

Article

Women in Higher Religious Education in the Context of Religion, Education and Modernisation

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Abstract

In addition to the transformative impact of learning and instruction on individuals and society, there is also the possibility that cultural, social, and political structures may reshape the educational system. Religious education, as a component of this system, is one of the area's most susceptible to such influence. Transformations in the field of religious instruction are clearly observable in the lands we inhabit. In the period following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, religious instruction and women's learning experiences were addressed as two separate topics. Given the fact that the history of women's educational participation has followed a distinct developmental trajectory from that of men, this topic could benefit from further discussion and clarification, and its boundaries should be more clearly defined. Individuals who successfully complete higher religious studies are qualified to work as formal and informal religious educators. The fact that graduates of these institutions are employed in formal religious teaching contexts, together with the recent growth in the number of women opting for advanced religious studies, highlights the importance of this topic. Although various studies have addressed religious education and women's education separately, the sources accessed for this study do not examine women's learning experiences in the context of higher religious education as a distinct and chronological analytical framework; this constitutes the originality of the present research. In line with this gap, the aim of the study is to describe the learning processes of women in the context of higher religious studies. Accordingly, the fundamental problem of this research is to demonstrate how women's learning experiences in higher religious education have developed within the historical context and how this change can be interpreted in terms of the relationship between religious education and modernisation. The description has been carried out in chronological order. Here, religious instruction refers to the Islamic faith. The research method employed was qualitative document analysis. This study examines the historical process and reveals how women's learning experiences have transformed since the emergence of Islam. It is understood that women with similar religious beliefs experienced these educational processes in different ways in different regions. In this context, it is seen that the institutional changes that emerged in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat period had a structure that transformed and differentiated educational institutions. Women's adaptation to the education system and the qualitative developments in women's education also took place during this period. With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the modernisation efforts that began during the Tanzimat period showed rapid development. The increased visibility of women in higher religious studies led to social and institutional shifts. The study addresses this transformation within the broader framework of religious instruction and modernisation.



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1. Introduction

The purpose of religions is to bring about change in individuals and societies, correct erroneous behaviour, and instil new habits. This indicates that they share similar goals with learning and instruction. Over the centuries, systems of learning have been shaped by religious foundations, giving rise to a dynamic interaction between religion and instructional practices. As a result of the structural changes defined as the modern era, religion-based education is giving way to the secular education system. During this process, higher religious education institutions have undergone changes in terms of their numerical data, curricula, names, and outcomes. One such development is the increase in the number of female students in higher religious education. This increase is likely to lead to certain social shifts. In this context, the scientific novelty of the subject and the methodological perspective of the research are noteworthy.

The role of women in higher religious education will be better understood, particularly considering their presence in various formal and informal religious education institutions. Although religious education and women's education have been examined separately in the literature, women's learning experiences in higher religious education have not been analysed as a distinct and chronological framework, which constitutes the originality of this study. Accordingly, the study aims to describe women's learning processes in higher religious education and to examine their historical development in relation to religious education and modernisation. In this context, the learning processes of women are analysed with particular attention to the historical, institutional and socio-cultural factors shaping higher religious education. This study adopts qualitative document analysis as its research method. Written sources related to women's education and religious instruction were examined systematically in order to trace women's learning experiences in higher religious education within a historical and chronological framework. The analysis focuses on interpreting these documents in relation to changing historical, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Here, religious education refers to the Islamic faith.

In this context, the study aims to identify the transformations, if any, in women's learning trajectories within the framework of religious instruction and modernism. The study attempts to reveal the processes of change in the concepts of modernism and their effects on women's education. Within this analytical scope, it is necessary to clarify the perspective from which women's educational experiences are approached. This study examines women's position in higher religious education not through a gender-focused theoretical framework, but rather through the lens of their mutual interaction with educational and institutional transformations. In this context, women are not merely passive reflections of social change; they are evaluated as historical actors who provide concrete data and dynamism to the transformation process of the education system through their educational practices, institutional demands, and post-graduation orientations.

This transformation may have an impact that could create potential differences in the social roles and understanding of knowledge among women who receive higher religious education within Turkish society. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that studies comparing the relationship between higher religious education and modernisation in different societies can be conducted, accepting the limitations it imposes within a specific socio-cultural framework.

