

# Between being and not being: An analysis of elective religious course curricula in republican-era Türkiye

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**Abstract:** Religious courses have oscillated between inclusion and exclusion since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. They were gradually removed from the curriculum and completely eliminated in 1939. After a long hiatus, they were reintroduced as elective courses in primary schools (1949), lower secondary schools (1956), and upper secondary schools (1967). These elective courses existed in various forms from 1949 until 1982, when religious education became compulsory. This study aims to provide a general evaluation of the structure and implementation of these courses, focusing specifically on the elective religious course curricula in Türkiye between 1949 and 1982. The study was conducted using a case study design, one of the qualitative research methods. Data were collected through content analysis of curricula and related studies. The findings are presented under four main headings: the process leading to the reintroduction of religious courses in 1949; the general approach of the curricula; and the aims and content of the religious courses. The study concludes with a six-point discussion framed within the context of relevant literature and the sociopolitical conditions of the period.

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## Introduction

Education is a phenomenon that plays a vital role in transmitting a society's epistemic, aesthetic, and moral understandings to future generations. For this reason, throughout history, every society has not only assigned a purpose to education but also defined the type of person it aims to cultivate, in line with its worldview. This process of cultural transmission has become especially important in modern times, due to the dizzying ease of access to information and the increasingly distinct and diverse needs of societies. During this period, educational boundaries have evolved into a clearly defined framework known as curriculum (Cevizci, 2010, pp. 184–185; Ertürk, 1972, pp. 7–8). Today, curriculum is designed separately for each course, extending from normative considerations about what subjects should be taught to detailed specifications of content (Cevizci, 2010, p. 182). Some general characteristics of modern curriculum can be identified. First, the curriculum reflects the value a society places on knowledge and epistemology, showing what knowledge is deemed important and the quality of the cognitive infrastructure being targeted. However, the curriculum must also be adaptable. As knowledge and technology -the foundations of education- continue to evolve rapidly, the curriculum must be flexible to remain relevant. At the same time, it plays a critical role in preserving and transmitting a society's national, historical, and cultural values. In this way, the curriculum also supports the development of citizenship (Cevizci, 2010, pp. 182–185; Tozlu, 2003, pp. 110–111). There are four basic pillars of an educational curriculum that cover all of these aspects. These are; the aims that contain the answer to why education is done, the content that determines what will be taught, the method that determines the ways of how to teach, and the evaluation that draws the limits of how much to teach (Bakırcıoğlu, 2012, pp. 693-694).

When it comes to religious education, it can be said that the curriculum-related principles mentioned above are generally applicable. In fact, religious education in Türkiye cannot be separated from general education in terms of its foundational parameters. However, it is important to emphasize that

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during the Republican period, religious education and its content were shaped with particular sensitivity (Doğan, 2004, p. 628). The development of religious education curriculum in Türkiye has been influenced by several factors: the state's stance on human rights, its understanding of knowledge and religion, educational policies, the socio-religious cultural structure, its international position, and student characteristics (Tosun, 2015, p. 114). An examination of the historical trajectory of religious education, especially within formal education institutions, reveals a pattern of fluctuation. To understand the context of elective religious courses -the focus of this study- it is helpful to briefly outline the earlier developments. In 1924, the first curriculum of the Republic included a two-hour weekly course titled "Qur'an and Religious Lessons" for all grades except the first year of primary school. By 1926, religious content had been restricted to the "Knowledge of Life" course during the first three years of primary education, while separate religious courses were reduced to one hour per week in grades three through five. In 1930, religious education was offered only in the fifth grade, and by 1936, it had been removed entirely from the curriculum. It was similarly absent from the village primary school curriculum in 1939 and remained excluded from formal education for an extended period. Following public and political discussions in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, media, and wider society, religious courses were reintroduced in 1949 as elective subjects. From that point on, they continued -subject to various modifications, additions, and removals- until they became compulsory in 1982. (For a detailed account of developments between 1924 and 1939, see: Altaş, 2002, p. 220; Tavukçuoğlu, 1996, pp. 147–153; Tosun, 2008, p. 235; Yürük, 2011b, pp. 248–249; Zengin, 2017, p. 121.)

