Chapter 14

Religious Literacy Culture in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The major aim here is to analyze knowledge literacy in general and religious knowledge literacy in particular. Knowledge literacy can be defined as the ability to find, select, evaluate, and at the same time, effectively use the desired information. Religious literacy in Turkey can be addressed in two categories. The first category is of scientific and intellectual nature, and the second is of popular nature. These two categories recall the distinction between “gentry and commons” (elites and ordinary people) in classical Islamic sources. The scientific and intellectual dimensions of religious literacy manifest itself in the work of scholars in the faculties of theology. However, most of the academic studies of theology community can be considered as insufficient and incompetent in terms of certain qualities such as selecting and criticizing the information and using it effectively to draw conclusions, because of the fact that these studies are shaped within the frame of existing templates and knowledge that passed through a sectarian interpretation filtering.

INTRODUCTION

In general terms, literacy is defined as the ability to effectively use communicative symbols that are attributed a meaning with social consensus. Reading and writing consist of the abilities to decode and generate the codes based on the alphabet system. Literacy, on the other hand, involves “construction of the meaning or interpretation”, which corresponds to a higher level of mental process, as well as decoding and matching the meaning. In this respect, literacy does not have an available alphabet. Different elements such as time, ground, context, and events can form the alphabet, however, the elements forming this alphabet lack a fixed/static meaning involvement. Moreover, the meaning is constantly renewed through the processes of re-interpretation, evaluation, and construction.

In today’s world, where information technology and communication opportunities develop and diversify very rapidly, many types of literacy are mentioned with respect to various fields, such as media,
Religious literacy in Turkey can be addressed in two categories. The first category is of scientific and intellectual nature, and the second is of popular nature. These two categories bring to mind the distinction between “gentry and commons” (elites and ordinary people) in classic Islamic sources. The scientific and intellectual dimension of religious literacy manifests itself in the work of scholars in the faculties of theology. However, most of the academic studies of theology community can be considered as insufficient and incompetent in terms of certain qualities such as selecting and criticizing the information and using it effectively to draw conclusions, because of the fact that these studies are shaped within the frame of existing templates and information that passed through a sectarian interpretation filtering.

The prominence of a sense of belonging to a sect in the use of sources in Islamic sciences and the transmission of the information in those sources have a narrowing and intensifying function in the religious literacy reflected in the academic studies. However, all information in the religious sources, including the text of the Quran, is of interpretive nature from the moment that it is subject to the human mind. Therefore, almost every information, view, and interpretation produced in the field of religion is both a scientific/intellectual activity itself such as ijtihad or tawil and the product of these activities. In this respect, religious information literacy as it should be requires a comprehension-based approach to evaluate different views and interpretations in the sources which are the product of different paradigms in both sectarian and methodological terms. However, academic theology community in today’s Turkey does not pay much attention to the information, views, and interpretations that are not approved by the kalam, fikh, and sufic doctrines of the classic Ahl-Sunnah sect; and therefore, literacy in this field is reduced to a process of adopting and promoting a certain sectarian interpretation to a great extent.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs can also be discussed in this context; however, religious information literacy in this institution is too weak to be even mentioned, because of the fact that this institution is rather structured for fatwa, religious service, mosque, and irsad services and that the persons in positions such as imam, muezzin, and Quran course instructorship regard themselves as civil servants who are solely in charge of imamate, oratory, azan, preaching, teaching Quran, and taking care of mosques. The publishing activities of the Directorate of Religious Affairs aim to create a literature that is intended for meeting the needs of the people’s piety and thus lack any intellectual and informative depth. It can even be said that the Directorate of Religious Affairs takes steps to reinforce the existing level of knowledge and consciousness rather than improving the religious knowledge and consciousness of the people, just like religious communities and cults do. This suggests that the Directorate of Religious Affairs does not enlighten the people about religion, but rather makes the religion instrumental to consolidate the social body in its present state.

Religious masses in Turkey listen to the narratives in the style of stories and anecdotes rather than reading writings in the field of religion. This can be related to the fact that the dominant religious structure in the Anatolian territories is based on oral culture and the tradition of chatting holds a very important place in this culture. It can be said that chatting culture in Ottoman period, which was based on telling stories and anecdotes, grounded on the popular religious literature works of the assemblies serving as autodidactic educational establishments, such as Anwar al-Ashiqin, Mahammadiyya, Ahmadiyya, Qara Dawod, and Muzakki al-Nufus. Religious literacy of religious people seems to be intended for increasing emotional intensity in religious experience rather than satisfying the need for reliable knowledge.
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