Understanding Religion and Science in Turkey: Lessons from a Groundbreaking International Study

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Introduction to the “RASIC” Study
- The first of its kind, the RASIC study investigates scientists’ views on religion in eight different national contexts. It was conducted by Rice’s Religion and Public Life Program from 2012-2015, and academic literature continues to be written based off of this study’s research.

Why Is Turkey Unique in Terms of Science and Religion?
- Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the nation has held to a brand of state-enforced secularism akin to the laïcité found in France.
- Much of the funding for science ventures in Turkey has come from federal sources. Recently, however, certain scientists have feared that the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which has shown a more openly religious identity, might adversely affect research funding in the country.
- The July 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan and subsequent purges have set the stage for a new conversation regarding the contentious relationship between science, religion and politics in Turkey.

Key Findings
- Turkey has seen some recent improvements regarding scientific research. The Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK), instituted 2,000 new PhD positions across the country.
- Nonetheless, many individuals have been purged from Turkey’s main research agency, TÜBİTAK, over allegations that they belong to the Gülen movement, which Erdoğan blames for the coup attempt against him.
- Despite the fear that a religiously motivated government could hinder research support for topics such as evolution, Turkish scientists were more likely to hold religious beliefs than scientists in most other national contexts in the RASIC study.

Reflection
- Islam carries different meanings for different Turkish scientists. For some, Islam is a strictly personal matter which motivates their scientific practice. For others, political promotion of a strict brand of Islam is viewed as a threat to science.

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