

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE EU: OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES

The author addresses the potential problems of rejection of Turkey from the EU on cultural and religious grounds. He underlines the importance of dialogue between Turkey and the EU to overcome misunderstandings between the two sides. Furthermore, he calls for improved and effective political and cultural dialogue oriented to the future.

Yalın Eralp *



* Yalın Eralp is a retired Ambassador. Presently, he is a diplomatic commentator at CNNTurk, and teaches Current Global Issues at Kültür University in İstanbul.

Cultural differences have become, in the eyes of some, an impediment to Turkish accession to the EU. French sociologist Amaury de Riencourt makes a clear distinction between culture and civilization. From his perspective, each culture engenders its own civilization. Culture emphasizes the individual; civilization the society. He says, “Civilization represents the crystallization on a gigantic scale of the preceding culture’s deepest and greatest thoughts and style. Civilization aims at the gradual standardization of increasingly large masses of men within a rigidly mechanical framework.”¹ If this logic is correct, the world is increasingly becoming one civilization. Indeed, the author states that “the 20th century is the dramatic watershed separating the culture behind us from the civilization that lies ahead.”

The Turkish people throughout history have met different cultures, have been influenced by them and have accumulated various customs and mores in their journey. Nations, in time, adapt to their influences in differing ways.

Today many in Europe consider that Turks come from a different culture and focus on issues such as “honor killings” and violence against women. It is true that there are cultural differences. But I submit that such unfortunate issues are not peculiar to Turks. The Turkish police’s heavy handed approach to demonstrators on 6 March 2005 was matched by the Italian police in 2001 G-8 meeting demonstration when a young Italian was killed by police shooting.² “Crime de passion” is not alien to the Mediterranean nations; nor is violence against women as witnessed by Spain trying to grapple with this problem.

Indeed, differences in the European Union exist even within nations; and there are of course differences between city dwellers and the rural folk. The differences between the northern and the southern parts of a country are notable. The differences between Nordic culture and the Mediterranean outlook are not minimal.

Nations’ behaviour and attitudes depend on and change in relation to their environment and events. During the 1990’s when Turkey was fighting against terror groups on its soil, European partners were admonishing Turkey for some of their more stringent laws. Yet, after 9/11 and when Europe faced terrorism, some EU members had to take similar stringent measures. When it comes to Turkey, to use the words of an American poet and lecturer, Ralph Emerson, “people only see what they are prepared to see.” Perhaps a wide-angle lense was, and is, needed. Fighting terrorism should be a priority and cooperation between Turkey and the EU is essential.

When one looks at the issue from afar, I would venture to say that differences between an average American and an average European are quite wide, perhaps

¹ Amaury de Riencourt, *The Coming Caesars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958) pp.10-11.

² Chris Marsden, “G8 summit: Brutal policing in Genoa leaves one dead and hundreds injured,” 23 July 2001, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jul2001/geno-j23.shtml>

wider than those with Turks. Certainly, there are religious underpinnings in every society. As the European Union's motto is integrating diversity, then religious difference should not be an insurmountable obstacle. French sociologist, Edgar Morin put it aptly. According to him Europe is "a complex whose attribute is to bring together the greatest diversities without confusion, and to associate opposites in a non-separable manner... there is nothing that was hers from the beginning, and nothing which is exclusively hers today... That which underlies the unity of European culture is not the Judeo-Graeco-Roman synthesis, but the not only complementary but also the competitive and antagonistic interplay between these separate traditions, each of which has its own logic."³

Turkey has long been preached to by our partners that cultural diversity is richness. If this is true in a country; it should also be true continent-wide and Europe should not deprive itself by refusing Turkey on the basis of religious and cultural differences.

An established political dialogue between Turkey and the EU has been taking place for some time.⁴ Usually, dialogue should be educational for both sides. Instead of explaining what goes on in a given region, the dialogue may focus on the subjects which are above-mentioned. This would be more beneficial. Moreover, both the EU and Turkey may give their vision and analysis on the energy problem, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea region and surrounding areas. They could discover views which converge and those which differ. From that, they may try to bring their ideas closer. The challenge posed by rising religion to secular republican regimes around the world and possible responses is another topic to be discussed.

