



ALEVISM





Who are we?

Britain Alevi Federation is an umbrella organization for approximately 300.000 Alevis living in United Kingdom.

There are Alevi Cultural Centres and Cemevis serving people in UK. These centres are based in London, Glasgow, Coventry, South London, Croydon, Harrow, Bournemouth, Nottingham, Doncaster, Hull, Sheffield, Leicester and Edinburgh. More Alevi Centres need to be open in London, Wales, Kent, Lancashire, East and South West England.

Alevism:

Alevis are the second largest belief community in Turkey. However language, belief and ethnic background are not registered in the national census, therefore it is not possible to have official statistics about the number of Alevis. On the basis of reliable academic research, the population of Alevis is estimated at approximately 20 million out of a 70 million population in Turkey.

What is Alevism:

Alevism has evolved by interacting with various beliefs, spiritual doctrines and cultures over a wide geographical area from Central Asia to the Balkan Mountains, throughout its history. A process of gradual convergence between various different Alevi - Bektashi Lodges, since the 13th century constitutes what we call Alevism today. The concept of Alevism is actually a broad term covering different language and ethnic communities sharing the same belief components. What defines the Alevi belief can briefly be summarized as follows;

- In Alevism, every human being is a carrier of the essence of God.
- God in Alevism is Hakk, which means 'the truth'.
- If God has created everything, then human beings are sacred in the world.
- Therefore, Alevis consider everything as sacred and as the carrier of an essence from God.
- Alevis call each other 'Can' (soul), which is a gender-neutral name. As a result of this understanding, the position of women in Alevism is equal to that of men.
- Alevis consider god, the cosmos and humanity in a state of total unity. This unity is symbolized with an exclamation, Hakk-Muhammad-Ali, which unites the three most sacred beings in Alevism – God (Hakk), Muhammed (the cosmos) and Ali (Humanity), a cousin and the son-in-law of Muahmmed.
- Ali, as the main sacred person in Alevism, considers the whole world as a place of worship, consequently, any good behaviour can be classified as worship in this world.
- A well-known verse of Hallacı Mansur, a Sufi poet from the 10th century, indicates the unity of God and humanity in Alevism as Ene'î Hakk (I am one with God).
- The founder saint of Bektashism, Hacı Bektash Veli, from the 13th century, explains this importance with his saying "My Kaaba is the human being".
- Alevis do not consider God as fixed into a place of worship, iconography or written books but He is la-mekan (placeless) and the human heart is His only domicile.
- Therefore, Alevis do not fear God but only bear love for him and they do not believe in paradise or hell but an infinite circulation until one reaches the status of perfection and reunion with where he or she comes from.
- Alevis regard all holy books and the prophets with great respect. For them, the aim is one but the ways in which they attempt to fulfil these aims are different.
- This understanding prioritises reason over dogma, as Hacı Bektash Veli says, "the end of

the path would be dark if the path is not science.”

- Alevi consider all nations as one regardless of ethnic, racial, gender and linguistic differences, simply because each creature carries the same sacred essence.
- Humanism, egalitarianism, mutual assistance, and gender-equality are the main social characteristics commonly shared by Alevi communities. Their Alevi lodge-centred social organization is based on a kind of agrarian socialism.
- A well-known saying of Seyh Bedrettin, a religious scholar and rebel against the Ottoman Empire, “everything except the cheek of a lover can be shared”, explains this egalitarianism perfectly.
- As a result, resistance against injustices expressed with the phrases “allegiance with the oppressed (mazlum)” and “standing up against the tyrant (zalim)” have become the main social attitudes in Alevism.

The Term Alevi:

An Alevi is a person who follows the faith of Alevism. As mentioned, the concept of Alevism is a broad concept covering various ethno-cultural communities, which have their own communal names such as Alevi, Bektashi, Kızılbaş, Tahtacı, Nusayri and Abdal, but are labelled in general with the concept of “Alevi”.

Alevi have been forced, for political reasons, to live a closed social life in rural areas for centuries and as a natural result of this condition, they fundamentally rely upon on the traditions of oral accounts and their unique social institutions. The oral tradition narrates the Alevi history embedded in epic tales as its nature would suggest. The oral tradition in Alevism takes its position among the people, with sayings which are performed together with the saz (a traditional music instrument), lyric togetherness and menkibes (mythical stories). These elements contain, to a great extent, special sayings and meanings originating from the inner structure of the community.

