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Boundaries of innovation

Turkish religious politics between pedagogic inventiveness and theological transgression

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This paper discusses the Turkish state sponsored celebration of 'Holy Birth Week' (HBW), commemorating the birth of Prophet Muhammad. Successfully transformed from 2010 into a massive, national celebration, it was considered a success for the Islamically oriented AKP government. It however not only infuriated the secularist opposition. More significantly, it spurred theological critique, alleging HBW to represent an unacceptable religious innovation (bida’), leading to a complete re-formulation and downsizing from 2017.

This paper explores the HBW controversy as indicative of the current blurring of the sacred/secular, traditional/modern, public/private binaries in Turkish religio-politics. Re-medialized and innovative celebrations sacralizes secular institutions and public spheres, while simultaneously secularizing religious practices and imaginations. Religo-pedagogical inventiveness thus requires delicate boundary-drawings, between aspirations of mobilization and the dangers of transgressing institutional mandates and theological sensitivities.