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COMMENTARY: What are the roots of Turkey's attitude to religious freedom?

By Canon Ian Sherwood , Anglican Chaplain in Istanbul

The complexity of Turkish attitudes to religious freedom is rarely understood and addressed, even by observers who live in the country, argues Canon Ian Sherwood, an Irish priest who has been Anglican Chaplain in Istanbul <http://web.archive.org/web/20080229064600/http://www.anglicanistanbul.com/> since 1989. In this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org> he notes that "one has to keep reiterating that minorities are Turkish by modern citizenship but often are made to feel foreign, even if their customs and deeper ethnic identities predate the majority culture by many centuries." The deep-rooted problems of non-Islamic religious minorities are "principally an innate social attitude that rests very much deeper than anything that could be usefully addressed by European regulation." He comments that observers find it difficult to understand "the injustices experienced by minority religious groups." These "seem to be particular to Turkey, as Turkey struggles to face west with an Islamic and eastern inheritance."

Turkey's peculiar attitude to religious freedom, after centuries of a rich patchwork of religious traditions variously tolerated in the Ottoman Empire, perplexes Europeans.

The Republic constituted in the 1920s under Mustafa Kemal (later known as Ataturk) primarily sought to defend what was essentially a newly emerged nation, called Turkey, from the forces that would have destabilised it or even destroyed it. On the one hand there was the problem of the Greek invasion, with its devastating effects on the resident Greek Orthodox population of Asia Minor and on Turks who lived side-by-side with the indigenous Greeks. There was too, the much-debated problem of Armenian nationalism and the terrible consequences among Armenians, Turks, and Kurds. On the other hand there was the problem of Islamic movements throughout the former empire.

To understand Turkey's current sensitivities about religious freedom, one has to understand the effects of history in shaping the life of the state and nation. One also has to understand the inherited Islamic psychology and its consequences for those who are not Muslims.

Turkey's reframing of its laws and rethinking of the rights of citizens following its decision to apply for European Union membership is of course a welcome development. But this is not a new development, as the origins of this change in Turkish attitudes can be traced back to the early 19th century, when Stratford Canning was British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte. This process of Turkey's adaptation to modern European life has continued since then. Nonetheless, diplomats and scholars can confuse this process with the inner reality of the nation. Turkey, it must be remembered, predates the republic that was born in the 1920s and the nation is deeply shaped by popular conceptions of what Islam is - or by what Islam should be.

The problem for Muslim minorities is absolutely different to the problem for other religious minorities. The Turkish state has always feared the splintering effects of Islamic dissension and the violence that often underlies many movements that intertwine religion and the state in a way that is innate to Islam. This intertwining is quite different from modern Western thinking, which makes more subtle distinctions between religion and the state. The state historically has felt the need to be firm in exercising the laws of the secular state to preserve the unity that is the Republic of Turkey.

Throughout the 20th century, Christian minorities have gradually died out in their historic homelands of Thrace and Asia Minor (Anatolia) as a result of war, massacre, deportation and emigration. Only a pale remnant of the indigenous Christian communities survives. The secular state's attention to these minorities has been constant and vigorous, and, to many observers, has seemed to be quite unfair and unsympathetic.

This remnant struggles for survival. The minorities are not permitted to use their historical facilities to train clergy for future generations and thus the identity of communities is under threat. Individuals are often made to feel socially inferior when conscripted to army service, in normal employment, and sometimes among neighbours. In educated society one can hear astonishingly racist comments made of Armenians, Greeks, or even other peoples described as Christians. It was quite usual in 2005 to read in the Turkish press articles of an anti-Semitic nature that were totally distasteful, erroneous, superstitious, speculative and

distressing to those who dared to comment at least in private. The problem of this racism goes unaddressed in the Turkish courts.

It is simply not possible to make comparisons between the caution that the Turkish state exercises towards Islamic minority groups and the state's attitude towards other religious minorities. The problem of Islamic minorities is fundamentally political, whereas the problem of other minorities, in recent years at least, is principally an innate social attitude that rests very much deeper than anything that could be usefully addressed by European regulation.

This troublesome attitude to minority groups often rears its head in other parts of Europe, but rarely at every level of society as in Turkey. Minorities in Turkey are obliged to deal quietly with the problems of normal domestic and community life, or with the problems of identity and property created by the state. Some community leaders do venture to express their frustrations and are politely received by those in authority. Sadly, practical solutions to problems they raise are rarely offered. In general there is always a fear of the consequences of raising questions. Thus an interminable decay has been the lot of minorities not only in recent decades, but indeed over the centuries.

It is difficult precisely to determine the effects of a complex Islamic culture on individuals and social groups. One has to keep reiterating that minorities are Turkish by modern citizenship but often are made to feel foreign, even if their customs and deeper ethnic identities predate the majority culture by many centuries.

Visits by Western politicians and those who wish to be informed and helpful about Turkey are always welcome. But conferences and the issuing of statements, enthroned as they are in modern hotels, rarely address the real problems of Turkish society. To comprehend Turkey's psyche, it is essential to live in the midst of Turkish society. Expatriates who live in Turkey and love the country often have a most uncritical and blinkered attitude to the realities around them. The minorities are now so reduced that few expatriates ever come to know anything profound about minority problems, except about those which appear on the surface in the Turkish press. Other observers involved in a deeper manner in Turkish life might point specifically to the injustices experienced by minority religious groups, yet most find it difficult to understand something that seems to be particular to Turkey, as Turkey struggles to face west with an Islamic and eastern inheritance.

Most believe that European Union membership is inevitable, and that such membership will only be possible by Europe ultimately turning a blind eye to problems, and accepting that one of its members will be an Islamic country, albeit with an outer secular structure. In most Islamic countries, it seems almost impossible to exercise the liberties and equality which many European countries have struggled to gain only as late as the 20th century.

To understand something more of the complexity of modern Turkey, David Hotham's book 'The Turks' and Stanley Lane-Poole's biography of Stratford Canning are essential tools, and provide better starting points for an understanding of Turkey than the raft of rather uncritical books published more recently.

Appreciation and love of Turkey by western observers is often exercised to the exclusion of any knowledge of the country's ailing minorities. Politicians, diplomats and other distinguished guests are often isolated by courtesy and depart from Turkey with an understanding based on sentiment, charm, hospitality and paper-thin commitment. An interesting phenomenon in recent years has been the presence of European bureaucrats who themselves are rather ignorant of their own cultures and inherited religious identity, and are, consequently, unqualified to address the problems with which they should be concerned in Turkey. One western Consul-General, whose diplomatic mission is long-established in Istanbul, was heard asking a colleague: "What is the Ecumenical Patriarchate?"

Observers who genuinely do live in the midst of Turkish society find themselves in a life that simply does not translate into the language of European bureaucracy. Ironically, this can be the very reason that they choose to live in Turkey. (END)

- Canon Ian Sherwood, Anglican Chaplain in Istanbul

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080229064600/http://www.anglicanistanbul.com/>, contributed this commentary to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

For overviews of religious freedom in Turkey, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=68>

A printer-friendly map of Turkey is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=mideast&Rootmap=turkey>

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