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COMMENTARY: A murder in Turkey, missionaries and Turkish-language books

By Canon Ian Sherwood , Anglican Chaplain in Istanbul

Since the murder of Italian Roman Catholic priest Fr Andrea Santoro, much discussion has taken place within Turkey as to why this happened. This mainly centred on the controversy over the Danish cartoons of Mohammed, and on Fr Andrea's work helping Russian women caught up in organised prostitution. But some discussion focused on the presence of Christian literature, in Turkish, at the back of Fr Andrea's church, notes 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 observes that even "liberal" voices see any attempt to express or commend Christianity in Turkish as suspiciously criminal, or at least intellectually unacceptable, and the liberty to distribute non-Islamic texts has been seen as unacceptable in Turkey for centuries. Canon Sherwood asks whether the time has now come to shed this misplaced suspicion and fear of a reasonable liberty.

In the days that followed the 5 February murder of Italian Roman Catholic priest Fr Andrea Santoro in his church in the Turkish Black Sea port of Trabzon, much discussion has taken place within the country as to why he was murdered.

This focused mainly on the controversy over the Danish cartoons of Mohammed, and on the work Fr Andrea had done in helping Russian women caught up in organised prostitution in Trabzon. More curiously, some discussion highlighted the fact that there was Christian literature, in Turkish, at the back of Fr Andrea's church.

Clearly the murderer – who was soon arrested - was influenced by his own religious convictions and an identity with extremist Islam. He shouted a religious slogan to justify his deed, and made a confession to the police that indicated the religious significance of the murder.

Listening to "liberal" voices within Turkey, it is quite clear that any attempt by foreigners to express or commend Christianity in Turkish is regarded as "missionary" and therefore unacceptable. Many conscientious Christians, simply by reason of their baptismal faith, would be seen as "missionary" in the Turkish understanding of the word.

Haberturk, a newspaper regarded as one of the liberal voices, interviewed Savas Ay of Sabah newspaper, who was in Trabzon investigating the crime, about whether the claims of "missionary activity" might be true.

Ay replied that locals had told him that the priest had not engaged in missionary activity. But he then commented that when he had entered the church he had seen New Testaments and Christian publications in Turkish, which suggested to Ay that the priest had been a missionary. Presumably he meant publications of a catechetical nature.

For centuries the liberty to distribute Christian or other non-Islamic texts has been unacceptable in Turkey. In recent years people have been detained and even deported for such activity.

It is one thing for Fr Andrea to have been murdered by an individual influenced by the current "religious" riots that have done so much damage and led to various deaths and fear. It is quite another for Turkey's intelligentsia to think that the simple practice of having literature about one's own faith, printed in a language understood by local people, is a questionable activity suggesting criminal behaviour.

Were this simply to be the musings of a journalist, one would count it as just another sound bite. Alas! The idea that Christian literature in Turkish, distributed by faithful Christians, is suspiciously criminal, or at least intellectually unacceptable, prevails among senior army officers, university professors, Islamicist politicians, lawyers, doctors, journalists and many others.

Fr Andrea Santoro died on his knees witnessing to the God of Love whom he believed to be incarnate in Jesus Christ. He may have displayed literature about that love in a language that Turks could understand. He, against all the odds, bravely worked and prayed in a provincial Turkish city, simply for the love of the people around him.

Has the time come for Turkey to shed her misplaced antique suspicion and fear of a reasonable liberty? Should Turkey now draw on the industry and experience of her wonderful expatriates around the world who have dynamically proved the potential of Turkey in art, commerce, cuisine, diplomacy, academia, the law, and indeed every kind of labour abroad in freer climates? Should Turkey draw on the great breadth of her history and open herself up to the reasonable norms – as expressed in the European Convention on Human Rights - of the societies whose friendship she now espouses? (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>

For a personal commentary on the roots of Turkey's attitude to religious freedom, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=716.

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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