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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Transformation of Religiosity Among Younger Generations in Türkiye: Urbanization, Individualization, and the Decline of Institutional Practice

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of religiosity among younger generations in Türkiye, situating recent evidence of declining institutional religious practice within a broader sociological account of individualization and urbanization. Drawing on an integrative review of scholarship published between 2023 and 2025, the article argues that generational religious change in Türkiye should not be reduced to a single explanatory factor, such as political disillusionment or digital exposure, but is better understood as the product of several converging processes: the individualization of religious meaning-making, in which young people increasingly construct personalized rather than institutionally prescribed religious identities; the erosion of intergenerational plausibility structures within families and communities; and the measurable, survey-documented shift toward secular self-identification across successive household panels. The article reviews evidence for a genuine, non-transitory secularizing trend among Turkish youth, evaluates competing explanations for this trend, and considers the implications of generational religious transformation for Turkish social cohesion, family life, and religious institutions. The article concludes that the transformation underway is substantial but uneven, producing not a uniform decline into non-belief but a diversification of religious and quasi-religious identities among the young that existing survey categories are only beginning to capture adequately.

Keywords: *religiosity, individualization, urbanization, secularization, generational change, Türkiye*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Problem Statement

Türkiye has historically been characterized, both by its own political leadership and by external observers, as an overwhelmingly religious, Muslim-majority society in which secularism, where it exists, has been understood primarily as a state-imposed constitutional framework rather than as a widely shared feature of individual consciousness. Yet a growing body of survey and qualitative evidence gathered over the past several years suggests that this characterization increasingly understates the extent to which religiosity among younger Turkish generations has been quietly, but substantially, transformed.

Original panel survey research comparing the same neighborhoods and households across 2019 and 2024 identifies a clear trend toward secularization at the individual level within Turkish society over this period, a trend that appears robust across multiple explanatory tests and that cannot be attributed solely to

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compositional changes in the surveyed population (Şaşmaz, 2025). This finding is significant because it moves beyond earlier, more impressionistic accounts of declining youth religiosity toward a methodologically grounded demonstration of genuine individual-level change over a relatively short and well-defined period.

The problem this article addresses is how to make theoretical sense of this documented transformation. Is it best understood as a delayed manifestation of classical secularization theory, in which modernization processes that reshaped religious life in other societies decades earlier are now, with some lag, reshaping Turkish society? Or does it require a more context-specific explanation attentive to the particular political, economic, and technological conditions of contemporary Türkiye, including the politicization of religious institutions and the disruptive effects of digital communication examined elsewhere in this research program?

1.2. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This article aims to develop an integrated sociological account of generational religious transformation in Türkiye, synthesizing recent survey, qualitative, and theoretical scholarship into a coherent explanatory framework. Three research questions guide the analysis. First, what does the most methodologically robust recent evidence indicate about the scale, direction, and durability of religious change among younger Turkish generations? Second, which explanatory factors, among modernization-driven individualization, urbanization, rising educational attainment, and reaction to political events, receive the strongest support in the recent literature, and how do these factors interact rather than compete as explanations? Third, what forms does the resulting religious transformation take among Turkish youth, and to what extent does it represent straightforward secular decline as opposed to a more complex diversification of religious and quasi-religious identity?

The article adopts an integrative, theory-building approach, treating recent empirical findings as the evidentiary basis for a synthesized account of generational religious change rather than presenting new primary survey or interview data.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This article is significant because it addresses generational religious change in Türkiye as a phenomenon in its own right, distinct from, though related to, the more institutionally focused questions of religious education and state religious policy addressed elsewhere in the recent literature. By foregrounding individualization and urbanization as sociological processes operating somewhat independently of specific political developments, the article offers a complementary rather than competing account to more politically focused explanations of Turkish secularization.

The article is also significant for its attention to the limitations of existing measurement approaches to religiosity, given that individual-level secularization, once understood as a multidimensional and potentially gradual process rather than a single binary transition, requires measurement instruments capable of capturing intermediate and hybrid religious identities that earlier survey categories were not designed to detect (Ertit, 2023).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This article draws on classical and revised secularization theory, understood as a multidimensional process encompassing institutional differentiation, declining religious practice, and the privatization of religious meaning, applied specifically to a non-Western, Muslim-majority context in which the theory's applicability has historically been contested (Ertit, 2024b). Rather than treating secularization as a simple, unidirectional decline in belief, this framework allows for uneven change across different dimensions of religiosity, such that formal religious identification may persist even as practice, institutional trust, and depth of belief decline.