Dialogue between Turkey and the EU should look to the future. The prospects for the Kyoto Protocol for example is a topic which has global significance that could be on the agenda. Neither the EU nor Turkey appears to be taking advantage of the opportunity of their dialogue. Both sides seem to perceive dialogue as a routine affair to get over with.

Political dialogue between Turkey and the EU will not only help both sides to improve analysis of political and other developments in their area of interest, but will also help them discover each other. This is a battle for the minds and hearts of the people. I think political and cultural dialogue are intertwined and are not separate processes.

Some in the European Union believe that the EU should become a "Fortress Europe." For two reasons I think this is a short sighted view: There are no fortresses any more. It is not possible to insulate oneself. We live in a globalized world. Terrorism also has become globalized, as latest developments have

³ Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987)

⁴ According to paragraph 12 of the Helsinki Conclusions (1999), Turkey's pre-accession strategy includes an enhanced political dialogue. Political dialogue meetings are usually held twice during each EU Presidency at Political Directors' level.

unfortunately proven. Sometimes Turkey's "dangerous" neighbors are seen as an impediment to Turkish accession to the EU. Such dangers exist in Europe irrespective of possible Turkish membership. More importantly, in this globalized world, the EU needs to compete with China, Russia, India and even the USA. How can one compete by insulating oneself? Turkish membership to the EU will make the EU more globalized. A Turkish addition will be an asset from geographic and economic angles, as well as others. Organizations, like companies, need to compete if they are to survive. This is the logical consequence of globalization.

Turkey's rejection by many circles in the EU on the basis of religion, culture and "non-Europeanness" is offending not only to Turks but to many other Muslims as well. The very fact that the membership "test" for Turkey would be more difficult and rigorous has been noted by a number of Arab journalists. Turkey's membership or rejection is being monitored by many around the world. Needless to say, the Muslim population of over 10 million living in EU countries is also watching. As such, Turkey's membership issue will have consequences that go beyond EU-Turkey relations and actually have an impact on the bridging of civilizations.

Many in the Islamic world look to the west as the "infidel." Many in the Christian world consider Muslims "inferior" barbarians. Both perceptions are wrong and dangerous and could have a lasting effect of global scale. This vicious circle must somehow be broken. Turkey is the only country with predominantly Muslim population that is democratic and secular and has been a partner of Europe for a very long time. Let us remember that Turkey was once called the "sick man of Europe" and not of Asia, as Bernard Lewis aptly noted.

If Turkey were rejected by the EU on the basis of religion and culture, this would be considered by the Islamic world as a rejection of Islam. Likewise, the Muslim population in EU countries would no doubt look at such a decision as their own rejection as well. It would be considered as the continuation of the West's disregard for Islam. One may argue that this is wrong. I would respond by saying that perceptions are sometimes more important than reality.

Turkey's rather negative image in Europe stems from two considerations. The first is the fact that the Ottoman Empire was the "enemy." Therefore there are prejudices that have continued from history. Interestingly and conversely, the Crusades have not had such an impact on Turks. Turks are considered as more "forgiving." The second consideration is the Turkish migrant workers living in Europe. Mistakes were made on this matter by all sides. These first generation migrants came from the lowest circles of society in Turkey. The host countries did not, at that time, care about their level of education but rather focused on the "muscles" of the worker. Until recently, host countries did not have a policy on integration, as migrant workers were considered temporary. The sender, namely Turkey, did not have any experience of dealing with their countrymen living

abroad. When one looks at the second and third generation of Turks in the EU countries, one can see a big difference between the grandfather and the grandson, though problems still prevail with the younger generation. Unfortunately, the first generation of workers left a lasting negative impression.

Turkey's relations with Europe can be considered Islam's approach to the West. The Turkish mentality, way of life and state structure are based on European modes. In a way, this has been the most important experiment of bridging the gulf between the West and the East; Christianity and Islam. Turks have not been able to explain this process. Turkey is little known and less understood. The fault lies with both Turkish and European prejudices. Both Turkey and members of the Union must do a better job at understanding each other. Townhall meetings of Turks and EU citizens of various walks of life in small EU towns can help. But TV must be better used. Monthly TV debates diffused in EU countries of Turks and EU citizens can be very decisive. Educating Europeans about Turkey and changing the current negative image of its citizens is a move in the right direction.