

## **Precedents (II)**

Thursday 27 March 2008, by [Hans-Peter Geissen](#)

### *[Part one](#)*

#### **Shifting Attitudes**

Another line of precedents, or perhaps a consistent attitude, links European indifference vis-a-vis the constitutional rights of Cyprus Turks with religious preferences. Inasmuch as it is indeed the case -as many Turks would argue- Cyprus (1963, 1974) was a forerunner of Bosnia in the early 1990ies. Europeans, then, would prefer to see Muslims massacred over seeing a Muslim state in Europe.

Unfortunately, this view cannot be totally rejected. For instance, some remarks of German Chancellor Kohl and French President Mitterand concerning the war in Bosnia support this view. From this point, the European (Western) refusal to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus -some ten years old at the time- was a precedent for not accepting Bosnia either. However, they would apparently or obviously continue the longer lineage of "Sèvres", the famous but never implemented "peace treaty" which essentially would have finished Turkish statehood. Which itself was the culmination of a century of Balkan and Anatolian wars in which Europe had seen, but never recognized, many massacres of Muslim civilians, just like now was the case in Bosnia.

However, this was also a turning point in that, for the first time as far as it relates to European Muslims, European media and intellectuals started campaigns against the intransigence of European politics. When the next massacres occurred in Kosovo, European politicians reacted quite immediately. In the same year, 1999, Turkey was recognized (once again, but more concretely than ever before) as an upcoming candidate to join the European Union. However, in all three cases the United States of America had exerted all their influence to move the Europeans forward.

Not every European had to be pushed by the US, but there can be no doubt that some coaching was indeed necessary. Quite obviously, much of Europe was (and still is) shaped by a millenium of religious hate. To be balanced, however, this comes also after a century in which no Muslim state had been able to become a real democracy. From this angle, not to want a Muslim country in Europe may simply mean not to want a nondemocratic country in Europe.

Then, the question is about root causes. Does Islam exclude democracy and modernity, or not? So far, we do not have unequivocal proof that a Muslim country can be fully democratic; however, neither do we have conclusive evidence that it is indeed Muslimness which prevents full democracy and modernity in fields like individual rights, science, arts and economy. And in recent years we see the respective countries in Europe - Bosnia, Albania, and Turkey- edging closer and closer towards that goal.

#### **Pluralism**

Yet, European experience with religious hate and war is by no means restricted to its confrontation with Islam. Christian countries in Europe sometimes, reluctantly, accepted the existence of Jews - and sometimes not at all. For many centuries, or more than a millenium, no other belief, wether so-called "pagan" or Muslim, did have a right to exist in almost all of Europe.

Well, with a few more or less longlasting exceptions (Venice, Poland-Lithuania), and one big exception:

The Ottoman Empire.

At this point I shall not ask for the reasons in detail. There is a general rule in Islam to tolerate “book-religions”; but the Ottoman practice was much more extended and pragmatic. Like it had been in “Byzantium”, the Orthodox Church remained an Ottoman state-church with administrative functions and spiritual as well as legal autonomy, and also the biggest landowner at least in the Balkan region (and a big one in Anatolia, too). A second state church, the Armenian, administrated the eastern, monophysite churches of the empire, and finally the Jews were granted self-administration. The main state-religion however was a Sunnitic Islam, which was complemented by more or less autonomous dervish orders, some of which were rather and some of which were distinctly un-orthodox.

At the start of their expansion into the Ottoman Balkans, the Habsburg Emperors were radically Catholic. Countless Protestants were murdered, tortured or forcibly converted to Catholicism in the so-called counter-reformation. Many fled the country either towards (parts of) Germany or to the Ottoman realm. Near the end of that empire, some 2-300 years later, Austria-Hungary was the first European state (other than the Ottomans) to acknowledge Islam as an official religion of the empire (which it still is in present Austria), along with Protestantisms, Orthodoxy and Judaism. This later phase is known as “Enlightened Catholicism” (or a variant of “Enlightened Absolutism”), but obviously we have to do with two different influences: The physical and realtime encounter with the results of Ottoman religious pluralism caused by and demanding pragmatism; and (west-) European Enlightenment, which delivered the theoretical framework.

We should take this case as a precedent.

## **Kosova**

It won't be easy. Artemije, a Serbian-Orthodox bishop from Kosovo, already called Russia and Serbia to the arms in these days to “liberate” the region. This is not really an extraordinary event, although this time Russia will stay away physically. Through the last two centuries, the Orthodox Church, once the church of two succeeding empires (Roman-Byzantine, Ottoman) has been transformed and fragmented into several national(ist) churches. “Divine” calls to war and massacre have frequently been heard and put into practice throughout this period.

We may see the attitude mirrored in Turkey's “National View” (Milli Görüş) or “nationalist-Islamic synthesis”. Or in the Croatian-Catholic “Ustasha”. And in the Armenian Church, too. Whereas Albanian nationalism is not religious (Albanians may be Sunnis, Bektashites, Orthodox' or Catholics), it is partly centered around the “Kanun”, a medieval ethnic code of conduct containing some archaic rules like blood feud, for instance. And of course, each may provoke every other.

But interestingly, both the Patriarchates of Istanbul, the Ecumenical (-Orthodox) of Bartholomeus and the Armenian of Mesrob Mutafian, have different perspectives and since long have worked for reconciliation between different sects and faiths. Although the first is considered “Ecumenical” internationally, and the second only a local patriarch, the two have something in common. Their institutional framework has long since ceased to be the empire, while it has not been replaced by a national(ist) church either. The two may indicate that the region may well embrace its long-established pluralism as a fact and perhaps even as a gift of history. There are many people in- and outside traditional communities ready to establish or re-establish bonds of cooperation across community borders.

This is something the world in general and Europe in particular urgently need.

Of course, this cannot mean a return to the Ottoman system, which was imperial as well as hierarchic. It needs the framework of democratic institutions and philosophical terminology, the heritage of Humanism and Enlightenment. To say it metaphorically, the region needs the cooperation of its two poles, Istanbul and Vienna. But that's not something for the lofty sphere of metaphors alone, but very much needed on

the ground, in the economy, policing, and traffic, and in social and cultural life. Therefore it is good news that both Austria and Turkey have taken their seats in the International Steering Group/ISG for Kosova, together with eleven other EU member states, Switzerland, and the US.

**The end**