The article further draws on individualization theory within the sociology of religion, which holds that under conditions of modernization, urbanization, and expanded educational attainment, religious meaning-making shifts from a collectively inherited, institutionally mediated framework toward a more personally constructed, reflexively chosen framework, in which individuals selectively retain, modify, or discard elements of inherited religious tradition according to their own biographical circumstances and reasoning rather than according to communal or institutional prescription.

Finally, the article incorporates a political-disillusionment mechanism, developed in adjacent scholarship within this research program, which holds that generational religious change in Türkiye has been accelerated, though not solely caused, by disillusionment with the political instrumentalization of religious authority under sustained one-party governance (Ertit, 2024a). This mechanism is treated in this article as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the more structural individualization and urbanization processes emphasized by classical secularization theory.

2.2. Review Methodology

This article follows an integrative literature review design, drawing on recent panel survey research, qualitative sociological research, and theoretical scholarship addressing religious change among Turkish youth. Consistent with the broader methodological standard adopted across this research program, only sources published from 2023 onward were retained for substantive citation, ensuring that the review reflects the most current empirical evidence on generational religious transformation in Türkiye, including panel survey evidence extending through 2024 and theoretical scholarship published as recently as 2025.

Sources were organized thematically around the three research questions identified in Section 1.2, addressing in turn the empirical evidence for religious change, the competing and complementary explanatory mechanisms proposed in the literature, and the specific forms that religious transformation appears to be taking among contemporary Turkish youth. This thematic organization, developed in Section 3, allows the review to move beyond simply documenting the existence of religious change toward a more analytically structured account of its causes and character.

3. THEMATIC REVIEW

3.1. Evidence for a Genuine, Measurable Secularizing Trend

The strongest recent evidence for genuine, rather than merely perceived or anecdotal, religious change among Turkish youth comes from panel survey research comparing the same districts and neighborhoods

in 2019 and 2024, which identifies a clear trend toward secularization at the individual level using pseudo-panel techniques that control for many of the compositional confounds that could otherwise account for observed differences between cross-sectional surveys conducted at different points in time (Şaşmaz, 2025). This methodological design is significant because it addresses a common limitation of earlier survey-based claims about declining Turkish religiosity, namely the difficulty of distinguishing genuine individual-level change from shifts in the composition of the surveyed population, such as differential migration or generational replacement effects.

This panel evidence is corroborated by qualitative research documenting a gradual, process-oriented crisis of faith among young Turkish adults, in which religious disengagement emerges cumulatively through experiences of authoritarian parenting, perceived hypocrisy, and gendered inequality within religious households rather than through a single decisive event (Babacan, 2025). The convergence of quantitative panel evidence and qualitative process-oriented evidence, produced through entirely different methodological approaches and research teams, substantially strengthens confidence that the documented transformation reflects a genuine underlying social process rather than an artifact of any single study's methodology.

Complementing both strands, grounded-theory research based on expert interviews with individuals professionally embedded in religious education finds broad consensus, across respondents with divergent political and religious orientations, that religiosity among Turkish youth has measurably declined in depth and practice even where formal identification with Islam persists, with several respondents explicitly rejecting the framing of this change as a simple binary shift toward atheism in favor of describing it as a more gradual process of secularization or worldliness, better captured by graded rather than binary measures of religious change .

3.2. Individualization and the Personalization of Religious Meaning

A central explanatory thread running through the reviewed literature concerns the individualization of religious meaning-making among Turkish youth, a process in which young people increasingly construct their religious, or post-religious, identities through personal reflection and selective engagement with inherited tradition rather than through straightforward acceptance of communally or institutionally prescribed belief and practice. This individualization is evident in qualitative accounts of young people who describe retaining a general sense of spirituality or ethical commitment while explicitly rejecting the institutional, communal, and political apparatus through which that spirituality was originally transmitted to them (Babacan, 2025).

This pattern is consistent with the theoretical expectation, developed within classical secularization theory as extended to non-Western contexts, that modernization processes reshape not only the institutional standing of religion but the very form that individual religiosity takes, shifting religion from a taken-for-granted, communally reinforced feature of identity toward a more optional, reflexively chosen component of a broader, individually constructed biographical narrative (Ertit, 2024b). Rather than uniformly abandoning religious identity, many young Turks appear to be renegotiating its content and meaning on more individualized terms, a pattern that graded and multidimensional measures of religiosity, such as recently developed secularity scales, are better equipped to capture than earlier binary religious and non-religious classifications (Ertit, 2023).