At the same time, the study demonstrates alignment with global texts such as the UN 2030 Agenda. As stated in these articles, access to education for women, who constitute

half of the world's population, is not only a human right but also essential for a prosperous world (United Nations 2015). Although the dynamics of each country may differ in this regard, within the framework of this study, the accessibility of education for women receiving religious education has led to, and is likely to continue to lead to, significant social and cultural changes. Under the heading of education, the goal of expanding free and compulsory education is clearly articulated, and particular attention is drawn to girls as a disadvantaged group in terms of access to education (United Nations 2015). In this context, within the scope of the present study, the long-term effects of the changing situation in favour of girls such as developments in the production of knowledge and quantitative changes in working life can be more effectively revealed through longitudinal studies.

2. The Concept of Religion in Islamic History and Literature

Based on the usage of the word 'religion' in Islamic sources, this concept is addressed in four groups in the literature. Punishment (retribution), reward, judgement, reckoning; supremacy, domination, humiliation, coercion; obedience, submission, service, worship; custom, way, law, sharia, nation, sect demonstrate the ways in which the concept of religion is used (Tümer 1994). The expressions 'to obey, the obedient and the obeyed' are derived from this meaning of the word. From the perspective of obedience and submission (el-Isfahani 2006). Sharia is also referred to as religion. One of the famous definitions in Islamic historical tradition belongs to el-Curcânî: 'Religion is the divine law that calls people of reason to the truths revealed by the prophet.' (el-Curcânî 2013). Tehânevî's definition is: 'Religion is a law established by Allah that guides people of reason, of their own free will, to salvation in the present (in this world) and to bliss in the future (in the hereafter).' (Tümer 1994). Ebû Hilâl el-Askerî states that the root of the word religion is tâ'at, and based on its root meaning of custom, habit, and tradition, the word religion can be used because it is a custom that humans adopt and make permanent (el-Askeri 2013). The definition of religion by Islamic scholars throughout history generally draws from the Qur'an and Islamic beliefs, while modern Muslim scholars offer more comprehensive definitions than the classical ones.

Abduh (2018) defines religion as the human being's comprehension of supernatural divine truths, while Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr states that religion is that which connects humans to truth (Nasr 2009). Mehmet Aydın notes that the word religion derives from the Latin words religare and religio, explaining that religare means to bind, while religio means worship, and limits religion to worship performed for God. Religion, which is also the institutional organisation of individual and social authority, is a set of beliefs that directs one to seek the truth about the beginning and end of the world (Aydın 2005). Gündüz defines religion as a system that gives place to the sacred, metaphysical values or the idea of God in the belief system and proposes a way of life to believers. According to the Qur'an, religion is a system that determines an individual's mental functions, attitudes, and social structures. Whether it incorporates the idea of God or not, any formation that determines human thought and lifestyle must be characterised as religion (Gündüz 1998). The definition of divine law, which directs rational beings to what is conveyed by the prophet through their own will and choice, also shares certain characteristics with other definitions of religion (Topaloğlu and Çelebi 2009).

Based on traditional and modern definitions of religion, it is emphasised that religion should be approached not only as a matter of belief but also in terms of practice and its social dimension. To reflect this holistic perspective, an emphasis on religious instruction renders the transmission of religious knowledge and values essential. Over time, this instructional field has become institutionalised and has evolved into a more structured framework. Institutions offering higher religious studies represent the most advanced

level of this institutional arrangement. Higher religious education can support social transformation by enabling the academic study of religious sciences and facilitating an interdisciplinary approach. The increased visibility of women in higher religious education institutions, as highlighted in this study, stands out as one of the transformations taking place. Women's participation in higher religious studies may be understood not only as a social shift, but also as an indicator of the evolving role of women in the production and dissemination of religious knowledge.

From this perspective, discussions of modernism and postmodernism should point to the different developments in the identity formation processes of women who have received higher religious education. Unlike the one-dimensional progression of modernism, postmodernism's multifaceted and diversity-focused perspective may enable these women to strike a balance between their religious knowledge and modern lives. Such a situation may lead to these women being regarded as active subjects through their religious knowledge, beyond being passive carriers or passive figures.

3. Modernism and Modernisation

While modernity is characterised as contemporaneity, modernism is referred to as the movement of becoming contemporary (TDK 2022). The word derives from the Latin root *modernus*. Modern, meaning 'belonging to the present day, to the era, evoking it,' expresses a departure from the traditional (Bolay 1997). The period from the nineteenth century to the beginning of the Second World War is referred to as the modernist era. While some argue that modernism disappeared after the Second World War, others accept that modernism has changed form but continues to exist today (Marshall 2005). Modernism stands at the beginning of new experiences that aim to change the historical process and oppose the accumulated knowledge of humanity. While the modern understanding of science introduces a different foundation of 'knowledge' from previous periods, it prefers to confront the metaphysical realm that goes beyond the concrete realm. Instead of the traditional perspective, which divides the world into the physical and metaphysical realms, the modern system of thought rejects the metaphysical realm and bases its understanding of the universe on the physical realm (Akgül 2012). With modern thought, the perspective rooted in religion has given way to a perspective that prioritises the individual and is rooted in the person.

