

# faith in Europe

## Religion, State and Society in Turkey

in the Light of Turkey's Proposed Accession to the European Union

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After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire Kemal Atatürk modelled the new Turkish Republic on the pattern of French secularism (laïcité), combining this with an emphasis on using science, efficient organisation and technology in order to achieve economic development. Atatürk transmitted his vision to the people largely through his Republican People's Party (RPP), helping to create its policies and encouraging a network of RPP deputies throughout the country. The RPP were facilitated in their welcome by the fact that they were a clear governing force after decades of war, and often unsuccessful reform.

There was however an inbuilt tension in the new Turkish society. In the spirit of secularism the new country spoke of its 'citizens', who were not confined to ethnic Turks. At the same time, Turkey (as opposed to the Ottoman Empire) was now a homogeneously ethnic Turkish country, and virtually all Turks regarded themselves as Muslims. This tension meant that, paradoxically, just at the point when secularism became enshrined as state policy, Turkish citizenship became almost

entirely predicated upon also being of the Muslim faith.

Atatürk was interested in establishing democracy in Turkey, and encouraged opposition parties. Every time he did so, they tended to turn to explicit Islam as a rallying-cry for the people. Meanwhile the official policy was to exclude Islam from public life. Atatürk therefore did not pursue this road, and democratic elections began only in 1950, with the victory of Menderes. At the height of this secularist period mosque worship was permitted, but there was a shortage of trained clergy because the medreses (training schools) had been closed down. All brotherhoods were forbidden, though in practice subsequently the Mevlevis and the Betkashis were tolerated.

After his victory in 1950, Menderes championed Islam, restoring for instance the public call to prayer in Arabic. Over the next few decades the Menderes option established itself as a real alternative, reflecting a different facet of Turkish identity to that officially promoted by the supporters of the RPP. The Menderes governments stressed economic liberalisation and increased personal freedom as far as religious practice was concerned. Selected shrines of former leaders of Islamic brotherhoods were opened as foci for pilgrimage, for example.

Menderes was ousted in a military coup in 1960 and executed for alleged corruption and undermining the Republic. Over the next two decades the RPP moved explicitly to the left, while the opposition party led for many years by Demirel and the Democrat Party moved to the right. The basic traditional division was thus reinforced: state control of the economy and secularism versus economic liberalisation and religious freedom. This division continued after the 1980 coup under

Özal, who later became president.

Islamic practice was by now de facto free, even though some aspects were still officially illegal. Islamic brotherhoods, for example, were officially banned, even though very many operated without hindrance. Mosque building accelerated, and large quantities of religious literature was published by the state, as well as by private thinkers. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (known sometimes as the Diyanet), attached to the office of the prime minister, had huge resources and budget to promote the official version of Islam. Secularisation among young people was certainly increasing, but anyone who wanted to pursue religion could do so unhindered.

Simultaneously, an idea was also growing that there was no necessary contradiction between Islam and modernisation, and that Islam was compatible with modern life: witness for example the successful educational activity of Said Nursi. Nursi died in the 1960s, but the number of his followers continued to grow, and now have become a substantial force. It is also necessary to note that Necmettin Erbakan, an Islamist political leader, began to operate much more freely than would have previously been possible. Erbakan did not manage to win a majority, but he did demonstrate that it was feasible for an Islamic party to win control.

At the end of the twentieth century Turkey experienced several natural catastrophes including a major earthquake, and high inflation led to an economic crisis. By the late 1990s there was widespread national discontent. A new explicitly Islamic party won a huge majority in 2002. There is now a completely new situation in Turkey. It is probably true to say that the traditional balance between the two historical

alternatives has become unhinged, though it is far from clear how things will develop in the future. It may now be argued that religious authority has grown so much as to restrict individual liberties once again. However, a new Galileo has not yet emerged.

### **Discussion**

*The following points were made by the speaker in answer to questions, and by other contributors, including David Barchard, a writer and commentator on Turkish affairs.*

The Atatürk reforms did not occur in a vacuum but were produced in part as a result of education becoming much more widespread in the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century; this produced a huge secularised bureaucracy.

The recent islamisation in Turkey has been taking place in the context of the current global radicalisation of Islam. The extent of direct outside influence on Turkey, however, for example from the Middle East, should not be exaggerated. There is domestic impetus to adopt extremist Islam amongst the lower middle classes in Turkey, who remember their recent peasant past and who feel betrayed by the middle classes.

Nowadays anti-western sentiment and opposition to EU membership is mainly to be found in the army and in the RPP: that is, amongst those of a secularist tradition who are nevertheless suspicious of the West (they recall for example historical western attempts to dismember Turkey after the First World War). Meanwhile the new revivalist Islamic movements are in favour of EU membership because they see no reason why Europe should not in future be influenced increasingly heavily in a Muslim direction given the large

Muslim minorities to be found in many western countries.

One problem for the EU will be if Turkey becomes a member, and then continues to develop in a radicalising Islamic direction to the extent of applying Muslim sharia law internally: what would the implications of this be for the secular basis of the EU? We should remember that there are no mechanisms for expelling an EU country once it has become a member.

In the context of pressure from the EU, restrictions on the freedom of Christians to worship and open churches are being relaxed.

The Diyanet began as a small office, but then came to be seen by the government as a useful tool for keeping a cap on Islam, so its powers and budget were expanded. Then in the 1970s and 1980s it started responding to popular requests for more places of worship, and this included requests from Turks living abroad. Then it started issuing its own opinions on Islamic matters. It is not just a tool for the government, then, but does in fact play a positive role in reflecting religious aspirations and meeting religious needs. For example, it has support from the Nursi movement and similar Islamic educational movements, because by and large it promotes a modernising form of Islam which is compatible with the globalising world of technology.

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