Alevi Cosmology:

Alevi cosmology understands the relation between god, the cosmos and humanity as a unity. Hallacı Mansur explains this philosophy as follows, “There is no other being in the universe than God (unity of being). This states that; I am something, when trying to express oneself as something apart from God and that is wrong; therefore one has to only say I am one with God (Ene’l Hakk).”

It is believed that Hacı Bektashi Veli determines the principles necessary to become a mature human. He explains it by the statement “the servant is able to reach God through four gateways, forty stations and become his friend.” This gnostic understanding of self-spiritual development is the main task before Alevi, in their relationship with the cosmos. Within this gradual development, we as humans, who come from the essence of Hakk, can develop and show their sacred potential and evolve from the stage of ham (immature) into that of insan-ı kamil (mature). The stages of this process are explained as; şeriat - the way to be born, tarikat - the way to promise, marifet - the way to be self-conscious, and hakikat is the way to find God in one’s own self. These stages are explained with an analogy with the educational system, the development from primary to higher education.

John Kingsley Birge briefly explains the doctrine of the four gateways in reference to Bektashism, “The Şeriat; (shariat), orthodox, Sunni religious law, the tarikat or teachings and practice of the secret religious order, the marifet: mystic knowledge of God the hakikat: immediate

experience of the essence of reality. A mystic teacher of Islam, one who sought as my mürşit [the spiritual guide] to teach me, explained to me the meanings of these four terms by taking the idea of "sugar" as an example. One can go to the dictionary to find out what sugar is and how it is used. That is the şeriat Gateway to the knowledge. One feels the inadequately of that when one is introduced directly to the practical seeing and handling of sugar. That represents the tarikat Gateway to knowledge. To actually taste sugar and to have it enter into oneself is to go one step deeper into an appreciation of its nature, and that is what is meant by marifet. If one could go still further and become one with sugar so that he could say, "I am sugar," that and that alone would be to know what sugar is, and that is what is involved in the hakikat Gateway" Birge (1937: 102).

Code of Morality in Alevism:

In Alevism, morality is the prerequisite of belief. A person, who is not capable of conserving his or her morality, is not regarded as suitable to participate in Alevi rituals. This morality is simply explained with the motto, "Being the master of one's hand, tongue, and loins," which requires Alevis not to behave immorally by using their hand (do not steal), their tongue (do not lie), their loins (do not commit adultery). These rules summarize a strong moral system, which is defined as "thinner than hair, sharper than a sword." Those who do not observe these basic moral principles are regarded as düşkün (the sinner) and are thus excommunicated from community life through social isolation.

Rites and Ceremonies:

It is a universal fact that all communities have their own faith practices and calendars originating from their particular cosmology.

Ayn-i Cem (the ritual of gathering) is the main ritual in Alevism. This special ritual is modelled on a mystical event, the Assembly of the Forty Beings (Kırklar Cemi), which includes 17 women and 23 men. They gather with the slogan of "all for one, one for all." This narrative portrays a sacred and secret gathering in which the Prophet Muhammad, allegedly participated in, on his way back from Miraç (the heavenly journey in which he meets God). Ali, as the leader of this gathering, opens the secrets of the belief to the Prophet during the ceremony. The notable narrative used by Muhammed was "I am the city of knowledge but Ali is the gate." The prophet is only able to enter the Assembly of the Forty beings as an equal, not as a prophet or member of higher class.

There are various forms of Cem, the most common cems being conducted on a weekly basis. In these gatherings, where men and women come together under the same roof, the belief community converse about daily as well as spiritual issues, sing Alevi deyiş (hymns), perform semah (ritual dance) and consume lokma (communal meal) at the end of the ritual. Given the idea that the humans are sacred within in the cosmos in Alevism, occasional muhabbet (conversation) is also frequently referred to as a part of the ritual. However, the significant gravity of the main cem rituals called ikrar (the admission) and görgü cemi (the manners ritual) must be undertaken if one is to practice Alevism.

Anyone who is born into an Alevi background is required to fulfil certain expectations. Although there are different local traditions, the common framework requires the person to have a musahip (eternal brother of the path). As an Alevi you are expected to observe certain moral principles. In this sense, the görgü cemi (the manners ritual) appears as a communal mechanism to evaluate each member of the community whether they observe

these principles and codes, or not. Each participant is asked to declare if he or she has any complaints about any other members of the community. The community collectively judges those who are believed to violate any moral principles and they can be punished for their transgressions according to varying sanctions such as organizing a communal meal or paying for a communal project. If he or she violates one of the main taboos such as adultery or murder, the punishment will be capital and he or she is excommunicated from every sphere of communal life. This system of communal control is celebrated by Alevi as a perfect form of human sociality.

