muslim identity and marks the female body as that of a prac-
ticing Muslim, it automatically enlists women to act as "perfect" or "proper" Muslims.
The definition of a "proper" Muslim woman comprises a combination of discursive and
bodily acts, including modesty in speech, behavior and clothing. Although it exhibits
wide variety in diverse Muslim spaces, laughing loudly, smoking cigarettes or shisha in
public, dancing or singing in mixed environments, socializing in alcohol-serving venues,
talking to members of the opposite sex in a seductive manner, wearing make-up, choosing
ostentatious colors and styles of dress, or not completely covering the hair and neck are all
regarded as "improper" bodily performances for veiled Muslim women (Deeb and Harb
2013; Kloos 2017; Kütük-Kuriş 2020; Liberatore 2017; Saktanber 2002; Van Nieuwkerk 2013).
Those who transgress the rules of Islamic modesty often experience verbal or non-verbal
expressions of public disapproval. They also receive advice on how to better cultivate
themselves as hijabis.

These practices of admonition are based on the Qur'anic concept of *amr-bil ma'ruf*
(commanding good or right and forbidding evil and wrong), which is defined as an
individual duty for every virtuous Muslim (Cook 2010). To explain the impact of this
notion on Muslims' lives, Khan (2012, p. 153) states that Muslims believe that there is a
"little mulla in each of us". My interlocutors fiercely criticized this notion of the "inner
mulla" who is responsible for "correcting" Muslim women's practices. Many stated that
being continuously judged by others (strangers and acquaintances alike) for their behavior
and appearance was an immensely frustrating experience. Irem, for example, stated that
she had first considered unveiling during her undergraduate years abroad. Although she
did not act on this at the time, her memories of how other Turkish Muslim students had
judged her clothing and behavior were vivid:

> I studied abroad due to the headscarf ban in universities. There were other
> Turkish students at my university, but I never got along with them. As they never
> approved of my veiling. Most were in *pardesüs*, their veils dropping over their
> shoulders. They talked behind my back, as I wore skinny clothes or make-up.
> [. . .] Some asked irritating questions such as whether my *wudu* [ablution] was
> acceptable when I had make-up on. Or I had male friends, and they were against
> the idea that men and women could be friends. On one hand, they gossiped
> about me. On the other, I saw that they did not pray regularly, so they did not
> truly live Islam either. Meanwhile, they employed the discourse of "Muslim
> sister". This seemed dishonest to me. I remember telling myself that I did not
> wish to be like them. Because I can't pray regularly either. I also can't stop
> thinking about whether I wear the veil properly.

Ece expressed her frustration:

> I came to the point of thinking that my veil prevented me from being Ece. I did
> not come into this world as a woman who was only responsible for wearing the
> veil. I came into this world to be Ece. But I am reduced to being a veiled woman.
> No one has the right to take my right to be Ece away from me, just because I also
> happen to be a veiled woman.

Ece's statement reveals that for ex-hijabis, the veil became an obstacle to their individuality.
For some, this negative experience stemmed from Muslim practitioners' attitudes toward
Muslim women, but some interlocutors regarded devout Muslims and secularists as two
sides of the same coin. Ece's narrative made an important criticism of devout Muslims:

> Since I wore the veil soon after my graduation, I only sought a job in companies
> run by devout Muslims. At the time, secularists would not even consider my
> CV because I was veiled. But my headscarf was a problem in the companies of
> devout Muslims too. The way they treated you was "be thankful that we gave
> you a job" [i.e., because of hijabis' lack of job options]. [. . .] The worst experience
> was my last job. There were no rules in the institution. Meritocracy did not apply.
> What mattered was your network. Who you know, whose nephew or friend you
> are. I had no chance to improve myself. I always struggled to be a successful
> woman, and look at me, I achieved nothing [in a sad voice]. All those years, no
> promising career. [. . .] They expect you to be a "perfect" Muslim, a *dawa* woman.
> But they ignored injustices created at their own hands. The betrayal of *dawa* was
> theirs. Not my skinny trousers. Their "perfect" Muslim women discourse felt
> sickening. I decided not to be regarded as one of them.