The origins of modernism can be traced back to the 17th century. The starting point for modernism, which sought to carve out a place for itself in the religious sphere, was the rational philosophy of the Enlightenment. It can be seen that the domino effect of a self-centred perspective, in which individual factors rather than social factors predominate in people's lives, has led to subjective understandings of religion replacing the practical applications of religions (Kirman 2005). It is understood that with modernism, religion, which was seen as the central force, has been forced to cede its place to different parameters. The 19th century is regarded as heralding a major transformation and marks the beginning of increased activity within the social order, alongside the industrial revolution that emerged several centuries earlier. The changes occurring in the social sphere—even if they take place under the subheading of economics—have an impact on both individuals' perceptions and their mental development processes. The emergence of socialism, which claimed to be an alternative to capitalism, was the cause of certain changes in the way of life until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was considered the pioneer of this perspective in the world. The 1980s and 1990s, on the other hand, reflect a perspective different from modernism in the fields of art, philosophy and science within the concept of postmodernism (Şaylan 2009).

Due to modernism's Western origins, its impact on other nations is not uniform. In fact, the encounter of different cultures may give rise to certain changes, developments, and similarities. However, modernisation seeks to maintain its dominance over other cultures, even if it does not carry the dynamics of the environment in which it originated. This situation, which can be characterised as a relatively inward-looking orientation, has contributed to greater differentiation compared to the pre-modern period. It can be seen that the authority and dominance of religion over the individual, social and political spheres in the pre-modern period has been replaced by different values with modernism.

The impact of these variables across different geographical regions means that the experience of modernisation also varies from place to place. When considering Turkey specifically, the first attempts at modernisation must be traced back to the final period of the Ottoman Empire. During this period, referred to as a time of stagnation and decline, reforms in the military sphere, modelled on the West, formed the initial nucleus of modernisation efforts. It can be seen that the efforts for change that began in the military sphere soon began to affect other areas as well. While the cultural structures of the Ottoman Empire and Europe were completely different, the active role of one in relation to the other led to the other culture being defined as a passive element. The turning point in Turkish history regarding modernisation is the Tanzimat period. This was a process in which the active role of the Western world was accepted, and the traditional structure was not only questioned but also attempted to be changed in almost every area (Akgül 1999). It is understood that the modernisation journey of Turkish history did not emerge from the same dynamics as the West's acceptance of modernism. It is not possible to speak of feudalism or the bourgeoisie in Ottoman society. Therefore, the Tanzimat, which is considered the beginning of Turkish modernisation, emerged not from the demands of the social sphere but from reasons seen as solutions to problems related to political balances. Modernisation efforts, which began with the Tanzimat, continued at full speed both in the Ottoman Empire and in the newly established Republic of Turkey. Religious interpretation and religious education were the areas most affected by modernisation in the military, political, economic and social spheres.

The experience of modernism in the Republic of Turkey can be characterised as a unique state of modernity. Particularly since the 1990s, new developments have emerged concerning the distinction between the public and private spheres. The space narrowed by modernity's authoritarian and centralised perspective has expanded with the void created by postmodernism, enabling Islamic discourse to draw sustenance from this (Kahraman 2007). Unlike the traditional era, modernism places scientific thought in opposition to religious thought. Criticisms that modernism ignores the 'subject' exalted by the modern age, based on the preconception that religion does not contribute to the democratic sphere, can be cited as the reason for the distance between modernism and religion. Amidst these debates, there are those who do not consider it appropriate to pit religion and modernism against each other. When the subject is addressed specifically in relation to Islam, they argue that religion supports science outside the sensory realm and that there should be no talk of competition between two concepts that draw on different sources and are based on historical experience (Başgil 1991).