The Institution of Consent:

At the beginning of any ritual or ceremony, each participant is asked for his or her consent (rızkalk) for the gathering. If he or she has any complaints, the community has to take this appeal into consideration. In principle, none of these gatherings can be initiated without the common consent of the participants. Alevism considers this mechanism as the genuine form of democracy.

The Institution of Spiritual Leadership:

Dedes are the group of spiritual leaders believed to be descended from the holy lineage coming from Ali, Ahl-i Bayt. Dedes or Anas are the group of spiritual leaders who are spiritual and social leaders. They do not only conduct spiritual rituals but also guide all manners of social life. In principle, each Alevi community has to be subjected to a specific dede family. Each dede has also to be affiliated with a spiritual centre called an Ocak (hearth). There are also well-structured hierarchical relations among dedes as well as Ocaks which are explained through the principle El ele, el Hakk'a (hand in hand, hand to Hakk). In this sense, there is no omnipotent spiritual position in Alevism but a chain of control. Each dede is the guide of his talips (followers) but they are also subjected to the supervision of the Ocak as well as bounded by communal consent of their followers. There is a circular supervision among talips, dedes, and pirs, which is explained as El ele, el Hakk'a (hand in hand, hand to Hakk).

The Component of Alevi Belief Culture:

Music in Alevism:

Music is the most significant component of Alevi cultural life. Its presence is felt everywhere. Anatolian folk music is mostly based on Alevi. The greatest minstrels of Turkey have emerged from the Alevi community. Music is an important part of Alevi rituals. The Dede or Zakir petitions (niyaz) the saz three times before the cem, and then starts playing. The Saz is also known as "the stringed holy book". It is said that there is no word without the saz, and no saz without words. Saz (bağlama) is a holy musical instrument for Alevi. The feelings, thought and beliefs of the people are expressed with the accompaniment of music. Değiş, düvaz-imam, mersiye, miraçlama, semah are different types of Alevi Music.

Traditions of the Aşık (Minstrel):

Aşık, Zakir or Ozan are terms used for the minstrel or bards who sing poems about belief and social issues, while playing an instrument. Minstrels also have a significant position in Alevi worship. They acquire a holy persona through this position. Their music also aims to express the feelings and troubles of the Alevi people.

Semah in Alevism:

The sacred dance performed in Alevism is Semah. The word Semah means to hear nice words, the sky and to fly. In different regions the word semah is pronounced as Samah or Zamah. During the cem ceremony when the last part of the mihraçlama is sung by the minstrel everyone comes to the centre of the cem space and by walking and spinning they start to form in to a circle. All the songs and hymns that accompany the performance of this dance are also called Semahs. The Semah is not performed for the audience but for Hakk. Therefore, it is not applauded. One of the most popular semah types is the Turnalar Semahı (the Crane Semah) which symbolises the movements of a crane, around a circle that symbolises the universe. The crane has a very important place in Alevi belief. They live together in peace and help each other out. The crane is a symbol of freedom, equality, community, luck, blessing and happiness.

Virtuous Personalities in Alevism - Poets and other important figures:

Given the fact that poetry and music have indispensable significance in Alevi culture and spirituality, it is understandable that most of the virtuous personalities in Alevism are poets. In fact, Alevi specifically revere seven poets as their 'grand poets' or Ulu Ozanlar. These are: Seyyid Nesimi (14th century), Yemini (15th century), Pir Sultan Abdal, Virani, Kul Himmet, Hatayi and Fuzuli (16th century).

In addition to these seven grand poets, certain sainted persons are further recognised as sacred in Alevism. These include Hacı Bektaş Veli (13th century), Güvenç Abdal, Abdal Musa (14th century), Yunus Emre (13th century), Kaygusuz Abdal (15th century), and the 12 Imams (7th century)

The Twelve Imams:

Each Imam represents a different aspect of the universe which are recognised as the twelve services or oniki hizmetler which are performed by members of the Alevi community within the cem. The Twelve Imams are Ali, Hasan, Hüseyin, Zeynel Abidin, Bakır, Cafer, Musa, Ali Rıza, Taki, Naki, Askeri, Mehdi.

Imam Huseyin;

Imam Huseyin is the 3rd Imam of the 12. Alevi respect Huseyin because of the way he lived and stood up against the tyrant Yezid in Kerbela in 7th century. When Huseyin clashed with Yezid's army of 3000 he and his followers totalled 72.