Irem's and Ece's criticisms of devout Muslims, and the question of whether those who
attacked their performances of piety were "perfect" Muslims themselves, are important:
they reveal that Irem and Ece had individualistic approaches to Islam and piety. This is a
way of being Muslim without adhering to *amr-bil ma'ruf*. Deeb's (2006) and Kloos's (2017)
distinction between social and personal piety is helpful here. Social piety refers to religious
practices and ideas that are not self-imposed but socially inculcated through *amr-bil ma'ruf*.
Personal piety, on the other hand, refers to the formation of personalized agency, a process
through which actors navigate their own assessments of religious beliefs and practices.
This does not necessarily mean that actors resist all practices promoted through social piety:
for example, Irem asked herself whether her veiling style was Islamically proper. However,
what ex-hijabis had in common was that they defined piety on individualistic terms, rather
than through external impositions.

Another crucial aspect of ex-hijabis' critique of devout Muslims who strictly followed
amr-bil ma'ruf relates to the fact that social piety rules are imposed primarily on women.
Ece's comparison of Muslim women's Islamically proper veiling with other Islamic values
such as justice was very telling. For Ece, favoritism and nepotism deeply conflicted
with Islamic values and ethics. Yet at her workplace—which was closely tied to the
AKP government—there were no safeguards against favoritism; it just became the norm.

Ece, therefore, criticized devout Muslims' gendered application of Islamic ethics. Her account levels strong criticism at the discourse of the "good" Muslim, which specifically aims to regulate women's bodily performances while overlooking the "wrongdoings" of Muslim men.

My interlocutors' negative experiences in regard to the veil did not only relate to their encounters with devout Muslims. They also shared numerous stories about secularists. The kernel of their problematic encounters with secularists was that headscarf-wearing women are commonly considered *de facto* supporters of political Islam. Considering the AKP's journey from the political margins to the establishment, this assessment is often intertwined with the presupposition that headscarf-wearing Muslim women support the AKP. As discussed above, the lifting of the headscarf ban has been an important subject. Its significance does not only lie in headscarf-wearing women's memories of their experiences of the ban. The AKP has further benefited from the headscarf ban discourse to keep its devout Muslim electorate intact. However, in parallel with feminist scholarship on the Middle East, in Turkey, the veil cannot be understood simply in relation to its wearers' political views. Headscarf-wearing Muslim women have diverse political orientations with respect to social class, generation, education, etc. As mentioned, this heterogeneity of political views was clearly evident among my interlocutors. This was why, for my interlocutors, being treated as pro-AKP made the experience of donning the veil difficult. Irem's workplace experiences illustrate this:

> In my current job, I work with foreigners and secularist Turks. They have their prejudices about me. This is not very apparent, they are very polite. But I still feel it. I cannot build up business networks easily. To achieve this, I attended several work dinners. Some take place in alcohol-serving restaurants. So as not to attract attention, I changed my style. I wore a *turban* and put on earrings. Still, I felt uneasy. Everyone gazes at you, as if to say "what is she doing here?" Or if there is a debate about Islam, they come to me with questions. But I am not an imam to issue fatwas. This is silly. I felt as if I was carrying a flag. [. . .] Or in my previous job, a colleague said "I hope Tayyip Erdoğan dies". Or the boss's driver, every single day, he would open the newspaper when I was around, and cursed Erdoğan.

Irem was my only interlocutor who openly supported the AKP, but despite her pro-AKP position, she stated: "Having such polarized debates in the workplace is not something I prefer. I often did not comment on these occurrences. But it is really exhausting". Although my other interlocutors did not support the AKP, they shared similar disturbing experiences because they had been taken as de facto AKP supporters. Thus, the hypervisibility of the veil and its wearers' assumed alignment with the AKP were important factors in their decisions to unveil. Bilge summarized this:

> There is this formulaic perspective that if you are a headscarf-wearing woman then you are pro-AKP, and if you are an unveiled woman then you are from Atatürkçü Düşünce Derneği [Atatürkist Thought Association, an ultra-laicist and ultra-nationalist NGO that vocally supported the headscarf ban]. This is a rigid view, unchangeable. I do not want to be likened to either of them. [. . .] Every time I met someone, I would first explain who I was not. I am done with this. By removing the veil, I chose to be neutral. When I am unveiled, you can't understand whether I support the AKP or whether I am an Atatürkist. Now you need to speak to me first to understand my views. This gave me some space. I desperately needed that zone of liberty.

