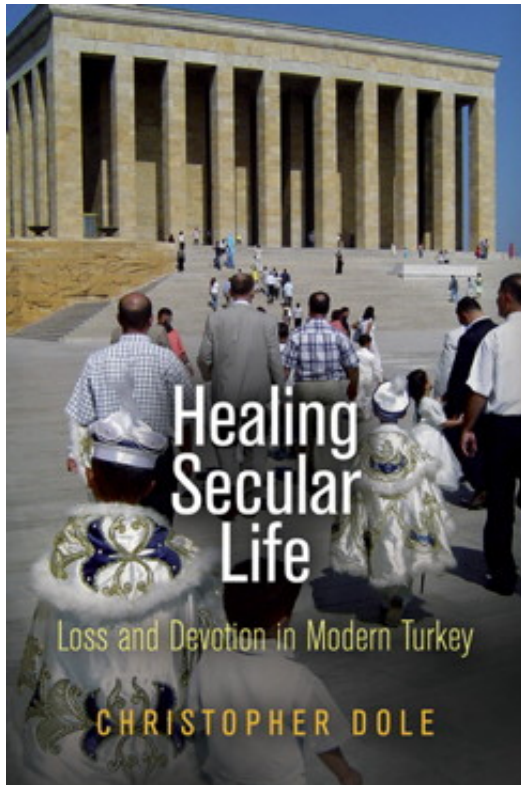


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## Christopher Dole's Healing Secular Life

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By Madeleine Reeves



[Healing Secular Life: Loss and Devotion in Modern Turkey](#)

By [Christopher Dole](#)

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 291 pp.

*Healing Secular Life* is a study of the organizing force of secularism in contemporary Turkish life. Dole's ethnographic entry is the practice of religious healing; specifically, the socially ambiguous work of two kinds of religious healer, the *evliya* or 'living saint' and the *cinci hoca* or Qur'anic healer, who work at the margins of authorized forms of Islamic orthodoxy. Drawing on research in two of Ankara's peri-urban squatter neighborhoods (*gekecondular*), the one majority Alevi, the other majority Sunni, Dole reveals how the ritual support and spiritual inspiration of two

significant local healers is locally sought out, even as their practice is publicly derided as a relic of a pre-modern, pre-Kemalist era.

Dole demonstrates how secularist sensibilities and symbols are incorporated into the practice of ritual healing: in acts of reverence (including to Atatürk himself); in modes of self-description; and in the desire of healers to situate their practice as legitimate entrepreneurial and commercial practice. Religious healing and secularist political ideology are not contradictory, in this reading, but parts of a single whole: healing, indeed, has “a unique capacity for confounding the sorts of societal differentiation ...that secularism presumes” (p. 226).

In developing this argument, Dole draws together scholarly debates that he sees as insufficiently integrated: a concern with ritual and religious healing within medical anthropology, on the one hand, and attempts to rethink secularism as a project of world remaking (a “productive, historical, social and ethical force”, and not simply the removal of religion from the realm of politics) on the other. In this analysis the enduring presence of the religious healer is less a remnant of a pre-secular age than a manifestation of the contradictions of Turkish secularism itself, in which political leaders acquire saint-like status and in which religious healers draw upon the iconography and legitimating discourses of the secularist state. Similarly, the experiences and accounts of healing and recovery that are relayed are significant not so much for what they reveal about fundamental questions of human agency and suffering, but because they “tell us...about the character of being governed in conditions born of secular modern political imaginaries” (p. 13).

Dole develops this argument through six substantive chapters. The first explores the importance of biomedicine for the formation of the early Turkish republic under Atatürk. Within the civilizing mission of Kemalism, individual health was seen as integral to the cultivation of a vigorous national body. The material institutionalization of western biomedicine through the creation of health outposts, “People’s Houses” and public information campaigns went hand-in-hand with the delegitimation of the “traditional healer” who drew upon Islamic knowledge in their practice. Campaigns against religious practitioners “emerged as a prominent stage on which secularist reformers enacted their ‘will to civilization’” (p. 56). While healers were never entirely eliminated from the landscape of therapeutic care, contemporary accounts of healing, for Dole, are inseparable from this secularist vision and its incomplete realization over subsequent decades.

The following chapters constitute the ethnographic core of the book. In chapter 2, Dole introduces us to the social and religious differentiation that characterizes the landscape of Ankara’s *gekecondu* districts, exploring

how everyday conversation about religious healing marked boundaries of community between the Alevi residents of Hürriyet (who experienced themselves as a secularist minority oppressed by a Sunni religious majority) and Sunni residents of Aktepe (who saw themselves as a pious minority persecuted by a secularist state). In both communities, religious healing is the topic of public condemnation, whether as a mark of backwardness (in Hürriyet) or lack of true Islamic faith (in Aktepe). And yet in both communities, religious healers are actively sought out; a fact that frames the questions that the subsequent chapters seek to address: how religious healers gather an audience, and how the delegitimized speech of the religious healer might “interact with other types of permitted religious, political, and medical speech” (p. 93).

