

## Turkey's unique history a challenge for this academic pope

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 17, 2006 All Things Catholic

As Benedict XVI's Nov. 28-Dec. 1 trip to Turkey draws near, one concern both in the Vatican and at the Phanar, the headquarters of the Patriarch of Constantinople, is that the post-Regensburg emphasis on Christian/Muslim relations will overshadow the ecumenical thrust of the pope's visit, intended to cap several decades of rapprochement between Rome and the "first among equals" in the Orthodox world.

One issue that could tie the two themes together is "reciprocity," meaning the demand that religious minorities in Islamic states should receive the same rights and freedoms as Muslims in the West. Reciprocity is a core element of Benedict's challenge to Muslims -- inviting them to embrace reason with respect to religious affairs -- and the dismal conditions facing Turkey's small Christian population, including the tiny flock of the Patriarch of Constantinople, offers a classic case in point.

Benedict will have to choose his words carefully, however, because there's a unique history in Turkey that could easily make such a challenge sound like a threat. Over the centuries, European powers repeatedly intervened in Turkey to demand special privileges for Christians, a process that many Turks associate with the slow undermining of the Ottoman Empire. If the pope is to avoid awakening those historical ghosts, he'll have to find a vocabulary that makes it clear he's talking about a matter of universal human dignity, not about special treatment for Christians.

Although Turkey is one of the few majority Islamic states where conversion is not illegal, and where religious tolerance is officially the law of the land, on the ground the playing field is far from level.

Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but by any standard Turkey's Christians represent a tiny minority. The Patriarch of Constantinople presides over perhaps as few as 2,000 souls. The Greek Orthodox presence in Turkey was eviscerated by a "population exchange" between Greece and Turkey in 1922, when almost a million and half Turkish citizens who were Orthodox Christians were sent packing to Greece, while a million Muslims in Greece were thrust into Turkey. There are still some 100,000 Armenian Christians in Turkey, along with roughly 30,000 Catholics divided across a variety of rites.

Whatever their numbers, there's no doubt that Christians face serious challenges, some of which are a *de jure* matter of formal discrimination. Christians, for example, are barred from careers in the military, which is the ultimate source of power and prestige in Turkish society. Christian clergy usually are refused Turkish citizenship, no matter how long they've been in the country. Only recently have they been able to obtain residency permits valid for more than a few months, paying a tax of 0.50 Euro (about 64 U.S. cents) for every day in the country. Because Christian churches have no legal personality, parishes and schools have to be bought and sold in the name of private Turkish citizens, a requirement that generates all manner of property disputes and administrative headaches. Seminaries for both the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Armenian Orthodox Church have been closed by government order since 1971.

Often, however, the obstacles facing Christians are a matter of petty bureaucratic harassment rather than formal legal discrimination.

In Mersin, for example, a port city on the Turkish Mediterranean, a handful of Capuchin missionaries once operated a center for the formation of young Turkish Christians. Shortly after 2000, however, it was shut down on the grounds that it was "not authorized by the Ministry of Public Instruction." The government moved to expropriate the facility, triggering a legal challenge by the Capuchins which will probably drag on for years. The Capuchins also offered courses in Italian and English for Turkish adults in Mersin, with no catechetical agenda, yet those courses too were ordered closed.

In Adana, another Mediterranean city, a Catholic parish was forced to close in 2005 after a bar and disco opened up in an adjacent space featuring round-the-clock, ear-splitting music. The mayor had promised the Catholic pastor that the bar would be moved, especially since the spot was not zoned for commercial activity, but in the end nothing happened. Eventually the parish closed because it became impossible to conduct normal pastoral activity. Given that it's virtually impossible to obtain permission to build a new church in Turkey, today the few hundred Catholics in Adana have to travel 80 kilometers to Mersin for Mass, while the pastor relocated to Iskenderun.

These and similar stories make up the daily fabric of Christian life in Turkey. Yet when I interviewed Patriarch Mesrob II, head of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Turkey, last year, he rather surprisingly said he hoped Benedict would not bring up such matters, saying it would amount to "interfering in the internal affairs of Turkey."