Yeğenoğlu (1998) argues that the neat dichotomy between veiled and unveiled women is a discursive political construction. Bilge's statement is a good illustration of this discursive regime's distressing effects on headscarf-wearing women's everyday lives. This was why some of my informants had decided to unveil. In most cases, this decision was not about turning away from the Islamic faith. It was about abandoning its most visible symbol.

5.2. Parental Authority

Most interlocutors stated that they began to wear the veil soon after puberty. The adoption of the veil at a young age conforms with Islamic authorities' guidance for girls on when to commence the observance of religious duties (e.g., praying, fasting, veiling).[13] Nur had decided to wear the veil following her socialization into Islamic groups during her Imam Hatip years, and her close relatives had responded negatively to her veiling; Ece's parents had disapproved of her veiling. However, apart from these two, my interlocutors stated that wearing the veil from the age of puberty was commonly accepted in their family and social circles. Since veiling was the norm in their social environment, and the teaching of its importance as part of their religious upbringing, most told me that they had readily performed what their parents and family environment expected of them.

The cases of Filiz and Pınar, however, contradict the thesis of personal will in adopting the veil. They stated they had not liked wearing the veil but had been unable to reject their parents' authority. Their decisions to unveil referred to the abandonment of a practice they never had willingly embraced. They felt strong enough to make the decision only after they had made their own readings of Islam. This helped them to come to terms with their own negative feelings about the practice. They had both carried out their decision after attaining economic independence. Another commonality between Pınar and Filiz was their upbringing in small, Islamically conservative Anatolian cities where the image of the veil had religious as well as cultural connotations (e.g., honor, social reputation) (for a comparative case study on Egypt see van Nieuwkerk, this issue). In comparison with interlocutors who had grown up in metropolises or less conservative Aegean cities (such as Nur), Pınar and Filiz described their parents as having rigid definitions of modesty. These definitions had regulated their attire since early childhood. Filiz (28, divorced) had been raised in the historic province of Safranbolu in the Black Sea region by middle-class parents attached to traditional Islam. Her narrative about her parents was informative:

> My father is an imam. He is a respected person whom people ask for fatwas. He always wanted me to properly represent his religious authority. My parents both reminded me that I was going to wear the veil when the time came [menarche]. [. . .] My clothing had always been an issue. For example, as a small girl, I always wore boys' clothes such as trousers and a blue shirt. My city wasn't rich in textiles. But for sure, the shops had both girls' and boys' departments, and my mother always picked my clothes from the boys'. She had an issue about girls wearing skirts. I remember wearing trousers, not tights, under my school uniform. [. . .] Then my periods began, earlier than I expected. To me this was bad luck, because I did not want to wear the veil. When I began wearing it, I could not make my parents happy, though. My father always commented like "why don't I wear longer tunics" or "why do I prefer skinny trousers" etc. For that reason I did not join my parents' excursions for a year, to avoid any disputes about my clothing [. . .] I was very determined to pursue my university education in Istanbul, to have a more independent life. It wasn't like a plan that I would move to Istanbul and then remove my veil. I was just certain that I would not spend my entire life in a small city right beside my parents.

Filiz did indeed pursue her tertiary education in Istanbul. She currently studies for her Ph.D in psychology. Her experience with her father, who assigned her the role of pious perfection, in Mahmood (2005) sense, and with her mother, who forbade her to wear clothes associated with a female identity, illustrates the adverse consequences that can arise from parents' authority over children's religious upbringing. Pınar also said that her

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13   Muslim legal scholars do not commonly agree on the exact age of maturity. Girls are accepted as sexually and psychologically mature from the onset of puberty, and the performance of religious duties must then begin. However, the distinction between minors and adults in classic texts has become complex following the modernization process, especially since international organizations such as the United Nations introduced the new category of adolescence. An adolescent is regarded as having a sexually mature body, but as not having yet attained "the age of reason". Due to its secular foundations, the Turkish legal system reflects this tripartite categorization (Fernea 2006).

strict upbringing had aroused enormous anger against her parents as well as religion itself. As mentioned above, although Pınar had chosen to wear the veil under the influence of Qur'anic summer schools, she soon regretted her decision:

> I was not happy, as my parents became overly controlling. My father would check my clothes before I went out. [. . .] There were specific rules for me, never applied to my brothers. I was not allowed to go out at night, or shop alone. My parents' strict approach became unbearable. [. . .] They never asked what my wishes were, they just concentrated on what they expected from me. [. . .] I felt that this system did not work for my benefit. It caused anger in me. [. . .] I was just around 14, and my first questioning of women's status in Islam began. I questioned the verses in the Qur'an and the Sunnah concerning women. [. . .] I then realized that my parents had the wrong understanding of Islam. But what is the right way? [. . .] You see, unveiling is only a detail in my story. My problem with my parents' authority turned into a problem with Islam, male authority in Islam.