One of the topics where the influence of modernism is felt is undoubtedly the concept of 'women'. As the practical counterpart of the changes experienced in the mental sphere is constructed through the individual and social shifts of women, the debate between opposing viewpoints also takes place through the lens of women. From this perspective, while it was impossible to use phrases and concepts such as 'religious education—modernism—religious women—secularism—religious women striving to be visible in social life' side by side in the early years of the young Turkish Republic, it is understood that in recent years women who have received religious education have been trying to step outside their shel-

tered homes and have been influenced by ‘modernist’ interpretations. In connection with this topic, it should be noted that Nilüfer Göle’s concept of ‘non-Western modernisation’ was developed based on examples from Turkish history. Göle states that the perspective of women who decide to become visible in public and fight for this, based on the identity symbols they use, is a departure from tradition (Göle 2010). One indicator of Turkish modernism is the departure from the traditional perspective on women’s clothing, while another is raising women’s level of education and ensuring their visibility in public and social life. Some women who have completed higher education fulfil the educational aspect of Turkish modernism while creating a paradox by interpreting traditional clothing styles.

The rejection of rationalism, one of the fundamental pillars of modernism, is called postmodernism (Jencks 1992). In other words, the foundation of postmodern thought is the critique of the Enlightenment understanding of rationality as the only correct perspective. It is the proposal of a pluralistic definition of truth instead of a singular truth (Hekman 2016). In postmodernism, concepts such as ‘diversity, contingency, and ambiguity’ are considered in place of the ‘subject, community, state’ concepts that are accepted as modernist symbols (Marshall 2005). Regarding how hermeneutic understanding occurs, Gadamer states that it is impossible for understanding to occur independently of its historical context, tradition, and preconceptions (Gadamer 2008). When viewed from the perspective of the social sciences, postmodernism suggests that objective reality cannot be discussed, and that theoretical knowledge cannot be constructed alongside humanity’s identity as narrators, interpreters, and commentators who communicate through language.

From this perspective, the debates between modernism and postmodernism may bring to the fore the impact on the social roles of women in higher religious education. While modernisation policies during the Republican era could be shaped through women, the postmodern era has paved the way for different interpretations to emerge; this has provided an opportunity to reshape the place of religious women in the public sphere. The desire to take advantage of the opportunities and roles offered by the modern age while preserving traditional religious identities has led to the formation of a new synthesis, and it is possible to consider women’s education and training processes in this context.

4. Women’s Education/Teaching

Ahmed Çelebi states that when the educational opportunities provided to women in both the East and the West are compared with those of men, a process unfavourable to women is observed. He notes that Western women were considered to have a say in their homes, and that while the daughters of aristocratic families were allowed to learn to read and write, this permission was not granted to other families (Çelebi 1998). Çelebi’s comment that a similar situation applies to Muslim women is understandable when the historical process is taken into account. Assuming that Islam does not have a restrictive view on the education of women, the reasons for this historical divergence must be sought elsewhere. The complaints that women did not have the opportunity to ask questions during the time of the Prophet Muhammad do not indicate a negative attitude towards the education of women. During the same period, schools called (Çelebi 1998). Küttab offered literacy instruction, poetry, and Quranic teaching. Although there is no information regarding the admission of girls to Küttabs, there is evidence that a small number of women in society were literate.

It is understood that the learning trajectories of women from different cultures who share the same religious beliefs do not progress in the same direction, and that the point they reach is not similar due to the influence of variables other than religion. When discussing the history of women’s learning experiences in Turkey, it is necessary to examine the instructional system of the Ottoman Empire and women’s learning separately. Among

the main reasons for the decline of the Ottoman Empire were stagnation in the education system and, subsequently, decline. Before the Tanzimat, it is possible to mention primary schools, madrasas, and the Enderun schools, which trained people to work in the palace and the army. From the perspective of women's education, the Tanzimat Period is an important turning point in Ottoman history. Until this period, it was not possible to speak of continuity in the formal education of girls. In 1869, with the Maarif-i Umumiye Nizamnamesi (General Education Regulations), an important step was taken in the institutionalisation of women's learning. The opening of a teacher training college for girls meant that girls, whose skills had previously been developed through informal education, were now included in the formal education system (Binbaşioğlu 2014; Somel 2019).