Individualization also manifests in changing patterns of religious authority recognition, in which young people increasingly evaluate religious claims and religious authorities on the basis of personally assessed moral consistency and credibility rather than on the basis of inherited institutional position, a shift documented consistently across both family-level and institutional-level research within this broader research program (Babacan, 2025).

3.3. Urbanization, Education, and the Erosion of Plausibility Structures

Beyond individualization as a general modernizing tendency, several more specific structural factors identified in the recent literature help explain the pace and unevenness of religious change among Turkish youth. Panel survey research explicitly tests rising educational attainment as one candidate explanation for the observed secularizing shift, finding that increases in formal education correlate with, and plausibly contribute to, the documented decline in individual religiosity, consistent with a long-standing finding within the broader sociology of religion that educational attainment tends to erode the plausibility of unexamined, communally inherited religious frameworks by exposing individuals to alternative explanatory systems and critical reasoning skills (Şaşmaz, 2025).

Urbanization operates alongside rising educational attainment as a further structural driver, dispersing young people from the dense, religiously homogeneous social networks characteristic of many smaller and more traditional Turkish communities into more socially heterogeneous, anonymized urban environments in which the informal social monitoring and reinforcement that historically sustained high levels of religious practice is considerably weaker. While the panel survey evidence reviewed here does not isolate urbanization as an independent variable with the same precision applied to educational attainment, the geographic patterning of documented secularization, concentrated in the urban and peri-urban districts examined in the underlying panel study, is consistent with urbanization functioning as a contributing structural mechanism (Şaşmaz, 2025).

The panel research also directly tests, and substantially discounts, several alternative explanations for the observed secularizing shift, finding that the trend is not primarily attributable to the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic or of the 2023 earthquakes, nor to straightforward generational cohort replacement alone, but instead reflects genuine within-individual change occurring across the study period, lending further support to the structural, rather than purely event-driven, character of the transformation examined in this article (Şaşmaz, 2025).

3.4. Political Disillusionment as an Accelerating, Not Sole, Mechanism

While the structural mechanisms discussed in Section 3.3 provide an important foundation for understanding generational religious change in Türkiye, the reviewed literature also identifies a more specifically political mechanism that appears to have accelerated the underlying structural trend beyond what modernization processes alone would predict. Analysis of the broader trajectory of Turkish Islamization policy under sustained one-party governance concludes that the state's explicit project of raising a religiously observant generation has, on balance, failed to achieve its intended objective, and interprets this failure partly as evidence of disillusionment with the political conduct of religious and political authority translating into a parallel disillusionment with religion itself (Ertit, 2024a).

This political-disillusionment mechanism helps explain why the pace of documented secularization appears, in some qualitative accounts, to have accelerated in recent years rather than proceeding at a constant rate consistent with gradual structural modernization alone, since respondents in expert-

interview research explicitly link intensified disengagement to specific periods of heightened political polarization and to perceived inconsistency between religious rhetoric and political conduct among prominent religious and political figures .

Importantly, the reviewed literature treats structural and political mechanisms as complementary rather than competing explanations. Political disillusionment appears to operate most powerfully among young people already predisposed toward a more individualized, critically reflective religious orientation by virtue of their educational attainment and urban social context, suggesting that the political mechanism functions as an accelerant that interacts with, rather than substitutes for, the underlying structural transformation identified in Section 3.3.

3.5. Diversification Rather Than Uniform Decline

A final, analytically important theme in the reviewed literature concerns the specific form that religious transformation takes among Turkish youth, which the evidence suggests is better characterized as diversification than as uniform decline into straightforward non-belief. Expert-interview research explicitly documents a spectrum of outcomes among young people moving away from conventional religious practice, ranging from explicit atheism and deism through various forms of what respondents describe as worldliness or loosened religious interpretation, to continued formal religious identification accompanied by substantially reduced practice and institutional trust .

This diversification is consistent with the multidimensional conception of secularization adopted in this article's theoretical framework, in which decline in one dimension of religiosity, such as institutional trust or practice frequency, need not be accompanied by proportional decline in other dimensions, such as formal identification or private spiritual belief. Recently developed graded secularity measures are specifically designed to capture this diversification, distinguishing among multiple intermediate positions rather than forcing survey respondents into a binary religious or non-religious classification that the qualitative evidence suggests poorly reflects the actual complexity of contemporary Turkish youth religious identity (Ertit, 2023).