Parents' rights over their children's religious upbringing is a highly contested issue beyond the scope of this article. However, I wish to highlight that Filiz and Pınar carefully regulated the social and political implications of their narratives of strict parenting and religious upbringing. Their stories have considerable potential to reproduce the neo-Orientalist discourse that portrays Muslim women as oppressed by their religion and views the veil as the symbol of their subjugation. Filiz and Pınar were aware that their stories might be taken as stories of "liberation" versus "oppression". They both expressed discomfort that their experiences might contribute to neo-Orientalism or Islamophobia. Consider Filiz's statement:

> My story is in fact a story of liberation. But I know very well that my experiences are not representative of all headscarf-wearing women. [. . .] This is why I explained to no one what had motivated my decision.

Although both Filiz's and Pınar's religious upbringings had triggered a process of religious doubt, only Pınar left the Islamic faith, as I will discuss in detail below. Despite her negative views of Islam, Pınar took extra care in her expression of those views, as she did not want to be taken for an Islamophobe:

> I feel real anger towards what I experienced during my childhood. My anger is very explicit in my discourse about Islam. But I do not like to be regarded as an Islamophobe. [. . .] I openly share my views only with my headscarf-wearing Muslim feminist friends. At first, I even avoided voicing my thoughts to them. But they understood where my anger comes from. In fact, it was these Muslim feminist friends who encouraged me to take off the veil. They told me, "if you do not believe in Islam, then you should be honest with yourself. You shouldn't continue to perform a practice that you do not believe in".

With regard to Filiz's and Pınar's accounts of religious upbringing as their main motivation for the unveiling, I must also emphasize the strong relationship between urbanization and religious education in the family. Irem and Hilal also mentioned that their clothing had been strictly regulated by their parents. Furthermore, Hilal (25, single), who had been raised by university-educated middle-class parents, stated that she had postponed her decision to unveil because she had not yet convinced her aging parents and did not want to upset them. At the time of the interview, after a year of postponement, she was finally about to carry out her decision: thanks to her new job in a film production company, she had saved enough money to move into a flat with a friend:

> My going out without the veil would sadden my mother. The transition process would also be hard for me, so I can't bear her reactions while I continue to live with them. I recently agreed with a friend to become flatmates. Once I move out, I will stop wearing the veil.

Hilal tellingly emphasized the importance of economic independence as an antidote to parental pressure. Economic independence was also evident in Filiz's and Pınar's cases. Nevertheless, I perceive Filiz and Pınar as very different from Hilal. First, the problem of parental authority was center stage in their unveiling stories. Second, both Filiz and Pınar had been brought up in small, conservative Anatolian cities. The experience of urbanization is an important factor for ex-hijabis because urban life offers alternatives that may help them to develop better mechanisms to cope with parental authority.

5.3. Religious Doubt

The hardships my interlocutors faced in their everyday lives due to the veil propelled some to make further readings of Islamic sources about women's veiling. They often sought out various interpretations of the Qur'an to establish whether the veil was religiously mandatory. For some, this inquiry was the key to their decision to unveil. Once they had found alternative interpretations, they could set themselves "free" from religious guilt in Kloos's (2017) sense. Ece's changing views on the veil were important:

> I began questioning whether the veil is *ibadat* [worship]. I am still not sure. [. . .] I already pray five times a day. To me this is more important. Because *ibadat*, when it is done with love, must give you comfort and benefit. The harm that being veiled has done to me, however, exceeded its benefits [referring to her negative experiences in the workplace]. Because of these so-called devout Muslims in the workplace, I was on the brink of losing my faith. I did not let this happen, so I gave up any extra merit that wearing the veil would have brought me. I preferred my faith to my veil. I now see things very differently.