This study focuses on the period during which religious education in Türkiye was offered as an elective course. Elective courses often held an ambiguous position within the curriculum, and religious education shared this status for nearly 30 years during the Republican era, before being made compulsory in 1982. Although no direct research has been conducted specifically on these courses -generally referred to as *Religious Knowledge* during this period- several studies on religious education and curriculum development have been published. These works provided relevant insights and commentary on the structure and nature of elective religious courses (Altaş, 2002, pp. 221–228; Ayhan, 2014, pp. 126–163; Bilgin, 1980; Doğan, 2004, pp. 620–631; Genç, 2012, pp. 573–574; Kaymakcan, 2006, p. 23; Tavukçuoğlu, 1996, pp. 154–158; Yürük, 2011a, pp. 91–131; 2011b, pp. 249–250; Zengin, 2017, pp. 124–127). The primary aim of this study is to offer a general evaluation of the functioning and curricular processes of elective religious courses in Türkiye between 1949 and 1982. The primary research questions include:

1. What historical context led to the reintroduction of religious courses after a prolonged absence?
2. How were elective religious courses defined within the curricula?
3. What objectives were these courses designed to achieve?
4. What content was included in these courses?
5. Considering the background, approach, objectives, and content, what was the role of elective religious courses in Turkey's educational policies, pedagogical structures, textbooks, teacher training/employment, and the development of compulsory religious courses?

A case study design (Creswell, 2021, pp. 97–100) -one of the qualitative research methods- was employed as the methodological framework. Data were obtained through document analysis (Karasar, 2012, p. 183) of curricula published in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1968, and 1976, and were subsequently subjected to content analysis. An initial review of the curricula was conducted to formulate relevant research questions, guided by expert opinions. Subsequently, the curricula were re-examined to identify answers to these questions, which were then coded and thematically categorized. Coding involved extracting specific information pertinent to the research questions, while theming involved grouping these codes into coherent categories. Both inductive and deductive approaches were utilized in the content analysis. To ensure the study's validity and reliability, two strategies were implemented: Firstly, comparing the findings with existing literature to contextualize and validate the results. Secondly, consulting with a field expert to review the analyses, incorporating their feedback into the final interpretation.

## 1. The Process of Preparing the Reintroduction of Religious Courses

In the development of religious education curricula in Türkiye, the influence of the state's sociopolitical vision and its desired citizen model is evident -that is, the type of individual the state seeks to cultivate (Tosun, 2015, p. 114). This supports the argument that state policies play a significant role in shaping the religious education process (Zengin, 2017, p. 114). Following the initial inclusion of compulsory religious courses in the early years, these were gradually reduced and ultimately removed from the curriculum entirely by 1939. Religious education remained absent from formal education for a significant period. It was not until 1949 that religious instruction reappeared in the curriculum. The 1949 announcement in the *Journal of Communiqués* that religious education would be offered as an optional subject in primary schools raises the question: what changed in the preceding decade to make this reintroduction possible?

Since 1924, efforts, reforms, decisions, and implementations had consistently aimed to embed the principles of the Republic -especially secularism- into society. The removal of religious education was initially justified within the framework of secularist reform. However, in the latter half of the 1940s, political conviction grew that Republican reforms had sufficiently taken root in society. As a result, religious life—and religious education in particular—could once again be cautiously reintroduced into public discourse (Bulut, 1997, pp. 115–116; Doğan, 2004, p. 630; Kara, 2019, p. 222). A 1946 commission tasked with studying the matter concluded that offering religious education would not contradict secularism, and this decision—along with changing societal dynamics—contributed to the shift in policy (Tavukçuoğlu, 1996, p. 158).

Other key factors also supported this shift in perspective. One was the growing recognition within the government of a societal need for religious education and services. Turkish society had a strong desire to live according to religious principles and to receive education in line with these values (Kara, 2019, p. 222; Kaymakcan, 2006, p. 23). After 1946, political leaders increasingly responded to public demands, bringing the issue to the forefront of the national agenda (Öcal, 1998, p. 245). Contributing to this awareness was a rising concern that religious education was being delivered informally by various organizations, which posed a perceived threat (Kara, 2019, p. 222). The lack of formal, state-controlled religious instruction risked driving people toward alternative sources, potentially undermining the Republic's reforms. Another crucial factor influencing the reintroduction of religious education was the political context of the time. The ruling single-party government recognized the growing momentum toward a multi-party system and the potential for political transition. After 1946, the Democrat Party gained popularity with its promises to fulfill societal expectations -particularly regarding religious services and education (Subaşı, 2017, p. 82). Additionally, the educational imperative to preserve and promote the unifying values of Turkish society (Üstel, 2016, pp. 241–242) also contributed to support for the selective inclusion of religious education in the curriculum.