This diversification has an important implication for how the broader transformation examined in this article should be characterized: rather than Türkiye undergoing a straightforward transition from a religious to a secular society in the classical Western European sense, the evidence points toward an increasingly pluralized religious landscape among Turkish youth, in which conventional institutional religiosity, individualized spirituality, explicit non-belief, and various hybrid positions coexist within the same generational cohort, and in some cases within the biographical trajectory of the same individual over time.

3.6. Family and Generational Continuity Under Conditions of Change

The transformation documented throughout Section 3 raises an important question about intergenerational family dynamics that the reviewed literature addresses only partially but that merits explicit attention here. Where secularizing change proceeds at meaningfully different rates across generations within the same family, the resulting divergence between the religious orientation of parents and their adult or adolescent children introduces a distinct source of intrafamilial tension that compounds, rather than merely accompanies, the direct socialization mechanisms discussed in companion research within this program. Qualitative accounts of young people navigating this divergence describe a range of family responses, from tolerant accommodation of a child's changing religious

orientation to renewed conflict and enforcement attempts, with the latter response appearing, consistent with the broader argument developed throughout this research program, more likely to accelerate than to reverse the underlying secularizing trend (Babacan, 2025).

This generational divergence also has implications for how religious transmission itself is likely to function going forward. Where a substantial share of the parent generation itself now falls somewhere along the diversified spectrum of religious orientation discussed in Section 3.5, rather than uniformly occupying a conventionally religious position, the very content of what is transmitted to the next generation is likely to be more heterogeneous than in earlier periods, plausibly reinforcing rather than dampening the diversification trend identified in this article as it continues to unfold across subsequent generational cohorts.

3.7. Comparative Perspective: Türkiye Among Modernizing Muslim-Majority Societies

Situating the Turkish transformation within a comparative frame of other modernizing Muslim-majority societies helps clarify whether the mechanisms identified in this article represent a distinctly Turkish pattern or a more general feature of religious change under conditions of rapid urbanization and educational expansion. Theoretical work extending secularization theory beyond its original Western Christian frame argues that the theory's core mechanism, the erosion of religious plausibility structures under conditions of institutional differentiation and pluralization, operates across a range of religious traditions once adapted to local institutional configurations, suggesting that the individualization and structural mechanisms identified in this article for the Turkish case are unlikely to be wholly unique to Türkiye (Ertit, 2024b).

What does appear comparatively distinctive about the Turkish case, drawing on the broader research program of which this article forms a part, is the specific combination of rapid structural modernization with a simultaneous, highly visible state project of religious revival, a combination that is less commonly observed in comparable settings where either structural modernization has proceeded without an equivalently assertive state religious project, or where state religious mobilization has occurred in societies undergoing less rapid urbanization and educational expansion. This combination plausibly accounts for both the scale of the documented transformation and its accelerated pace relative to the more gradual secularizing trajectories observed in some other developing Muslim-majority contexts.

4. DISCUSSION

The evidence and theoretical synthesis presented above support a central argument of this article: that generational religious transformation in Türkiye reflects the convergence of multiple mechanisms, individualization, urbanization, rising educational attainment, and political disillusionment, rather than any single dominant cause, and that these mechanisms interact and reinforce one another rather than operating as independent, competing explanations. This multi-causal reading is consistent with the convergent evidence from panel survey research, qualitative process-oriented research, and grounded-theory expert-interview research reviewed in Section 3, each of which, despite differing methodologies, points toward a broadly similar structural and political explanation for the documented transformation.

A significant implication of this multi-causal reading concerns the durability of the observed transformation. Because the underlying drivers include structural modernization processes, urbanization and rising educational attainment, that are unlikely to reverse over the foreseeable future, the

transformation documented in this article should be understood as a durable generational shift rather than a transient reaction to specific, potentially reversible political circumstances. Even if the political-disillusionment mechanism discussed in Section 3.4 were to diminish under changed political conditions, the structural mechanisms discussed in Section 3.3 would likely continue to exert a secularizing influence on subsequent Turkish generations.

A second significant implication concerns the diversification theme discussed in Section 3.5, which cautions against interpreting the current transformation through an overly simplified religious-versus-secular binary. The evidence reviewed here suggests that Turkish social and religious institutions, including family structures, educational systems, and religious authorities, are likely to face a considerably more heterogeneous younger population in terms of religious orientation than earlier generations, with implications for social cohesion, family relationships across generations, and the design of any future religious or moral education curricula that assume a more religiously homogeneous student population than current evidence suggests actually exists.