Neighbourhood schools, also known as primary schools, are educational establishments where reading, writing, Quran recitation and basic knowledge are taught. While it is possible to speak of primary schools in rural areas, it cannot be said that all girls attend the primary schools found in cities. Mixed schooling existed in neighbourhood schools, where both boys and girls were present (Unat 1974). The Tanzimat Period marked the beginning of institutional restructuring in the Ottoman Empire and also had a structure that changed, transformed and differentiated educational institutions and their processes. Women's adaptation to formal learning environments and the shift in the nature of their learning experiences also took place during this period. Before this period, the education of Ottoman women was limited to reading, writing, and Quranic instruction in primary schools or sewing and dressmaking instruction in later years. However, with the Tanzimat period, the education of Ottoman women began to diversify (Demir 2017). Before this period, access to schooling was not available to every girl attending neighbourhood schools. While it was impossible for girls living outside cities to attend primary schools, it is understood that some families with a good socio-economic status preferred private lessons for their daughters' education. It is seen that the daughters of leading figures in the state received private lessons from poets, calligraphers, and musicians (Kurnaz 1997; Oktar 1998). As mentioned earlier, the General Education Regulation is the legal framework that made primary schools compulsory for both girls and boys in the Ottoman Empire. Examining the articles of the regulation reveals that separate primary schools existed for girls and boys, with compulsory attendance for girls aged 7 to 11. At the same time, it was required that teachers in girls' secondary schools be female, and if there were not enough female teachers, mature male teachers should be appointed. Among the subjects to be taught in girls' secondary schools were "Mebâdi-i Ulûm-ı Dinîye (Religion), Concise History and Geography, Rules of the Ottoman Language, Methods of Calculation and Bookkeeping, Fundamentals of Arabic and Persian Grammar, Embroidery to a Competent Level (de) Drawing, Spelling and Composition (Spelling and Writing), Life Skills (Sewing), Literary Selections, Home Management, Music (not compulsory)". Looking at the subjects, it can be seen that the curriculum includes content that will support girls in fulfilling their domestic duties and social roles. The regulations state that a Girls' Teacher Training College, namely Darü'l-Muallimât, was planned to be opened in Istanbul to train teachers for girls' primary and secondary schools, and that this college continued to exist for a long time as the only higher education institution opened for girls (Somel 2019). It is understood that one of the problems expressed in the first women's newspaper published in the same years emphasised the continuity of the rights granted to women by Islam (Şişman 2004). The opening of girls' secondary schools reinforced women's steps towards professionalisation. The first female teacher was appointed in 1873, and the first woman to speak at a graduation ceremony did so in 1881. Women began to take on administrative roles in 1883, a period coinciding with the reign of Abdulhamit (Berkes 2017). The introduction of compulsory education for girls led to their participation in public life. Institutions offering secondary-level

instruction were established at a later stage, with girls' secondary schools emerging during the Second Constitutional Era. With regard to technical institutions, it is understood that a five-year training programme was implemented in Girls' Art Schools, where students received general courses in the mornings and practical instruction in sewing, embroidery, handicrafts, and music in the afternoons. In subsequent periods, the curricula of Girls' Art Schools were revised in terms of both programme duration and course content. The French style dominated the Western-style education and training process, and this influence continued in areas ranging from architecture to musical notation and the uniforms worn by female students. The first university for girls was established in 1914 under the name 'İnas Dârü'l-Fünunu' and was defined as an institution aimed at training teachers for girls' secondary schools (Doğramacı 1992). With the 1926 Civil Code, female students were granted access to all schools except Military Academies (Turkish Civil Code No. 743 1926). At the same time, the acceptance and implementation of co-education in secondary schools in Turkey also demonstrates a departure from tradition in the education of girls. It should be noted that women living in rural areas and women living in cities differ not only in their social lives but also in their access to educational institutions. Considering that the population living in rural areas was denser than that in cities during the early years of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, it is also a reality that girls had to be considered a disadvantaged group for a long time in terms of their education. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, women became more visible in the public sphere within Ottoman territories, with efforts made to train them in midwifery, nursing, and teaching. It should be noted that the efforts made in women's education began to bear fruit after a while, and that women began to perform official duties, albeit in limited numbers, but that the real breakthrough in women's education came during the Republican era (Kurnaz 1997).

When discussing the understanding of women during the Ottoman period, the social perception of women, and the effectiveness of women in the education process, it is also possible to observe the change in the roles assigned to women with the newly established Republic. It was to be expected that the young Republic, turning its face towards the West and moving beyond the traditional perspective, would plan and implement a number of changes in the education process for women.

It is understood that with the advent of the Republican era, many of the revolutions took place through the visibility of women. The rights granted to women in the political sphere, along with the amendments made to the Civil Code, are elements that support women's education. Over time, the wave of migration from rural areas to cities has generally led to families prioritising the education of their sons. It is known that girls who continued to live in rural areas continued to provide services in areas required by their social roles, and the vast majority of them attained literacy through widespread education (Doğramacı 1993). The reality that every culture has its own set of customs and that differences in cultural codes also alter the role assigned to women is one of the factors affecting the accessibility of education for girls living in rural areas. In this regard, transforming the roles attributed to gender into behaviour and providing education accordingly is also among the expectations (Arkonaç 1993). While the participation of girls in the education process in recent history can be summarised in this way, today campaigns organised by the state, the efforts of civil society organisations and the process of raising awareness among families continue in this area.

