

SEPARATE BUT UNEQUAL CITIZENS *

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Almost 1200 years of Christian civilisation in what is now known as Turkey came to an end with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The much lauded millet system which followed, by which the religious communities were allowed to rule themselves, was in fact a system of 'separate but unequal'. Sharia law prevailed, and the status of the Christian or Jewish dhimmi ("protected people") was inferior both legally and in everyday life.

The Christian presence in Turkey was effectively terminated with the First World War.

Both the Greek and Armenian populations were depleted through massacres and deportation as well as the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey.

The Greek inhabitants of Istanbul and two Greek islands, totalling 200,000, were exempt from this ex-change, but restrictions imposed by the Turkish government in 1932 on their commercial activities, a punitive wealth tax imposed on non-Muslims in 1942 and the Istanbul pogrom in 1955, have reduced the Greek population of Turkey today to between three and four thousand. The Lausanne Treaty (1923), which provides the legal basis for the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, guarantees religious freedom for non-Muslim minorities and, furthermore, "an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education". Nevertheless, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the spiritual head of 300 million Orthodox Christians round the world, feels beleaguered and, as he put it in an interview with CBS, some-times crucified. Turkey has refused to recognise his ecumenical status and the legal personality of the Patriarchate, which makes it difficult to administer its own property. However, the European Court of Human Rights has in a ruling determined that the orphanage on the island of Büyükada (Prinkipos), which was confiscated by the Turkish state, should be returned to its legal owner, the Patriarchate.

Furthermore, since 1971 the Greek Orthodox seminary on the island of Heybeliada (Halki) has been closed after a law banning private higher education. As a result, it is no longer possible to train Greek Orthodox priests, as they must have Turkish nationality. In an interview with the Turkish daily Milliyet Patriarch Bartholomew said the Patriarchate was dying from lack of oxygen.

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There are now 60,000 Armenians and 25,000 Jews remaining in Turkey, and in addition 24,000 Christian Syriacs, who suffered the same fate as the Armenians during the First World War. The Syriac Orthodox Church is fighting a legal battle against the Turkish authorities, who are trying to confiscate part of the land belonging to Saint Gabriel's monastery, founded in 397, which is among the oldest in the world.

Although the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership include respect for and protection of minorities, which Turkey defines on a religious and not an ethnic basis, the gestures Turkey has hitherto made are more of a token nature. For example, allowing a mass to be held once a year at the Sümela monastery on the Black Sea coast, or the recent mass held at the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross in Van (but still without a cross on its dome).

In a study conducted by Istanbul's Bahcesehir University last year, half the Turks polled said that they didn't want Christian neighbours, and it must be admitted Christians are not popular in Turkey. Witness the three Christians who had their throats slit in Malatya three years ago, Father Andrea Santoro who was murdered in Trabzon (where Hrant Dink's killer also came from) and Bishop Luigi Padovese, who was murdered in Iskenderun in June. And according to the indictment in the ongoing Ergenekon case, Turkish Special Operations planned to terrorize and attack the non-Muslim population in order to incriminate the AKP government.

Cyprus

Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, has explained that Turkey's multifaceted foreign policy rests on four pillars, one of which is cultural harmony and mutual respect. When it concerns Cyprus, where Christianity was already established in 45 AD, Turkish practice falls short of Professor Davutoglu's ideal.

As has been well documented, for example, in the 2009 report by the Helsinki Commission, Christian churches and monasteries in the occupied areas in the north have been devastated, vandalized and looted, not only with the cooperation of the Turkish army but also, on occasion, with the connivance of the UN authorities.

Over 500 churches, chapels and monasteries have been confiscated and put under the control of Evkaf, the Moslem religious trust. Their former congregations and priests have been reduced to the role of supplicants and, subject to the whim of the Turkish authorities, are on occasion allowed to worship at their holy shrines. In 1971, when the former Swedish prime minister Oluf Palme visited Zambia, he referred to the Zambezi river, which separated Zambia from Rhodesia (where the white minority regime had unilaterally declared independence), as "the border of human decency." The same could be said of the Green Line in Cyprus.