Recently, Turkish television station Kanal T announced a new game show in which representatives from four different world religions will try to convert atheists. The show's title "Tövbekarlar Yarisiyor," translates roughly as Penitents Compete. Each episode features 10 atheists who have been screened to ensure they are not secretly faithful. Audiences can then watch a Muslim imam, a Jewish rabbi, a Greek Orthodox priest and a Buddhist monk attempt to bring them into the respective fold. Any atheist who experiences a conversion wins an all-expense-paid pilgrimage to a holy site of the newfound faith: Mecca, Jerusalem, or Tibet. (Producers follow new converts to ensure the pilgrimage does not become a free holiday.)

Penitents Compete is the brainchild of Seyhan Soylu, a transsexual pop figure who goes by the nickname "Sisi." Soylu has said of the show, "We are giving the biggest prize in the world, the gift of belief in God.

Needless to say, Penitents Compete has aroused ire as well as curiosity from both atheists and believers around the world. Many see the show as disrespectful to religion while others see it as an indictment of atheism. However, the motivation for Penitents Compete may simply be a curiosity about religion, conversion, and pluralism.

While 99 percent of Turkey's population identifies as Muslim, the government is highly secular. Religion is carefully regulated by the state: Religious affiliation must be listed on national identity cards and places of worship are designated by the state. For more than 50 years there has been a ban on religious head coverings in universities or by civil servants in public buildings. Religious proselytizing in particular is regarded with suspicion. Police frequently charge proselytizers with disturbing the peace or similar charges that are eventually dismissed in court. However, some Turks believe that proselytizing itself is illegal.

If not illegal, many Turks regard the show as inappropriate.

Hamza Aktan, the chairman of Turkey's High Board of Religious Affairs, has called the show a ratings ploy that is disrespectful to all religions. He added, "Religion should not be a subject for entertainment programs." But in a society where so much of religious life is at the discretion of the state, is it reasonable to expect a popular consensus about what constitutes a "respectful" attitude towards religion?

Critics in the West have raised a different concern about Penitents Compete. While the premise of the show seems to embrace religious pluralism, it frames atheism as an unacceptable, even a tragic, philosophy.

Although producers recognize that many atheists will not convert, there is no prize offered for retaining one's philosophical convictions. Politically, the show frames four religious traditions as a "belief constituency" in opposition to atheism. This discourse ties into an ongoing culture war in Turkey that parallels battles in the United States and other Western nations.

In 2006, copies of a book titled "Atlas of Creation" by Harun Yahya were sent unsolicited to schools throughout Turkey. Yahya's book claimed that, "The root of the terrorism that plagues our planet is not any of the divine religions, but atheism and the expression of atheism in our times (is) Darwinism and materialism." While Soylu is far less polemical, she commented, "We don't approve of anyone being an atheist. God is great and it doesn't matter which religion you believe in. The important thing is to believe."

Nilüfer Narli, a sociologist from Istanbul Bahçeşehir University, commented that Turkey has experienced rising "curiosity" about religion for the last 10 years. While Penitents Compete may strike some as gauche, it appears to be an honest exploration, if perhaps a naive one, of topics that have traditionally been mysterious and taboo.

And in a culture where religion has been a controversial subject, Penitents Compete may be the beginning of an important public conversation about pluralism. The format of an unscripted reality show has the potential to challenge assumptions about other religions.

For example, the producers do not seem to have considered that Buddhism may be far more palatable to atheists than the Abrahamic religions.

Similarly, by putting a human face on Turkey's atheists, Penitents Compete may ultimately lead towards extending tolerance to non-religious philosophies. If the open discussion of religion remains civil (unlike most American reality shows), the show could even tip the scales in Turkey's ongoing political battles over head coverings and other forms of religious expression.

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