Why the sensitivity?

Because Western challenges regarding the status of Christians in Turkey today don't occur in a historical vacuum. In fact, there's a long and not terribly edifying history of foreign governments, especially Europeans, insisting upon special privileges for Christians within the old Ottoman Empire, which from the 16th to the 20th century was the main carrier of Islamic civilization. Such appeals are associated in the Turkish mind with treachery and anti-Islamic hostility, so that Benedict's rhetoric on "reciprocity" risks being misunderstood as merely the latest installment in a centuries-old story of Westerners who don't have Turkey's best interests at heart using the status of Christians as a classic "Trojan Horse."

For centuries, Greeks and Armenians as well as other Christian groups within the Ottoman Empire prospered, so that it was fairly easy for many Orthodox to say, "Rather the turban of the Turk than the tiara of the pope." Part of the reason was that almost from the very beginning of Ottoman rule, the emperors granted a series of what came to be known as "capitulations," first to the French in 1536, then to all foreign merchants operating in the empire. These capitulations granted exemptions from various taxes and laws as well as a series of special privileges. Eventually the capitulations were claimed as an extraterritorial right by all Christians living in Ottoman lands.

The system began at street level: Christian women, for example, were allowed to travel first-class on second-class tickets on the ferries that criss-crossed the Bosphorus. A rumor widely believed in the late Ottoman period is that a Christian thief being pursued by imperial police could throw his passport on the ground, touch it with one toe, and thus claim the protection of the all-powerful foreign embassies.

When a new constitution was drawn up following the Young Turk revolution of 1908 which declared the equality of all citizens before the law, some Turkish Christians actually protested on the grounds that such a principle would mean surrendering their patchwork of special privileges and exemptions.

As foreign governments became increasingly vocal in defense of the Christians within the empire, and as Christians became increasingly restless in asserting their rights, a feeling grew among Turks that Christians were not really subjects of the same state, and that foreign advocacy on behalf of Christians really had as its aim weakening the empire from within. Even today, the term "capitulation" for many Turks evokes memories of this past.

Thus if Benedict XVI elects to push the reciprocity issue in Turkey -- and there are powerful arguments for doing so -- he should understand that he doesn't begin with a blank slate. It will be important for the pope to make clear that he's not talking about a new form of "capitulation" aimed at privileging Christians, or undermining Turkey's power or prestige.

One possible way to do that is to engage the religious liberty issue across the board in Turkey, for Muslims as well as Christians. It's still a delicate question in an officially secular state where many public forms of Islamic faith and practice are discouraged or officially banned. Under the modernizing program of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey in the early 20th century, the Islamic caliphate was abolished, Islamic courts and brotherhoods were banned, and both the female headscarf and the traditional Turkish fez were prohibited. The Muslim calendar was replaced with the European system, polygamy was banned, and the Turkish language was rendered into the Latin alphabet.

While many of these measures had the desired effect of placing Turkey on a pro-Western, modernizing course, they also drove Islam underground and converted it into a permanent source of political radicalism. Today, Turkey is struggling to strike a balance between healthy expressions of religious faith while at the same time preserving the secular character of its state.

If Benedict phrases his reciprocity challenge in terms of a broad appeal for religious freedom for all Turkish citizens, it could resonate with many Muslims who themselves feel frustrated with what many see as an overly restrictive environment. (A recent poll found that 68 percent of Turks regard the ban on headscarves, which is widely flouted in practice, to be a violation of religious freedom). In the long run, this may prove a more effective way of improving the lot of Turkish Christians, as opposed to a direct challenge on their behalf.

In any event, Turkey's history makes the reciprocity question especially complex, and especially challenging. Benedict's performance in Turkey will be the first serious post-Regensburg test of whether this academic pope has learned the main communications lesson of that episode -- that a dash of sensitivity to the intended audience sometimes matters as much as intellectual coherence, and that carefully chosen words often determine whether what is pitched is also what's caught.

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