In this context, the statement by Eric Cohen, a sociology professor at the Hebrew University, that 'Not mentioning men when talking about women is like clapping with one hand' expresses that womanhood has a relational characteristic and that it is not possible to address the subject in isolation (Yuval-Davis 2003).

Despite the contribution of women, who constitute a significant segment of society, to the social workforce, their classification as a ‘secondary workforce,’ the wage inequality between women and men experienced in some countries, and the fact that women’s education is more costly in some periods are examples of disadvantages in this regard.

According to historical data, women’s participation in educational activities is not an individual choice but rather has a political and social basis. In this complex process, it can be said that state policies and civil society organisations have helped women gain greater visibility in the social sphere. It is possible to examine women’s social status in terms of historical development and change, and the role of women in formal and informal religious education can also be addressed.

5. Women in Formal/Informal Religious Education

Various factors can be mentioned that enable women to participate in social life. Undoubtedly, the most important factor among these is women receiving education and participating in working life in line with the education they receive. Looking at the issue specifically in Turkey, it is understood that efforts have been made to include women in the formal education system, but despite this, women’s education statistics have not reached the expected level.

According to 2020 Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) data, 6.5% of women aged 25 and over are illiterate. The employment rate for women aged 15 and over stands at 26.3%. The labour force participation rate for women with higher education qualifications is 65.6%. The data indicates that educational attainment is a decisive factor in women’s participation in social life (TÜİK 2021).

Every innovation within the schooling system can be regarded as a socio-cultural change process that affects women’s social status. Developments in religious instruction in Turkey may be understood as a reflection of this process. With the inclusion of religious instruction in modern academic institutions, it was recognised for the first time in Ottoman history as a subject comparable to others within the formal curriculum. The Law of Unification of Education dated 3 March 1924 laid the foundation for many institutional reforms in education and can be considered the legal beginning of the approach to religious education. As the practical implementation of the law did not progress very well, religious education gradually lost its place in formal education, while Quran courses, which continued as a widespread religious education institution, served only a limited number of individuals. Although religious education was implemented at both primary and secondary school levels with the founding of the Republic, it appears that religious education was removed from all school curricula between 1930 and 1950. One reason for this stance on religious education was the preconception that its inclusion in teaching programmes was contrary to the principle of secularism, one of the fundamental principles of the young Republic.

The experiences related to the variability of the religious education process can be traced back to the period when women became involved in religious education, coinciding with the opening of the Faculty of Theology in Ankara and the Imam Hatip Schools. In 1924, the Ministry of Education opened the Faculty of Theology at Darülfünun and the Imam Hatip Schools (Öcal 1994).

Regarding the purpose of establishing the faculty, the then Minister of National Education, Tahsin Banguoğlu, stated: *“The most fundamental point we considered in establishing a Faculty of Theology is this, friends: This institution we wish to establish within our universities—which are communities of knowledge—will be an institution commensurate with the conditions of the new civil and social life that Atatürk’s revolution has brought us, and worthy of the identity of our new society. This is precisely why, as in all Western countries and increasingly in Eastern countries, we are considering establishing an institution that provides theological knowledge within*

the university community. This line of thinking is, in itself, of a nature that will respond to the concerns of some of our friends. We are not thinking of reviving the old madrasa style of education in our country and training people in the style it produced. We are absolutely determined to avoid this..." he said (Koştaş 1989).