As a result of the conditions of the time, a letter dated February 1, 1949 -signed by the then Minister of National Education, Tahsin Banguoğlu, and issued under the 1948 curriculum- was sent to provincial governorships, requesting that the necessary procedures be implemented. The letter stated that religious courses could be taught for two hours per week in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school, provided that parents submitted a written request (MEB, 1949, p. 153). This letter served as an official document authorizing the reinstatement of religious education after a long hiatus. A similar decision was made in 1967 for upper secondary and equivalent institutions. According to this decision, starting from the 1967–1968 academic year, religious courses were to be offered for one hour per week outside of regular class hours in the first and second grades of high schools and equivalent schools (MEB, 1967, p. 371).

## 2. General Approach of the Curricula

In this section, information is provided about the general approach to elective religious courses based on the explanatory sections of the curricula published in the bulletins of the Ministry of National Education. It should also be noted that the explanatory sections of the curricula contain very limited information. This title was included in the study because the curriculum explanations provide content that supports the study's purpose, scope, and discussion.

In the 1949 primary school curriculum, it was emphasized that these courses would be extracurricular and would not influence students' promotion to the next grade. It was stated that they could be taught for two hours per week in the fourth and fifth grades, at times convenient for student attendance. Parents were required to submit a written request for their children to participate in the course. Additionally, school administrations were instructed to prevent unnecessary disputes between the parents of students who opted into the course and those who did not. As for who would teach the course, the responsibility was assigned to existing teachers at each school, although no mention was made of specific pedagogical or professional qualifications. It was also noted that the book titled *Religious Lessons*, to be prepared by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and approved by a commission including its president, would be used during this period (MEB, 1949, p. 153). Two significant changes were introduced to this curriculum in 1950. First, religious courses were officially included in the curriculum. Second, instead of requiring a written request from parents who wanted their children to take the course, it was offered to all students except those whose parents explicitly opted them out (Doğan, 2004, p. 620; Yürük, 2011a, pp. 98-100; Yürük, 2011b, pp. 249-250).

The 1967 upper secondary school curriculum stated that these courses could be taught for one hour per week outside of regular class hours, similar to the approach in primary and lower secondary schools. However, for students who chose to take the course, attendance was compulsory, and the course was considered in their grade promotion. Teachers who graduated from faculties of divinity or higher Islamic institutes were to be preferred for teaching the course. In their absence, teachers from related or interested disciplines could be appointed. These teachers were expected to present the subject matter in simple, comprehensible language and to follow the curriculum's guidelines. The curriculum also included a reading list of Islamic sciences texts, which could be used during instruction. Moreover, the character-building and personality-developing aspects of Islam were to be emphasized as models in teaching, along with Islam's guiding and cautionary functions, distinguishing right from wrong (MEB, 1967, p. 371).

The 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum emphasized the importance of considering students' grade level, general cultural background, and psychological development during the teaching process (MEB, 1976, p. 338).

### 3. Purposes of Religious Courses

In this section of the study, the purposes of religious courses that have found their place in schools again will be analyzed around the information in the curriculum.

In the letter sent to the governorships in 1949, there is an article regarding the possibility of religious courses being taught by taking into account the need for citizens to exercise their right to provide religious information to their children based on the emphasis on freedom of conscience in the constitution (MEB, 1949, p. 153). This article reveals that one of the purposes of religious courses is to meet the need of parents who want their children to receive religious education through school. This proposed purpose also confirms the sources that state that the public had an expectation for religious education and teaching to be provided in schools during the period in question (Kara, 2019, p. 222; Kaymakcan, 2006, p. 23; Öcal, 1998, p. 245). The fact that religious courses began to be taught as electives in 1949 shows that an attempt was made to partially, if not completely, fulfill the aforementioned expectation. In the text that decided that religious courses would also be taught in high schools and equivalent schools nearly 20 years later, it was emphasized that the constitution aimed to elevate national unity and spirit in the education and training planning process, and that within this purpose, students could be provided with the information they needed in terms of religion within the framework of secularism (MEB, 1967, p. 371). In the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum, it is seen that the teaching of this course is based on the individuals' own will and the minors' legal representation (MEB, 1976, p. 338). It is striking that in the two decision texts in question, religious education is based on a right that is subject to the constitution in terms of purpose. The freedom of conscience in the constitution, which is included in the text that decided that religious courses would be taught in primary schools, is included in various articles of the 1924 constitution (Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanunu, 1924). The emphasis on national unity and spiritual exaltation in the 1967 decision to include religious courses in high schools and equivalent institutions is also reflected in the preamble of the 1961 Constitution. Similarly, the 1976 curricula's emphasis that religious education should be subject solely to the will of individuals -or, in the case of minors, their legal guardians- is echoed