Hilal too stated that she was unsure whether the veil was a requirement in Islam:

> I am a devout Muslim, but I am confused whether veiling is *fard* [a binding religious duty]. Because the Qur'an says cover your bosom. It seemed to me that the verse does not apply specifically to the hair. I searched about this online, hoping to find respected scholars approving this view. My parents, for example, like the views of Şaban Ali Düzgün [a reformist Islamic theologian]. I came across one of his TV appearances with Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal [a Muslim feminist hadith scholar]. Although she herself is a veiled woman, Tuksal argues that the veil is a cultural practice. I sent a link to this TV program to our family WhatsApp group. My parents chose to ignore my unveiling decision. I want them to know that I am certain about my decision.

Hilal's case demonstrates that not all ex-hijabis turn away from Islam itself. Yet, like Hilal, most question Islamic truth claims. Hilal's unhappiness with the veil pushed her into intense uncertainty about it. Her engagement with various Islamic scholars resonates with Liberatore's (2017) informants' "mosque hopping", or Deeb and Harb's (2013) informants, who picked and mixed "alternative fatwas" rather than following one particular jurisprudent. In Hilal's case, her alternative fatwa referred to doubts about the common Islamic interpretation of female veiling. Here I refer to Pelkmans's (2013) definition of religious doubt as having a "push" effect on the doubter. In Pelkmans's view, Muslims in relationships of doubt with traditional Islamic sources push themselves to find a resolution. Although Hilal was still uncertain, her case illustrates how religious doubt facilitates the quest for alternative knowledge.

On the other hand, some interlocutors' religious doubts did not begin with questioning the veil. Their general unease about classic Islamic sources on women and other taboo topics such as drinking alcohol led them to seek different interpretations. They then encountered historicist readings of the Qur'an, and a radical transformation began in their beliefs and understandings about Islam. Thus, there was variety in their experiences of religious doubt: some interlocutors' uncertainty went beyond the veil. Nur's account was telling:

I first encountered historicist approaches to the Qur'an and hadith collections during my graduate studies in theology. I never heard of Fazlur Rahman [a modernist Muslim scholar] in my undergraduate years. Professors at my undergraduate university were really conservative, they presented such views as nonsense. However, my postgraduate supervisor belonged to a school of historicism. This opened a whole new world to me. I was baffled by the idea of interpreting the Qur'an differently. I began thinking about the overall objective of the Qur'an and hadiths. I assessed normative truth claims defended by Islamic jurists against what are seen to be the real intentions of Allah's revelation. My change, therefore, is an intellectual one. The way I see Islam has changed. I do not see *ibadats* hierarchically. Prayers, fasting, you name it. I believe that Allah issued religious dictums for general ethics. Not for single *ibadats*. At the time of the Prophet, the veil as a form might have been necessary. But for me, this form does not apply to our contemporary lives. What applies are the general objectives of the Qur'an.

Nur's story of religious transformation is important, given that she teaches religion and ethics in a state primary school. In light of her controversial views, I asked how she had managed the process of unveiling and how she conducted her classes:

I first told my husband about my decision. It was ok with him, but he told me "wait until we move to Istanbul". At the time, we were about to move from Izmir to Istanbul. I found his idea reasonable, because this idea of a religious education teacher removing her veil might create a furore among the parents. But in Istanbul, it would be a fresh start. Students would see me as an unveiled teacher, not knowing about my change. [. . .] Besides, in my classes I teach students the common Sunni interpretation of Islam. I do not share my own views. [. . .] At home, I try to be an example to my boy. I sometimes pray, putting the veil on loosely. It is important for him to see the prayer mat or *tasbih* [prayer beads]. I attach great importance to *zikr* [acts for the remembrance of Allah]. Before going to sleep, we express our gratitude to Allah. When my son asked me about religion, I gave him answers in accordance with Sunni Islam. Not because I believe that he needs to do all the *ibadats*. But he needs to know them so as not to feel socially isolated.