By the 1940s, the needs arising in social life regarding religious education began to be voiced loudly. As can be understood from the minutes, criticisms regarding the implementation of Tevhid-i Tedrisat led to the opening of different avenues for religious education. The words of Yusuf Ziya Kösemen, the Kocaeli delegate speaking at the 1947 CHP Congress, are important for understanding the implementation of the Unification of Education: "Friends! You know that in 1924, the Unification of Education Law No. 430 came into being; that law is still in force today. According to this law, religious education, along with religious institutions, was transferred to the Ministry of National Education. According to this law, the ministry must be concerned with the religious and moral education of citizens. However, in order not to compromise our principle of secularism, this important duty has been neglected" (CHP, Seventh Congress of the Republican People's Party 1948). One of the common points raised by various members of parliament is the moral weaknesses of the younger generation. It is assumed that religious education will contribute to moral education. In this regard, there is talk of reintroducing religious education in formal education. In 1948, Imam Hatip Training Courses were established, and in 1951, Imam-Hatip Schools were opened in seven different cities (Jaschke 1972). According to Article 32 of the National Education Basic Law No. 1739, these schools are classified as educational institutions that implement programmes preparing students for both vocational careers and higher education (National Education Basic Law No. 1739 1973). From 1948 until the early 1980s, elective religious education classes were available. In 1982, Religious Culture and Ethics became one of the compulsory subjects within formal schooling. The participation of female students in Imam Hatip schools, where religious instruction was provided more intensively, as well as their employment as personnel in formal and informal religious settings, may be seen as a reflection of their learning experiences in social life. With the law on eight years of uninterrupted compulsory education, which came into force in 1997, all vocational schools, and consequently the middle sections of Imam Hatip High Schools, were closed. With Law No. 6287 of 2012, 'Law on Primary Education and Education and Amendments to Certain Laws,' and amendments made to Law No. 1739, the eight-year compulsory education period was extended to 12 years, and the compulsory education process was designed to consist of three stages, formulated as 4+4+4 (Law on Amendments to the Primary Education and Education Law and Certain Other Laws No. 6287 2012).

Looking at the history of religious education in higher education, it is understood that one of the changes envisaged by the Unification of Education in relation to the education and teaching process was the establishment of a Faculty of Theology at the University of Istanbul. The faculty, which opened in 1924, was closed in 1933. In 1949, the Faculty of Theology was established in Ankara, the first Higher Islamic Institute was opened in Istanbul in the 1959–1960 academic year, and the first Faculty of Islamic Sciences was opened in Erzurum in 1971–1972, affiliated with Atatürk University (Cebeci 1996). Subsequently, some higher education institutions, previously known as Divinity Faculties, have undergone a name change to Faculty of Islamic Sciences since 2013. When considering the gender ratio of students, faculties where female students were virtually non-existent in their early years have seen a shift in favour of female students in recent years. The latest figures on the number of female students in religious education institutions are significant. According to data from the 2021–2022 academic year, the number of female students enrolled in Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools is 292,935, which is higher than the number

of male students (https://sgb.meb.gov.tr/www/icerik_goruntule.php?KNO=460 accessed on 18 August 2025).

As of the 2021–2022 academic year, 7870 male students have enrolled, while 13,104 female students are studying at faculties of theology. In terms of the number of students currently enrolled, there are 35,023 male students and 56,146 female students (YÖK (Council of Higher Education) (2025)). The data presented above indicates more than just a numerical increase. It is likely that both institutions will reshape their future workforce. This situation demonstrates the functional role of education in the professionalisation and social visibility of women. It may not be accurate to interpret these figures solely in relation to institutions offering higher religious studies. A comparable increase in the number of female students can also be observed in certain faculties that provide vocational training. (Due to variables such as the working hours of the teaching profession and the characteristics of the target audience, the number of students studying at Faculties of Education is also shifting in favour of female students at a higher rate than at Faculties of Theology.) The employment of women who have received religious education in higher education contributes to their socialisation. One of the educational fields supported by families with a traditional outlook is religious education. The Ministry of National Education and the Presidency of Religious Affairs are two institutions directly involved in religious education. Faculties of Theology, which meet the personnel needs of both bodies, are closely linked to them in terms of planning religious instructional practices and preparing individuals to carry out these responsibilities.

Viewing women as the subject of change leads to observations and interpretations of traditional societies continuing to focus on women. One area where women are visible in both education and the public sphere is religious education. Imam Hatip schools, theology faculties, and the working lives that follow these educations make the change in the ‘religious’ woman important from this perspective as well. Considering women’s effectiveness in educating children within the family, it is understandable that women’s socialisation rate, outlook on life, and the individual effects of their education constitute the first step towards long-term societal transformation.

In religious perceptions, it is more common to see this continuing through women. Factors such as the continuation of superstitions, the rate of participation in collective worship, and the mixing of tradition and religion, where women are both active and passive, are among the reasons for interpretations concerning women.