in the section on freedom of thought, belief, and rights in the 1961 Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1961). This alignment indicates that a legal foundation was first sought to legitimize the inclusion of religious courses within formal education. Thus, the general aim of the course was established.

Direct information about the specific purpose of this course is included in the third article of the explanations section of the 1967 text, for religious knowledge courses in high schools and equivalent schools. Accordingly, the purpose of religious courses is not just to give some information to young people, but to make them understand that there is a spiritual world above matter, that existence is not only made up of matter, and to awaken the interest of souls towards spiritual values. Thus, the relations between material and spiritual existence were intended to be comprehended through this course (MEB, 1967, pp. 371-372). Thus, the inclusion of religious courses in high schools aimed to show the unseen face of the world of beings, that is, the spiritual dimension, to students who were considered to be in a suitable position in terms of mental maturity. An ambiguity is felt here. When we look at the content of the courses, it is seen that this is based on faith and morality in the same article. Spirituality was taught with belief in God, and in the reflection of this in real life, this spirituality was instilled as a moral virtue within the framework of a sense of duty.

In the continuation of the explanations, it becomes evident that the specific objectives of the course are outlined in greater detail. Articles five and six suggest that the course is primarily centered around the teachings of the Islamic religion. Indeed, it is stated that this religion is regarded as a light that illuminates the soul and conscience, and that its rational and progressive aspects will be presented through verses, hadiths, and historical examples. The following articles emphasize that these positive characteristics of Islam resonate with the soul and conscience of the Turkish people, align with their national identity, and highlight the historical role of the Turkish nation in spreading, establishing, and safeguarding Islam—points that will be stressed as needed (MEB, 1967, p. 372).

It is seen that the special purposes of the elective religious knowledge courses in the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum are given more clearly, understandably and in the form of items. These purposes are listed as follows (MEB, 1976, p. 338):

- 1. To teach the principles of faith, worship and morality (ilmihal) of the Islamic religion and to prepare the opportunity and ground for them to feel and live these principles,*
- 2. To provide the sense of diligence and the longed-for national personality that the Turkish-Islamic spirit has developed and tempered throughout history in defending the homeland and in national matters,*
- 3. To help them organize their inner worlds and adjust their relations with the world of science and civilization in society,*
- 4. To provide them with a respectful view and attitude in accordance with science and religious matters, far from primitive beliefs and ideas that may be received from their families, their surroundings and various sources outside the school,*
- 5. To teach the beautiful morality, lifestyle, advice, views and thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad as an exemplary person, in various areas,*
- 6. To provide religious and national consciousness based on our national identity.*

As in the 1967 curriculum, the aims of this curriculum are centered on the beliefs and teachings of the Islamic religion and the moral conduct of the Prophet. However, it is also evident that religion and religious education are employed to promote homeland defense, foster national pride and awareness, and that religious courses are based not on negative interpretations, but directly on authentic religious sources.



#### 4. Content of Religious Courses

When the course contents in the curricula where religious courses were taught as electives during the Republic period are examined, it seems possible to collect these contents in several categories. These categories are; faith and worship, morality, living world religions, and Turks and Islam -with some topics also touching on citizenship-.