Nur's unveiling story and her relationship with her son demonstrate the importance of having a strategy before putting one's decision to unveil into action. Although Nur was not a non-believer, she knew very well that her views might be taken as "improper" in a predominantly Sunni Muslim society. She, therefore, benefited from strategies adopted by other ex-Muslims (e.g., Cottee 2015). For example, she postponed her decision in order to alleviate the psychological complications that might arise from comments by her students' parents about her unveiling; at school, she passed as a Sunni Muslim, despite her controversial views on classic Islamic sources. She also took special care of her boy's upbringing. Nur wanted her son not to feel alienated, and she tried to build his belonging to the larger Muslim community.

Filiz's intellectual journey has similarities with Nur's religious transformation. The similarity, however, does not extend to the final moment of unveiling, which for Filiz was unique in its speed, even though her intellectual quest had been a long and dynamic process:

As my father is an imam, we had a big library with Islamic books. I read them all [. . .]. But since my childhood what these books taught never seemed right to me. [. . .] My readings continued in later years. I came to the conclusion that yes, there is a Creator, there is Allah. *Ibadats* do good to one's soul. But I believe there are various ways of doing *ibadats*. [. . .] When it comes to the veil, I believe that the fatwas of the seventh century reflect the society of their time, and these fatwas can't apply today. [. . .] All these thoughts made me certain that I do not accept Islam as a package. I mean that there is a template dictating

that you cannot drink alcohol, extramarital sex is forbidden. Or women must veil, and they must behave in this or that way. You are supposed to abide by it. I never bought this package. [. . .] One night, contemplating these thoughts, I told myself: "Filiz, you deny this package. You drink alcohol, thinking that if you do not lose your social and cognitive functions, then it is ok. You believe that if your action does not harm anyone, then it is ok. Then why do you never think outside the box about the veil?" It was the very first time I wondered whether I should unveil. My heartbeat quickened. [. . .] I decided to try going unveiled for a week, to make my informed decision. The following day it took me hours to step outside. Yet I went outside wearing a minidress. Since then, I have been unveiled.

Filiz's account of her unveiling and religious transformation is important in many respects. First, her views on alcohol and dancing in mixed environments show that she defines piety in individualistic terms. This is also a criticism of social piety, which requires Muslims to act modestly for the public good. For Filiz, individual choices come before social responsibilities to present oneself as a "perfect" Muslim. Indeed, she denies the association of specific manners and behaviors with Muslim perfection. Second, her quick decision-making process illustrates Pelkmans's (2013) notion of religious doubt as unsettling the individual and triggering a resolution. Filiz has already reached a resolution in her inner world; her unveiling decision completes her attainment of certainty.

5.4. Exiting Islam

Many interlocutors said they had experienced a period of religious doubt before making the decision to unveil. This is often related to classic Islamic interpretations of the veil as a religious imperative whose abandonment may trigger a sense of moral failure or sin. Irem and Bilge, who had not embarked on any quest for alternative Islamic interpretations, explained how they had come to terms with their own religious negligence (Kloos 2017) or learned to live with ambivalence (Schielke 2015). Nevertheless, most interlocutors mentioned that the process of religious doubt had introduced them to gender-inclusive interpretations of Islam. These alternative readings helped them to cope with their negative experiences concerning the veil without experiencing feelings of religious negligence. However, Pınar's and Sema's search for alternative Islamic interpretations led them further—into a process of religious disaffiliation. Pınar explained how she exited Islam:

My childhood memories never stopped haunting me. I had anger towards Islam, thinking that Islam promotes men's interests. [. . .] At university, I met Muslim intellectuals who denied the Sunnah and relied only on the Qur'an. This gave me relief for some time. But my peace with this new interpretation soon faded. This new correct reading seemed not very correct. For instance, marital rape is a big issue for me, and this new perspective was still weak on this subject. [. . .] I began thinking that I had made an enormous effort to understand the correct form of Islam. But most women couldn't dedicate the same time and energy. Think about women working 12 hours a day in a factory. How do such women find the correct reading? [. . .] I therefore couldn't hold onto this new and moderate version of Islam.