Huseyin famous dying words are "I prefer to die with honour rather than to live with dishonour."

Hallac-ı Mansur;

An important figure in Alevi history, known mostly for his presentation of the term Ene'l-Hakk (I am one with God, who is the truth), which has become the saying explaining the relationship between the cosmos, Hakk and humans in Alevism. Hallac-ı Mansur was tortured to death in 922 in Bagdad because his thoughts were considered as blasphemous against Islam.

Hacı Bektaş Veli;

(The master of the Bektashi Dergah, Academy), is the founder of Bektashism, a Sufi spiritual order, established in the 13th century. His spiritual doctrine is accepted as one of the earliest forms of universal humanism symbolised with the unity of a gazelle with a lion.

The heat is from the flame, not from the
cooking plate,
The miracle is in the head, not in the
crown,
Whatever you are searching for, search in
yourself,
Not in Jerusalem, or not in Mecca!

Yunus Emre;

(A student of Hacı Bektaş Veli), one of the most impressive poets of the Anatolian Sufi tradition, is believed to have lived in the 13th century. His poetry exemplifies unconditional tolerance in Alevism:

If you break someone's heart
This prayer you perform is no good
None of the seventy two nations
of the world
Can wash the dirt off your hands and face

Seyyid Nesimi;

Seyyid Nesimi was born in 1369 in Baghdad, and is considered to be a great Sufi poet. His poetry advocated the philosophy of vahdet-i vücud (unity of existence). His ideas were regarded as blasphemous by the Ulema in Aleppo, and he was executed through being skinned alive in 1417.

Come, come nearer,
There is a way to make up for missed
prayer and fast
But not of the time passed without you

Pious people called this wine of love a sin
I fill my goblet myself and drink it myself, it
doesn't interest anyone
Sometimes I fly to the sky and watch over
the world,
Sometimes go down to the ground and
the world watches me,
Sometimes I go to Madras and study in the
name of Allah
Sometimes I go to a tavern and have fun
of wine, it shouldn't interest anyone
Some asked "is Nesimi" happy with his darling?"
I am happy or not, she is mine, it shouldn't
interest anyone.

Shah Ismail (Hatayi);

A descendant of the Azeri Sufi saint Safi-ad-din Ardabili and the founder of the Safavid Empire. Among Alevi, he is known by his poetry under his penname, Hatayi. His poetry is still recited in Alevi rituals as *deyiş* (hymn). Hatayi died in 1524.

Pir Sultan Abdal;

(A follower of Hacı Bektaş Veli) was a legendary Alevi poet who is believed to live in the first half of the sixteenth century. He was put on trial and was obligated to deny his adherence of Shah Ismail (see above) but he refused to obey and was executed by hanging by the Ottoman Empire in 1550.

Virani Baba;

It is believed that he lived in the 16th century. In his poems, he reflected the hidden interpretations of letters and numbers in an enthusiastic and fluent manner.

I am a town crier in a great city
I am the crier; Ali is the warden of the
market
If I buy less or if I sell more, it is still a profit
I am the crier; Ali is the warden of the
market

Edip Harabi;

Edip Harabi was a poet born in 1853, in Istanbul. He worked as a clerk until he passed away in 1917 in Istanbul. He was known as an important Bektashi follower. His poet pseudonym, Vahdetname (the poem of sacred unity) perfectly portrays how Alevi see the relation between God and humans.

Before Allah and the world came into being
We created it in an instant and announced it
Before God had any worthy habitation
We took him in and became his host.

He didn't yet have a name
He didn't yet have material form

He didn't yet have an appearance
We gave him a form and made it just like
a person.

We became one with Allah here
We entered the place of pre-eternity and
became one
We conversed there about the secret of
the hidden treasure
We gave him the sacred name
Compassionate.