Topics related to faith and worship were included in the lower secondary curriculum prepared in 1956. According to this curriculum, love of Allah, the prophet and the conditions of Islam were included in the first grade of lower secondary school. In the second grade, belief in Allah and the prophet; and in the section that would include worship, some terms (such as farḍ, wājib, sunnah, ḥarām, makrūh) were covered (MEB, 1956, pp. 147-148). The 1967 upper secondary curriculum continued to address faith and worship -often grouped under broader "Islam and Morality" sections (MEB, 1976, pp. 371-372). When we come to the 1968 primary school curriculum, we come across topics related to faith and worship more frequently. In the 1968 primary-school curriculum, Grade 5 students encounter a unit titled "Belief" (Āmanat) alongside an expanded treatment of worship: the Five Pillars, fitrah, and zakāh and 'udḥiyah (MEB, 1968, pp. 107-111). By 1976, the combined lower - and upper-secondary curriculum revisits the basic principles of Islam -belief (Āmanat), worship terms (farḍ, wājib, sunnah), and the conditions of Islam- across both levels (MEB, 1976, pp. 338-340).

One of the contents included in the curriculum is morality-related subjects. In the first and second grades of the 1956 lower secondary curriculum, various values were included under the title of Islamic morality. In general terms, these were family, love of the homeland and its protection, respect for the rights of others, kindness, assistance, rules of decency, protection of health, moral rules in business life, rules of speech, and the foundations of morality in Islam (MEB, 1956, pp. 147-148). In the first and second grades of the 1967 upper secondary curriculum, morality-related contents were included in a way that was intertwined with the subjects of faith and worship. In the first grade, morality-related rules that Islam values such as unity, togetherness, believing, charity, and helping each other were covered. Finally, the relationship between religion and morality was also included here. In the second grade, morality-related subjects were included as separate themes. These are moral principles, fear of God and morality, sense of duty, the relationship between belief and servitude and morality, family and social responsibilities, conscience and morality, and religion and morality (MEB, 1967, p. 372). When it comes to the 1968 primary school curriculum, it is striking that various moral virtues were included at the fourth-grade level. First of all, these are love for mother, father, sibling, family, teacher, nation, and country under the title of love. Then, moral virtues such as respect for elders, love for younger ones, mercy, goodness, truthfulness, tolerance, not harming, not being lazy, being reliable and honest are included (MEB, 1968, p. 108). In the 1976 lower secondary school curriculum, the subjects of the 1956 curriculum on the foundations of morality in Islam were contented with the subjects of the soul, chastity, self-control, perseverance, heroism, modesty, gentleness, honesty, reliability, patience, generosity, and diligence were covered under this subject. In this year's upper secondary curriculum, under the title of Islamic ethics, the fear of Allah and some moral virtues of the Prophet Muhammad were included (MEB, 1976, pp. 339-340).

It is seen that the content of the elective religious course also included topics on some world religions other than Islam. In this context, the 1956 lower secondary second-grade curriculum included a topic called "religions in our time and the place of Islam among these religions" (MEB, 1956, p. 148). Similarly, the first-grade topics of the 1967 upper secondary school curriculum included a collective look at the history of religions and the place of Islam among divine religions (MEB, 1967, pp. 371-372). Although these religions were not directly included in the 1968 primary school curriculum, respect for members of other faiths other than Islam was emphasized among moral issues (MEB, 1968, p. 109). The aforementioned topics were included in a bit more detail in the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum. The Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity, were included in the lower secondary school curriculum. Later, the place of Islam among these divine religions was mentioned. Among the subjects of the same curriculum for the third grade of upper secondary school, a collective look at the history of religions and the titles of true and false religions from the perspective of Islam were covered (MEB, 1976, pp. 338-340).

One of the themes that draw attention in the course content is the Turks, Islam and citizenship. In this context, the 1956 lower secondary, 1967 upper secondary, 1968 primary and 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curricula covered the services of Turks to Islam throughout history. Among these topics were the contributions of Turks to the spread of Islam, the struggles of Chinese, Byzantium, Crusader troops and Westerners in recent times during the spread of Islam, Turkish religious scholars, the influence of Turks on the development of Islamic art and architecture and charitable institutions such as madrasahs, fountains and bridges established by Turks throughout history (MEB, 1956, pp. 147-148, 1967, p. 372, 1968, p. 111, 1976, pp. 338-340). In addition to these issues, it was also aimed to strengthen citizenship awareness, and the subjects of love of country, protection of the country, responsibilities towards the state, and martyrdom and veteranship were included in the 1956 lower secondary and 1976 upper secondary curricula (MEB, 1956, p. 147, 1976, p. 340).