The increase in the number of women in higher education cannot be seen merely as a rise specific to religious education institutions. This situation heralds a transformation in the processes of participation in social life and socialisation. Through higher religious education, women can shape not only their own lives but also the first steps of social change with the knowledge, skills and roles they acquire. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse accurately the transformations experienced by women within higher religious studies and the public sphere, as well as to anticipate the potential social implications of these developments.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Within the scope of this study, an attempt has been made to create a depiction of female actors through the interrelated dimensions of religion, education, and modernism. Accordingly, the definitions of religion and modernism are presented as conceptual tools to frame the analysis. Modernism, which brought about profound transformations in the social, cultural and intellectual spheres in the Western world where it emerged, has also created various spheres of influence within different historical and sociological contexts in the Islamic world (Tekin Sevinç 2023). Importantly, the modernist world has not always operated within a non-religious frame of reference; at times, it has interacted with religious

references, producing different interpretations and practices. As subjects of social transformation processes, women are not entirely independent of the influences of the period they live in and the socio-cultural structure they are part of. Within this context, mentioning women with higher religious education among the groups that interpret and redefine modernism in line with their own value systems should not be considered an exaggerated conclusion within the analytical limits of this study. Indeed, the fact that women who have received a high level of religious education display a different appearance and identity in the social sphere has led to debate in the definitions of certain concepts such as modernism. In a world where being educated is considered a prerequisite for modernisation, the place of educated religious women within modernisation is a question in itself (Göle 2010). From this perspective, it is important to reveal the stance of women who have received religious education towards life.

It is difficult to say that women who define themselves as religious fulfil all the requirements of modernism, as understood in its classical Western sense; but it should also be noted that they interpret modernism in their own way (Karakaya 2019). This context-specific interpretation of modernism has brought about many changes, particularly in the public sphere. The critique of public space, one of the concepts of the modern world, originated with postmodern thinkers. Rather than a single, universal public space, public spaces in which everyone can participate have been idealised (Köroğlu 2013). Women, positioned at the intersection of religious identity and modern social life, have become symbols of modernisation and religious revival and have benefited from postmodernism's pluralistic interpretation. They attract attention through their clothing, forms of participation in the public sphere, and perspectives on the family. Accordingly, this situation necessitates an in-depth analysis of their social roles and positions within the framework of higher religious education and modernity.

This new situation for women and the processes of social interaction make their connection to education and the social implications of education even more valuable. The broad impact of women on social life further emphasises the importance of their education. The historical role of religious education in the participation of women living in Turkey in educational processes is extremely valuable. The integration of women into the institutional education system has yielded new results. Pious women raised within traditional values may choose to become more visible in the social sphere under the influence of modern education. While preserving their individual piety, these women, unlike previous generations, are stepping outside their homes, which they see as safe spaces, and struggling to exist in social life with their religious identities.

However, the emergence of religious women in society in this manner has led to significant debates and criticism in different social circles. The entry of religious women into the public sphere has brought with it many questions and debates. The fact that these individuals, thought to be distant from the modern world, are receiving education and entering the workforce has been criticised by the conservative segment opposed to modernism, while individuals who consider themselves to have modern values have also been disturbed by this situation. As a result, religious female actors have been forced to either counter or ignore the criticism they face from two different fronts.

According to sociologist Nilüfer Göle, this inconsistent situation can be understood through the interaction and efforts for change between secular and Islamic groups. Göle explains the efforts to reconcile Islam with modernism, undertaken in recent years to better understand the transformation experienced by the religious segment of society, as being due to the secular segment becoming more visible in certain areas (Göle 2017). The emergence of 'Islamic' elements and devout women asserting themselves in the public sphere in their own style has created a domino effect leading to multiple societal shifts.

This process has accelerated the modernisation journey of Muslims and enabled new forms to emerge between the religious and the secular (Özbolat 2017).

Within this complex framework of relationships, the possibility of Turkish society accommodating both modernism and religious elements is being raised. Amidst debates concerning modernity and religion, there are views emphasising that Turkish society can accommodate both perspectives. Referring to the importance of sacred sentiment, it is stated that religious practices and rituals can thus continue to exist (Köse 2015). In this integration process, religious women are striking a balance, particularly by drawing on the terminology and reference points of conservative communities. The ‘religious’ woman striving to exist in the public sphere has continued to skilfully use the language of the conservative world. Through her references, she has contributed to change in this conservative environment, but has done so quietly and discreetly (Haenni 2014).

Therefore, this transformation, which is perceived as noisy from the outside, is in reality a profound yet calm attempt at separation and reshaping. The transformation experienced by religious women may appear to have a noisy impact on society; however, in reality, this process clearly and calmly reveals a departure from the traditional perspective and ways of interpreting modernism.

All these changes and transformations can be examined and interpreted from different perspectives. Therefore, this research has been prepared to pave the way for new studies and raise certain questions.

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