Before the world came into being in the
hidden secret of non-existence
I was alone with Reality in his oneness
He created the world because then
I formed the picture of Him, I was the
designer

I became folded in garments made
of the elements
I made my appearance out of fire, earth
and water
I came into the world with the best of men
I was of the same age even as Adam

I came as Seth from the loins of Adam
As the prophet Noah I entered the flood
Once I became Abraham in this world
I built the House of God, I carried stone

I appeared as Ishmael once, O Soul.
I became once Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
I came as Job, I cried out for mercy
Worms ate my body, I was in bitter mourning

They coy me in two along with Zachariah
With John they scattered my blood on the
ground
I came as David, There were many who
followed me
Often I carried the seal of Solomon

The blessed rod I gave to Moses
I became guide to all the Saints
To Gabriel the Faithful I was the right hand
companion

From the loins of my father came Ahmed
the chosen
The two-edged sword made its arrival from
among those who guide on the way
Before the world was, friend to the People
of the House
I was, while a slave, a fellow sharer of the
mystery with God

I mediated much within myself
Without beholding a miracle I came to
believe
With the Prince of Heroes I rode on Döldül
I bound on the Zülfikar, I carried the sword

Martyrdom in Alevism:

Alevism understand their historical origin with the saying 'allegiance with the oppressed (mazlum)' and 'standing up to the tyrant (zalim)'. They seal their destiny in allegiance with Ali. His right to claim the caliphate was overruled by his political powerful rivals. Then, his two sons, Hasan and Hussein, were killed in their search for justice. The murder of Hussein with his 72 followers in Kerbela in 680 has significant importance in defining Alevi's group identity. Following his death, many people took side with Ali's cause throughout history and they were punished for their advocacy of Ali. The execution of these people perfectly articulates the perception of being an eternal victim in Alevism. What is common in these historical events is that "they were killed by a superior state authority which was either de jure or de facto Sunni Islamic" (Reinhard Hess 2007: 282). Reinhard Hess further differentiates the notion of Martyrdom in Alevism and Sunnism. The "absence of violent details... or aggressive interpretation... oriented towards an outward enemy" (ibid. 276) differentiates the notion of Martyrdom in Alevism from that in Sunnism. He also underlines that this album of martyrdom in Alevism is open to further affiliations.

For instance, the abolishment of the Janissary Organisation in 1826 is understood as insistent continuation of the Ottoman oppression against Alevism. The Janissaries were an infantry unit formed in the 14th century as the household troops of the Sultanate. The Bektashi order was appointed as the patron lodge to this special military force. The Janissary system became politically corrupted during the recession period. As a part of modernisation reforms, Mahmut the Second attempted to abolish this force in 1826 and the Bektashi lodges were also aggressively targeted during the massive military campaign against the Janissaries.

It is popularly claimed that Alevis welcomed and venerated the establishment of the Republic in 1923. However, this is not true for all Alevi communities, especially, those, who contravened or did not give support to the Republic, were targeted by the military campaigns in 1921 in Koçgiri and 1937-38 in Dersim. The abolishment of the main Bektashi Lodge in 1925, due to secularism caused irreversible devastation in their spiritual and social organisation.

This articulation gains obvious political characteristics in the 1970s. Alevi communities were victimized by right-wing Islamic militancy in the Middle and South-Eastern Anatolian regions during political polarisation in the 1970s. An example of this victimisation can be seen when 111 Alevis were killed in a civil war-like clash in Maras in 1978. Reinhard Hess indicates that these civil victims as well as Alevi leftist militants are "quoted in an Alevi source in a line of continuity with traditional Alevi martyr figures" (2007: 281)

On July 2nd 1993, during the second day of the Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Festival in Sivas, Turkey, a crowd of thousands assembled after their Friday prayers, to protest against the festival. Upon surrounding the hotel, where the festival participants were staying, the protest got out of control and 37 people lost their lives in the fire set by Islamic militants. Of those who died, two were from among the protestors and another two were from hotel personnel. The rest of the 33 killed, including a Dutch female anthropologist, took their place in the line of martyrdom for Alevis.

Two years later, on the evening of March 12, 1995, anonymous assailants opened fire from a car at three Alevi café houses in the Gazi District, which is a historically left wing and Alevi shanty-town area of Istanbul. An elderly Dede, Halil Kaya, and another Alevi lost their lives during the shooting. Following this attack, the local residents organised a protest and marched to the police station in the district. The police responded aggressively to the protest and this resulted in it developing into a civil uprising and spread to other Alevi shantytown districts which were placed under partial curfew. 19 people lost their lives in three days during this massacre.