### Conclusion and Discussion

The article can be concluded with a discussion of key issues, based on the literature concerning elective religious courses, which managed to remain on the agenda and in practice -albeit with various changes- from 1949 to 1982. These issues can be summarized as follows:

1. As is well known, religious education in the early years of the Republic was significantly shaped by state education policies (Zengin, 2017, p. 123). These policies generally envisioned an educational model grounded in a positivist scientific approach, emphasizing progress, rationality, and secularism (Doğan, 2004, pp. 626-627; Tosun, 2008, p. 235). This orientation was one of the reasons religious courses were partially or completely removed from the curriculum. However, after 1946, as emphasized in the first part of this study, a new understanding emerged -alongside various other factors- that the threat of reactionism had diminished, and that the reforms of the Republic had been internalized as societal gains (Bulut, 1997, pp. 115-116; Doğan, 2004, p. 630; Kara, 2019, p. 222). This perception contributed to the reintroduction of religious courses, albeit in elective form, within the framework of a progressive and rational educational model.

All the changes, innovations, developments, and restrictions introduced during this period—from the goals defined for religious courses to the development of their content—indicate that debates over their legitimacy, or at least efforts to establish it, are still ongoing. As highlighted in various studies, these discussions have hindered efforts to focus on curriculum development (Altaş, 2002, p. 229; Doğan, 2004, p. 631). The fact that religious courses remain elective rather than fully integrated into the curriculum is one of the clearest signs that their legitimacy has yet to be firmly established at the time. Some researchers also argue that the preservation of the elective status of the courses is an indication that secular practices are still continuing and that the fear of losing the gains of the Republic has not yet been completely eliminated (Zengin, 2017, p. 124). For this reason, although the courses have an elective status, they actually still carried the signs of non-existence. In order to point this out, the expression “between being and not being” was preferred in the title of this article.

2. It is seen that the content of the elective religious courses includes the subjects of belief and worship, morality, religions other than Islam, and Turks and Islam. It is possible to make some evaluations here regarding the contents detailed above. When the content of belief and worship is examined in general, three points stand out. The first is that when we say belief and worship, the Islamic belief and worship are handled in a clear and understandable manner. In this direction, the curriculum has offered religious education within the framework of Islamic belief to the children of citizens who want it. Secondly, as time progressed, these subjects have been included more in each new curriculum. Thirdly, these two subjects have been covered less in high school curriculum and more frequently in primary and lower secondary school curricula. This content reveals traces of a denominational and religious education model. Placing the teachings of Islam at the center openly evokes the characteristics of doctrinal and religious learning approaches (For detailed information on religious education models and religious learning, see Kızılabdullah & Yürük, 2008, pp. 109-111). This assessment is also noteworthy in studies conducted on religious education before 1980. These studies have shown that religious education was based on catechism and centered on Sunni-Hanafi understanding of Islam (Altaş, 2002, pp. 224-226). In addition, studies also show that the non-denominational model could not be applied (Doğan, 2004, pp. 630-631). It is clear that this resolve has influenced religious courses in recent times (Tanyas, 2024, p. 9).

When we look at the content related to morality in elective religious courses, two basic features stand out. The first of these is that Islamic morality is explicitly covered under the title of morality. Apparently, there was an attempt to draw on the content and approach of Islam regarding morality in the moral development of children (Yürük, 2011a, p. 104). Second, moral virtues aimed to be reflected in individual and social life are included in primary and lower secondary school curricula. Although these topics are also included in upper secondary school curriculum, more advanced content that reflects moral philosophy topics such as the source of morality and the relationship between religion and morality could be included. This will indicate that the mental development levels of students are also taken into consideration in the treatment of morality-related topics (Kesgin, 2010, pp. 122-123).

Religions other than Islam were included in the religious course curriculum of the Republic period (Tosun, 2010, p. 670). When the subjects related to religions other than Islam are examined, three basic points stand out. First, only the Abrahamic religions were covered among the religions other than Islam. In addition, it was aimed to provide students with general cultural information about religions. In this respect, Indian and Chinese religions or other issues related to faith were not included. Secondly, considering the possibility of encountering people of different religions, respecting different beliefs was inculcated as a moral virtue. Thirdly, it was found that the world religions discussed were compared with Islam. In this context, emphasis was placed on Islam's position among these religions, and the comparisons were made in a way that favored Islam.