The generational continuity dynamics discussed in Section 3.6 further suggest that the diversification identified in this article is unlikely to represent a temporary, single-generation phenomenon that subsequently reverts toward earlier patterns of religious homogeneity. Because the parent generation transmitting religious orientation to the next generational cohort is itself becoming more internally diverse, the diversification process identified here plausibly compounds across successive generations rather than resolving into a new, stable equilibrium within a single generational cycle.

Finally, this discussion connects directly to the broader research program of which this article forms a part: the individualization and structural mechanisms emphasized here provide essential context for understanding why the politicization mechanisms examined in companion analyses of family religious socialization and Imam Hatip schooling have found such fertile ground for producing disengagement. Political disillusionment with religious authority is unlikely to have generated the scale of generational religious change documented in this article had it not been operating upon a population already undergoing substantial structural individualization, underscoring the analytical value of treating structural and political explanations as jointly necessary rather than as alternative, mutually exclusive accounts.

The comparative reflection offered in Section 3.7 further suggests that researchers studying religious change in other rapidly modernizing Muslim-majority societies would benefit from examining whether a similarly assertive state religious project is present alongside structural modernization, since the Turkish evidence reviewed in this article suggests that the coexistence of these two conditions, rather than either condition alone, may be what most distinctively accelerates and intensifies generational religious transformation of the kind documented here.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

This article has argued that the transformation of religiosity among younger generations in Türkiye is a genuine, methodologically well-documented phenomenon that reflects the convergence of structural modernization processes, individualization, urbanization, and rising educational attainment, with a more specifically Turkish mechanism of political disillusionment arising from the perceived instrumentalization

of religious authority under sustained one-party governance. Rather than representing a uniform decline into non-belief, this transformation appears to be producing a diversified religious landscape among Turkish youth, encompassing explicit non-belief, loosened or individualized religious interpretation, and continued formal identification accompanied by reduced practice, in proportions that existing survey instruments are only beginning to measure adequately.

The convergence of quantitative panel evidence, qualitative process-oriented research, and grounded-theory expert-interview evidence reviewed across this article provides an unusually robust, multi-method evidentiary basis for concluding that this transformation reflects genuine underlying social change rather than a methodological artifact or a transient reaction to specific political circumstances.

5.2. Limitations

As an integrative conceptual review, this article synthesizes existing panel survey, qualitative, and theoretical scholarship rather than presenting new primary data, and its account of the relative contribution of individualization, urbanization, and political disillusionment as explanatory mechanisms rests on evidence that, while convergent, has not yet been integrated within a single unified research design capable of directly testing the relative explanatory weight of each mechanism against the others. Future dedicated research explicitly designed to disentangle these mechanisms would strengthen the causal claims synthesized in this review.

A further limitation concerns the article's treatment of intergenerational family dynamics in Section 3.6, which draws on qualitative evidence originally collected to address individual religious trajectories rather than family-level dynamics specifically, meaning that the article's account of generational divergence within families should be treated as a plausible extension of the reviewed evidence rather than as a directly tested empirical finding.

Finally, the panel survey evidence central to Section 3.1 and 3.3, while methodologically strong, is drawn from a specific set of districts and neighborhoods rather than a nationally representative sample spanning the full geographic and socio-economic diversity of Türkiye, meaning that the pace and intensity of the transformation documented in this article may vary considerably across regions, particularly between the more urbanized western provinces and the more rural or religiously conservative eastern and central Anatolian provinces, in ways the underlying panel study was not designed to fully capture.

5.3. Recommendations

For researchers, this article recommends the wider adoption of graded, multidimensional measures of religiosity, of the kind recently developed and validated for Muslim populations, in place of binary religious and non-religious survey classifications, given the strong evidence reviewed in Section 3.5 that binary measures substantially understate the true complexity and diversity of contemporary Turkish youth religious identity.

For family, educational, and religious institutions navigating this transformation, the evidence reviewed here suggests that responses premised on the assumption of a uniformly religious younger population are likely to be increasingly mismatched with the actual, diversified religious landscape documented in this article, and that institutional approaches capable of accommodating a wider range of individualized religious and quasi-religious identities among young people are likely to prove more effective than

approaches premised on restoring a more religiously homogeneous generational profile that current evidence suggests is unlikely to return.

For future comparative research, this article recommends examining whether the specific combination of structural and political mechanisms identified here for the Turkish case generalizes to other Muslim-majority societies undergoing comparable processes of urbanization and rising educational attainment under conditions of politically visible religious governance, which would help clarify the broader applicability of the multi-causal framework developed in this review beyond the Turkish context alone.

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