As discussed above, Pınar shared her views with her headscarf-wearing Muslim feminist friends. Sema had a slightly different story:

I liken parental bonding styles to my relationship with God. I have divorced parents, and this affected me during my teenage years. I particularly had problems with my mother. We never had a secure attachment style. The same way I denied my mothers' authority, I denied God's authority. [. . .] I have always believed that I did not choose Islam, it was assigned to me by my parents. I have always thought that submission to God does not suit my nature. This is why I always

> paid attention to faith, not Islamic law or specific *ibadats*. [. . .] Although I was
> veiled, I had issues with alcohol, I tried drugs. I lived with my boyfriend before
> we got married. [. . .] I never searched for the true Islam. For a time, I was in
> close contact with Muslim feminists. At the time, I had already begun wearing
> the veil loosely [revealing the hair]. Then my readings brought me to deism, and
> I quickly stopped wearing the veil. In the last couple of years, I began defining
> myself as an atheist. This was like a watershed, once you deny God there is no
> turning back.

Pınar's and Sema's stories share commonalities in their move into a phase of non-belief.
However, their stories have many differences too. In Pınar's religious transformation
story, a quest for "true" Islam plays a cardinal role. As explored in previous sections, as a
teenager, Pınar had believed in the romanticized Islam presented in salvation novels. She
only used alcohol or dated after she had become a non-believer. By contrast, Sema had been
indifferent from several Islamic observances and dispositions (e.g., praying, abstaining
from alcohol, showing modesty in relation to the opposite sex), even though she had
adopted the veil. However, unlike in parental authority stories, Sema had not perceived
the veil as an externally imposed practice. As her views of Islam gradually changed, her
approach to the veil was also transformed (first a loose hijab, then unveiling).

Another important dimension in Pınar's and Sema's religious transformation pro-
cesses is that their transition from religious doubt to non-belief did not bring them resolu-
tion in Pelkmans's (2013) sense. Pınar, for example, told me that she did not want to define
herself as an atheist or deist. She wanted "some time off"—or to follow McBrien's (2013)
take on religious doubt, a phase of non-reflection:

> To be honest, I do not ponder whether I am an atheist or a deist. I just moved out
> of Islam, and Islam had imposed on me a very intense identity. After leaving such
> a strong identity formation, finding another identity would mean constraining
> my freedom. I simply do not care whether God exists or not.

Pınar's statement of fatigue constitutes a non-reflection upon her newly acquired self. In
Sema's case, social motives to conceal her exit from the faith were apparent. Sema also
emphasized that her religious transformation was a dynamic process:

> Two or three years ago, I was a deist. Now, I am an atheist. But I don't publicly
> declare this. I only share it with close friends. I have suffered enough from stigma.
> It was because of the social stigma attached to the veil that I first said goodbye
> to my veil. I don't want a new stigma [of being an atheist]. [. . .] Secondly, I
> don't like to declare myself an atheist, because once you accept it, people behave
> as if your Muslim past never existed. I do not like this. [. . .] When you say
> "I am a Muslim", people expect you to act like Mohammad's lawyer. Likewise,
> when you say I am an atheist, people expect you to claim that Mohammad was
> a paedophile [referring to his marriage with Aisha]. I don't want to be in this
> frustrating game.

Sema's statement is significant in three respects. First, she was aware that being a non-
believer carried a moral stigma, and thus passing as a Muslim was an important strategy.
As Cottee (2015), Enstedt (2018), Schielke (2012) and Van Nieuwkerk (2018a) demonstrate,
being an ex-Muslim and sharing this only with trusted friends is a common strategy in
both Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority contexts. This is because, as Schielke (2012,
p. 309) argues for the Egyptian case, "morality is identified with religiosity to the extent
that "having no religion" means to lack any moral sense". Thus, Sema's reluctance to
declare her atheism was a strategy to avoid being accused of immorality or targeted as
an apostate. Second, Sema criticized the neo-Orientalist discourse about Islam, and her
concealment strategy prevented her from being taken for an Islamophobe. Last, Sema
valued her Muslim past. The significance she attributed to that past slightly differed from
the way the literature discusses ex-Muslims who—especially in the early stages of their
transition—have difficulty giving up some religious observances (e.g., drinking alcohol,

having extramarital sex, eating pork) (Cottee 2015; Enstedt 2018). As elaborated above, Sema said that she had occasionally broken rules of propriety concerning female piety during the time she had identified as a Muslim. Thus, for Sema, respecting her Muslim past was about reconciliation with her memories and experiences of Islam.