For Dole, the answer to these questions lies in the way in which exilic modes of religious life cultivate authority by drawing upon forms of speech, aesthetics, and healer-patient (or practitioner-client) relations that evoke and reproduce the logics and political aesthetics of secularism. In Chapter 3, we meet Zöhre Ana, a ‘living saint’ with a large, and now trans-national online following. Zöhre Ana’s divinely inspired poems (*nefesler*) reproduce Atatürk’s voice as a source of spiritual legitimacy, and her spiritual center (*derg?h*) accommodates spaces for communal worship and ritual sacrifice within a paradigmatically “secular” architectural form (the building shaped in the star and crescent of the Turkish flag; the ritual spaces echoing the stylized aesthetics and didactic register of the ethnographic museum). Through her integration of saintly and state forms, Dole argues, Zöhre Ana “offers her audiences a novel language for participating in and...finding a home within the state’s ongoing project of secular world making” (p. 128), just as it offers them the possibility of healing wounds and repairing relationships.

In Chapter 4, this argument is extended to a category of healer, the *cinci hoca*, derided as regressive, cunning and untrustworthy. Here we meet Ibrahim, an ex-convict turned religious healer, whose spiritual capacity derives not so much from divine gift (*keramet*) as from cultivated ritual knowledge and pious personal ethics. If Zöhre Ana manifests the secularist political sensibilities that inflect contemporary “saintly” practice, Ibrahim’s healing practice comes into focus for Dole as a site of intense corporeal and ethical entanglement, in which piety “circulates as a sign” within an economy of entrepreneurial professionalism.

If Chapters 3 and 4 focus largely on the practitioners themselves, the final ethnographic chapters gives us an insight into the motivations of those who attend Zöhre Ana’s *derg?h*. In Chapters 5 and 6 we meet Hüsniye who found, in visiting Zöhre Ana, an authorized pretext for leaving the house and gathering with friends; and Nihal, for whom Zöhre Ana’s presence fostered a sense of communal warmth and intimacy. Here Dole

argues against an interpretation that would locate the persuasiveness of religious or therapeutic speech in the performative moment of a healing session itself (p. 180). Rather, drawing on Bataille's concern with religious experience as allowing an awareness of the continuity and indivisibility of the world,

it was the specific relational encounters fostered by the ritual space of the *derg*?h that enabled Zöhre Ana's patients to "discover new potentialities within relationships" and regain lost intimacies. It is precisely this desire for lost intimacy, according to Dole, that "represents a certain underside of secularism's politics of aesthetics" (p. 213).

Dole's argument presents a significant intervention into debates about contemporary secularism in Turkey. Rather than reading the ongoing salience of the religious healer as a mark of secularism's failure or an index of grass-roots opposition, the enduring popularity of religious healers rather reflects "the ways that large-scale political structures are continually being built and rebuilt in the course of social life" (p. 219), including the structural differentiations inherent in secularism itself.

This is an important argument for debates about the organizing power of contemporary secularism that will have relevance well beyond Turkey. But in foregrounding the work of just two religious healers and a handful of their visitors, and reading their practice so directly in terms of an alignment between secularist sensibilities and therapeutics of care, the text also forecloses other interpretations for religious healing, or for seeking out healers' help. The narrative also brackets off the ambivalence that seems characteristic of public responses to exilic forms of healing. We learn early on, for instance, that one former devotee of Zöhre Ana had lost faith in her authority, creating divisions within this man's family. However, we learn little of the context for this tension and its implications. Nor do we get a clear sense from Dole's narrative of whether such shifts should be seen as indicative of the more generally fragile authority of exilic religious healers in contemporary Akara. Similarly, we learn that "few are loathed as much as the *cinci hoca*" (p. 129) but gain little sense of whether those who publicly condemn their practice might harbor more ambivalent sentiments in private; or indeed whether such critics might also be found, at times of spiritual need, among the *cinci hoca*'s visitors. Dole writes often of "*cinci hocas* like Ibrahim" (p. 157) without giving an indication of who these healers are and how their practice varies. In short, the ethnography gestures towards a sacred landscape that is more disparate than Dole's argument allows.

Scholars of secularism will find much in this text that is generative. Those reading the text to understand the meanings and motivations of heterodox medico-religious healing may find themselves wishing for more attention to

the voices and practices of Dole's informants, and their own interpretation of their practice within the multiple currents of Turkey's secular modernity.

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