Alevi Calendar:

The Commemoration of Dersim	Genocide in the summer of 1937 to the spring of 1938 of the local Alevi population of Dersim, now called the Tunceli Province (in Turkey). One of the leaders of Dersim, Seyit Rıza was hanged by the Turkish authorities in November 1937.	17 Nov 1937
The Fast of Khizir	Hızır is a mythological angel-like persona who helps those who are in need. Whenever Alevis are in difficulty, they cry "Help Ya Hızır!" to call him for help. To honour Hızır, Alevis fast for three days each year.	13 - 15 February
The Commemoration of Gazi	The commemoration of 19 people killed in the Gazi District incident in Istanbul on March 12, 1993.	12 March 1995
Sultan Nevroz	Newruz in Persian and Newroz in Kurdish mean a 'new day' and stands for New Year's Day in the old Persian calendar. Kurds also celebrate this day in representation of Kawa's struggle for liberation against the tyrant king, Zuhal. In Alevism, the night of March 21st is celebrated as the birthday of Ali and Turks celebrate it as the beginning of Spring. Newroz (spring) represents daylight overcoming darkness in nature as well, representing enlightenment coming out victorious over backwards and dark thoughts.	21 March
Hıdırallez	The celebration of the beginning of Spring.	5 - 6 May
The Abdal Musa Festival	The festival organized in the name of Saint Abdal Musa in Antalya.	6 - 7 June
The Commemoration of Sivas	The commemoration of the death of the 33 people killed in the Pir Sultan Festival in Sivas, 1993.	2 July 1993
The Commemoration of Çorum	The commemoration of the death of 80 people killed in Çorum province during seven day attacks by right wing militants in July 1980.	3 July 1980
The Hacı Bektaş Veli Festival	The festival organized in the name of Saint Hacı Bektaş in Nevşehir since 1964.	16 – 18 August
The Masum-u Paklar Fast	Fasting for the 'Fourteen Innocents' of the Ehlibehy-t family who were killed. (Set according to the Lunar Calendar).	According to the Lunar Calendar
The Muharrem Fasting	12 days (according to the Lunar Calendar) the commemoration of the death of Hüseyin and his followers.	According to the Lunar Calendar
The Aşure Day	The Aşure soup is cooked and shared with everyone and symbolises peace and love as well as being a symbol of support for the fight of Hüseyin and followers in Kerbela on November 10, 680.	According to the Lunar Calendar
The Commemoration of Maraş	The commemoration of the death of the 111 people killed in Maraş province during the three day bloody attacks by right wing militants on 19-24 December 1978.	19-24 December 1978

Alevi Geography:

It is a historical fact that Alevi settlements are concentrated more in remote mountainous areas in contrast to Sunni communities generally settled in plain and flat regions while usually dominating town and city centres. This social and geographical isolation is an obvious result of the confrontations between Alevi and Sunni and centuries old oppression applied by the latter over the former. Given the fact that this geographical concentration determines their way of life, before the 1960s, Alevi were traditionally either semi-nomadic herding or household based agriculture society. Considering their economically and socially disadvantageous position which emerged as a result of this isolation, it would not be surprising to note that as of the 1950s, Alevi participated on a wide scale in both internal migration and emigration. Today, rural areas, which are traditionally Alevi have largely been urbanized.

Alevi in Europe:

It is largely claimed that Alevi are over-represented in regards to internal and external migration waves, which emerged in the 1950s. The bloody attacks targeting Alevi at the end of the 1970s in Çorum, Elbistan, Maraş, Malatya, Sivas and Yozgat, imposed their participation in migration, especially in international migration waves to Europe. Today, it is estimated that approximately a million Alevi are living in Europe. The European Alevi Confederation represents more than 250 Alevi Cultural Centres, which are organised under national federations in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK

Alevi Demands in Turkey:

The abolishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs:

The Directorate of Religious Affairs is a massive public institution with over a hundred thousand employees which caters for the needs of Sunni but in no way provides for or considers the needs of Alevi, Assyrians, Christians or Jews. Alevi rightfully claim that religious services should not be sponsored by the state according to secularism.

The abolishment of compulsory religious education:

The 1980 coup in Turkey brought with it com-

pulsory religious education lessons in secondary education. The curriculum for these courses is compulsory. There are thousand of cases in which Alevi pupils are illegally forced to practice Muslim rituals and to memorise Muslim prayers. If they refused to participate, they are intentionally failed for that lesson, which can result in them being kept back a year at school. Following a complaint filed by Hasan Zengin and his daughter Eylem, both Alevi, to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that the content of these religious classes violated human rights and contradicted the principles of plurality and objectivity in 2008.

- **The recognition of Cemevis:** Although there is no specially designated place for worship in Alevism, having a separate building to provide basic social and spiritual services became a necessity for Alevi living in cities. From the 1990s onwards, Alevi began to establish their own cultural centres, although the status of these centres is still not legally clearly defined. In order to secure their social, cultural and spiritual practices, Alevi demand the recognition of Cemevis (Alevi cultural centres and place of worship) as the place of worship of Alevi.