Finally, when we look at the subjects of Turks and Islam, we see that the aim is for students taking these courses to know the contributions of Turks to Islam, and that the contributions of religion and faith are used in the formation of citizenship awareness. Some sources reveal that, after 1950, religious courses were used as a tool to raise awareness and build national identity in Türkiye (Ueno, 2025, p. 9). This awareness is generally included in modern curricula, but after 1982 it has also been included in Religious Culture and Ethics courses, and has been the subject of various studies in this respect (Kaymakcan & Meydan, 2010, p. 37; Nazıroğlu, 2011, p. 80).

3. It is noteworthy that, over time, the search for curriculum content to align with specific pedagogical frameworks became more evident. Altaş (2002, p. 227) notes that the suitability of course content for students' developmental levels began to receive attention in National Education Council meetings after 1960. A clear reflection of this concern can be found in the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum, which explicitly states:

*"Subjects should be handled in a thought-provoking and persuasive manner, taking into account the general cultural and psychological development of the students according to their grade level, without exceeding their cognitive capacity, and presented in an engaging way"* (MEB, 1976, p. 338).

4. There is a statement in the 1949 curriculum concerning the textbooks to be used in elective religious courses. According to this statement, the textbook to be taught must be approved by a special commission chaired by the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Various sources have revealed that this book was prepared by the then-President of Religious Affairs, Ahmet Hamdi Akseki (Altaş, 2002, p. 221; Kara, 2019, pp. 439-440).

As noted above, a list of books authorized for use in the 1967 curriculum was compiled. However, it appears that Akseki's books continued to be used as textbooks for an extended period. This trend was also observed in other institutions under the Ministry of National Education that provided religious education. For example, Akseki's works were used in imam-hatip schools reopened in 1951. Oral history research on the subject indicates that these works left a lasting impression on the memories of students who studied in imam-hatip schools during that era (Ecer, 2024, p. 233).

5. One of the issues that emerges from the curricula is the challenge of training teachers for religious courses, or more broadly, teachers of religious subjects. Although the 1949 curriculum suggested that classroom teachers would teach the elective religious courses in primary schools, no assessment was made regarding whether these teachers had the necessary background to teach these subjects. It is unlikely that such background was based on professional competence at that time, since it is well known that for a long period, neither teacher training programs nor formal education included courses related



to religion. Some sources even indicate that classroom teachers were already being assigned to teach these courses, and that graduates from higher religious education institutions were not given the opportunity to teach them (Bilgin, 1998, p. 94).

However, at the National Education Council meeting in 1953, discussions took place about the qualifications teachers of religious courses should have. In other words, although these courses were optional, shortly after their inclusion in the curriculum, the need for qualified teachers and for teacher training that would enable comprehension of religious courses at a cognitive level became a topic of concern (Ecer, 2023, pp. 782-783). Following these discussions, sources report that a compulsory "Religious Knowledge" course was added to the first and second grades of teacher training schools (Aydın, 2000, p. 56; Ayhan, 2014, p. 140).

A more detailed explanation about the qualifications of teachers for these courses was provided in the 1967 high school curriculum. According to this explanation, graduates of divinity faculties or higher Islamic institutes were preferred, and if such teachers were not available, teachers from related fields who showed interest could teach these courses (MEB, 1967, p. 371).

The most obvious reason for this specification is that high school courses are taught by specialized branch teachers. Indeed, graduates from the Ankara University Faculty of Divinity, established in 1949, and from Higher Islamic Institutes, which started opening in 1959, began to be employed as branch teachers. However, as implied in the curriculum, the number of such qualified teachers did not meet the demand. The provision allowing teachers from related branches to teach in the absence of divinity graduates confirms this shortage.

6. Religious courses, which continued as elective subjects with varying degrees of continuity for more than 30 years, became compulsory in 1982. Since then, they have existed under the name Religious Culture and Ethics (also known as Religious Knowledge and Moral Education) up to the present day. Various factors contributed to making these courses compulsory. Among them, it is important to highlight the undeniable influence of the experiences gained during the period when these courses were elective. Studies on the subject note that the content of the compulsory religious courses was largely shaped by the content developed during the elective period (Doğan, 2004, p. 622). Additionally, the interest in these courses, the feedback received, and the perceived need throughout this period likely played a significant role in the decision to make the religious course compulsory.

## Declarations

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