Pınar's move into the phase of non-belief had other complex dynamics. She displayed some similarities with the ex-Muslims described by Cottee (2015) and Enstedt (2018). For example, Cottee (2015) notes that leaving Islam requires one to both learn and unlearn habits, tastes or clothing practices. Contrary to both Cottee and Enstedt, Pınar did not describe drinking alcohol or dating as stressful experiences: "At the beginning, I lost control. I got drunk. [...] I still drink when I see secular friends. But I decided not to spend so much money on this. I've come to realize that drinking alcohol is not a big deal". However, a perhaps unexpected occurrence, which also paralleled the literature on ex-Muslims, was that Pınar sometimes missed the veil:

> Some days I miss wearing the veil. Because unveiling didn't dramatically change my life. It is my faith that has changed. Missing the veil isn't about religiosity. I performed this practice for years. Why should I suddenly abandon it? But I can't do part-time veiling either. Thoughts about "what would people say" hold me back. If I lived abroad, I would definitely try part-time veiling.

For both Pınar and Sema, unveiling was related to their religious disaffiliation process. However, leaving one's faith is a nonlinear and fluid process, and ex-Muslims may maintain some of their "old" practices and beliefs. Although veiling is often perceived as religiously driven, and some of my interlocutors gave it up at the risk of "sinning" (Irem, Bilge) or after seeking alternative Islamic interpretations (Nur, Filiz, Hilal), for others, it had simply been a habitual practice, and its abandonment might cause feelings of longing for an "old" habit, without religious connotations (Pınar).

6. Conclusions

This article has investigated the reasons why some hijabi Muslim women have recently decided to stop wearing the veil. This phenomenon has occurred under the Islamically inclined AKP, and the article has examined the extent to which women's motivations for unveiling relate to Turkey's current sociopolitical atmosphere. Although many of my ex-hijabi interlocutors declared that they did not like to be perceived as pro-AKP, I have outlined other sociological reasons as well as familial and theological motivations behind their decisions to unveil.

This article has discussed Muslim women's decisions to unveil in terms of their construction of a new perspective on politics and political authority. Their criticisms do not only target devout Muslims who demand Muslim perfection; ex-hijabi women also criticize the secularist gaze. A crucial point here is that despite the normalization of the headscarf under AKP rule, my interlocutors still refer to feelings of fatigue with the secularist gaze. Certainly, their fatigue is not unconnected to the increasingly polarized climate fostered by the AKP since the Gezi protests. Polarization and anti-AKP sentiments thus emerge as important reasons why many of my interlocutors have stopped wearing the veil. Most of my participants define their political alignment, not in terms of political party affiliations, but with regard to basic liberal and/or human rights conceptions (e.g., justice, women's equality, meritocracy, freedom of expression). Thus, although removing the veil may mean non-alignment with the AKP, it does not indicate adherence to any opposition parties.

Moreover, the article has argued that unveiling is closely related to Muslim women's religious transformation—a dynamic and nonlinear process. Contrary to popular media debates or Islamic and political discourses on the subject, unveiling is not necessarily about abandoning the Islamic faith. Most interlocutors' changing engagements with mainstream Islamic ideas, discourses, and symbols suggest that ex-hijabi women develop a new perspective on female piety. It is central to most interlocutors' experience of unveiling that they began by questioning the achievement of perfect piety—which necessitates the carefully regulated and socially policed implementation of behaviors, dispositions and acts

that are particularly imposed on women. Often critical of this gendered imposition of social piety, many ex-hijabi accounts demonstrate a growing dissonance with taken-for-granted Islamic discourses. Importantly, my interlocutors' religious doubts are diverse, ranging from questioning the veil as a religious dictum to challenging traditional interpretations of Islam or leaving the faith altogether. One surprising finding is that ex-hijabis sometimes miss the practice of veiling. Such longings for the veil, especially by ex-Muslims, subvert the veil's usual significance in the construction of the "perfect" Muslim. Moreover, ex-hijabi women's narratives of unveiling—particularly expressions of doubt about the veil as a religious dictum and the general defense of alternative readings of Islam—result in the reconfiguration of religious authorities (e.g., Diyanet, Islamic scholars, Islamic orders).

Overall, despite differences in their upbringing, class and political affiliations, educated urban Muslim women's decisions to unveil in Turkey refer to a quest for individualism: they define piety in individualistic terms, counter parental pressure to make decisions about their own lives, or perceive politics through the lens of individualism and women's rights.

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