- **The abolishment of the compulsory construction of mosques:** Since the 18th Century, as a strategy for assimilating Alevi, the central authorities construct mosques in Alevi villages without the consent of Alevi. Alevi demand the termination of this policy.

- **The Madımak Museum:** 33 persons (poets, writers, singers, dancers and artists) were murdered in the Madımak Hotel, which was set on fire by a crowd of Islamic fundamentalists protesting the fourth Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Festival organised in Sivas in 1993. Alevi appeal for this hotel to be converted into a museum to commemorate the deaths, in the hope that it never happens again.

- **The Dersim and Maraş Massacres:** In the framework of this previous demand, Alevi also require the Turkish government to disclose official archives pertaining to the massacres in Dersim 1937-38 and Maraş 1978. During the violent military campaign from the summer of 1937 to the spring of 1938, thousands of Alevi Kurds

and Zazas were killed and thousands were exiled. Despite all attempts by the families, the grave sites of Seyit Riza (A leader of the Dersimi community, executed by the Turkish authorities) and his followers have still not been disclosed. In addition to this, Alevi communities were targeted by a series of the right wing militant attacks at the end of the 1970s in Eastern and Central Anatolian provinces such as Malatya (17-18.04.1978), Sivas (03-04.09.1978), Maraş (19-25.12.1978), and Çorum (02-10.07.1980) and Hatay (14.01.1980). Maraş was one of the most significant attacks. Armed right wing militants, called 'Grey Wolves', killed more than a hundred Alevs including new born babies during the six-day massacre. In the wake of these bloody attacks, Alevs fled these provinces. Most of the Alevs living in the UK have come from these provinces.

• **The Alevi Lodges:** Alevs reclaim their religious centres and lodges which were destroyed in 1826 by the Ottoman Empire and then abolished in 1925 by the Republic. These are the most significant institutions in preserving and reproducing Alevi culture. Some of these centres were reopened as cultural museums during the 1960s. Today, Alevs have to buy tickets to enter their own spiritual centres. Hence, they demand legal ownership of these centres to Alevi associations.

All these demands can briefly be summarized under the main demands of the constitutional recognition of Alevism as an independent belief.

Alevs in the EU Reports: Progress Report on Turkey's Accession to EU

• 1998: p.19: As far as freedom of religion is concerned, religious education (Sunni) in state primary schools is obligatory. Upon verification of their non-Muslim background, Lausanne Treaty minorities are exempted by law from Muslim religious instruction. Religious minorities recognized by Turkey are free to exercise their religion, but practice of religion other than (Sunni) Islam is subject to many practical bureaucratic restrictions affecting, for example, the ownership of premises and expansion of activities. The Assyrian Orthodox religion is not recognized as a religious minority and is subject to pressures in the exercise of its religious education. Turkey's Alawis are esti-

mated to number at least 12 million. There are no government-salaried Alawi religious leaders, in contrast to Sunni religious leaders.

- 2000: p.18: The official approach towards the Alevs seems to remain unchanged.
- 2001: p. 27: freedom of religion: No improvement in the situation of non-Sunni Muslim communities has taken place. The official approach towards the Alevs is unchanged.
- 2002: p. 37: freedom of association and peaceful assembly: In February the Cultural Association of the Union of Alevi and Bektasi Formations was dissolved on the grounds that, according to Articles 14 and 24 of the Constitution, and Article 5 of the Law on Associations, it was not possible to found an association by the name of Alevi or Bektasi.
- 2003: p. 34: Freedom of Religion: As far as the situation of non-Sunni Moslem communities is concerned, there has been a change as regards the Alevs.
- 2004: p. 44: As far as the situation of non-Sunni Muslim minorities is concerned, there has been no change in their status. Alevs are not officially recognized as a religious community...
- 2005: p. 29-30: With respect to freedom of religion only very limited progress has been made since October 2004 in terms of both legislation and practice. Despite improvements in the legislation governing associations, the current legal framework still does not recognize the right of religious communities to establish associations with legal personality in order to promote and protect their religions... Alevi children are subject to compulsory Sunni religious instruction in schools, which fails to acknowledge their specificity.
- 2006: pp. 15-16: There have been no developments in relation to the situation of the Alevi community. Alevs face difficulties for opening their places of worship (Cem houses). Cem houses are not recognized as places of worship and receive no funding from the authorities.
- 2007: p. 17: Alevs face difficulties with opening their places of worship (Cem houses or "Cemevi"). Cem houses are not recognized as places of worship and receive no funding from the authorities
- 2008: p. 18: However, the government's initiative has not been followed through. Overall, Alevs

continue to face the same problems as before, in particular as regards education and places of worship.

Since then a slight improvement has been recorded concerning the status of Cemevis and Alevi associations. However, the current situation is not pleasant as far as the main demands raised by Alevis is concerned.

Alevis in the UK: The UK has never been a destination for contract-based guest-worker labourers emigrating from Turkey to Europe. The presence of people from Turkey in this country is mainly as a result of the influx of refugees, between 1985 and 1995. The exact number of this population is unknown in official statistics. However, community leaders and academic researchers estimate the number of immigrants coming from Turkey at around 350,000. Alevis are over represented in this population with 200,000 heavily concentrated in London alone. In this sense, London is one of the most important cities with a considerably sized Alevi population in Europe. The geographical concentration of Alevi communities living in the UK has diversified since the mid-2000s. Today, considerable Alevi communities living in Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brighton, Croydon, Coventry, Glasgow, Leicester, Liverpool, Nottingham, Manchester, South London and Wales. New Alevi Cultural Centres were established in Nottingham, Hull, Sheffield, Harrow, Glasgow, Croydon, Coventry, Bournemouth, South London, Doncaster, Edinburgh and the East Midlands (Leicester) since 2008.

The London Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi was established in 1993 in London to meet basic social and cultural needs of the newly emerging Alevi population in the capital. Alevi Cultural Centres all over Britain have Women, Youth, Cultural and Media sub-branches. The Britain Alevi Federation (BAF) works to provide:

1. Advice and legal services: BAFs voluntary solicitors and advisors provide legal, advisory and translation services for anyone who is in need of it. This service is provided free of charge at all Alevi cultural centres.
2. Educational Services: BAF provides various

courses and clubs especially for youngsters including mathematics, Turkish, science, chess, after school classes, English ESOL and Alevism, these lessons exist in all Alevi Cultural Centres.

3. Cultural Services: Alevi cultural centres, with the leadership of BAF, across Britain carry out cultural events, organised by the community and for the community. For example, since 1993, the London-England Alevi Cultural Centre (EACC) organises an annual youth festival, The Hacı Bektaş Veli Youth Festival, in October. Alevi Youth Festivals and Alevi Youth Theatre groups exist in places like Glasgow Doncaster and elsewhere in Britain. Our first open-air park festival was first organised in June 2011. Besides these festivals, Alevi Cultural Centres working with BAF also organises events, inviting singers, music bands, Alevi minstrels and theatre groups from Turkey and Europe. All Alevi Cultural Centres also provide courses on semah (ritual dance) and saz (lute-like instrument) so as to convey the Alevi culture to younger generations.

4. Belief Services: BAF also organises cem rituals presided over by dedes and Ana's invited to Britain from Turkey and Europe. By providing funerals services, the BAF funeral fund meets another significant need of Alevis living in the UK. In the year 2010, 90 funeral ceremonies were carried out in the London alone.

5. Media and Public Relations Services: We regularly prepare media-releases to inform the wider public about our events and services. In 2010, we started a new associational bi-lingual journal and internet-based radio and TV channels so as to increase public awareness about Alevism. Our web address is www.alevynet.org and email contact address is britanyaalevifederasyonu@gmail.com, cemevi@live.co.uk.

6. Charity Sales: We organize regular charity sales to raise funding to provide free daily lunches to our elderly community members and to sponsor low-income students.

7. Cultural and Political Lobbying: In co-operation with Alevi Associations in Turkey and other parts of Europe, we are lobbying in Europe to overcome difficulties experienced in practicing Alevism in Turkey. We do also work for developing a good inter-communal dialogue with other communities living in Britain.

*“the end of the path would be
dark if the path is not science.”*

Hace Bektash Veli



BRITAIN ALEVI FEDERATION

**LONDON IAKM CEMEVI • COVENTRY / LEICESTER CEMEVI
GLASGOW CEMEVI • CROYDON CEMEVI • SOUTH LONDON CEMEVI
BOURNEMOUTH CEMEVI • HARROW CEMEVI • SHEFFIELD CEMEVI
DONCASTER CEMEVI • HULL CEMEVI • EDINBURGH CEMEVI
NOTTINGHAM CEMEVI**