

'Islamic Calvinism' a paradoxical engine for change in conservative Central Anatolia

David Judson Referans

September 30, 2005

It was just about a year ago that I first met the young Austrian economist Gerald Knaus. We had quite an interesting conversation between two outsiders about Turkey and its prospects for the European Union. I shared with him a view I have held for some time: That Turkey is much better at asserting its claim to EU membership in arguments addressed to the European 'elites' than it is to common folks.

It was just about a year ago that I first met the young Austrian economist Gerald Knaus. We had quite an interesting conversation between two outsiders about Turkey and its prospects for the European Union. I shared with him a view I have held for some time: That Turkey is much better at asserting its claim to EU membership in arguments addressed to the European elites than it is to common folks. In other words, when the arguments are the complexities of demographic change or geostrategy or even long-term agricultural policy, logic wins over the thoughtful European mind. However, when the listener is not in Bonn or Berlin but lives in Bochum, or when he or she is not the owner of a big factory but is a small supplier or worker, then things get tougher. It is in a sense, the base element in the dichotomy we saw this week between the rash European Parliament and the foreign ministries of the EU's member states over the list of serious -- but nonetheless populist -- conditions Turkey is being asked to undertake on the road to membership.

I asked Knaus his thoughts on making the case for Turkey in a clear and understandable way to the uncomfortable part of the European mainstream that increasingly expresses the fear of vulnerability to the rapid and confusing change that is the fate of all societies a few years into the 21st century.

Knaus was quick with his answer. He offered the example of German politician Angela Merkel, the preacher's daughter of conservative temperament whom all of us were just getting to know for her anti-Turkish views. She is in many ways a sort of archetype of cultural resistance to Turkey's EU membership.

I have the impression that the fears of Merkel and many like-minded conservatives are rooted in their images of Anatolia that have developed over time, he said. The irony is that the values of the conservative, traditional, perhaps rural, and in their own terms Christian, citizens of many parts of Europe do not conflict or clash with the values of Anatolia. Quite the contrary, the values of the Christian conservatives are at one with the values of the people of Anatolia. The problem is that this realization is not part of their consciousness. He was perhaps not the first to draw the connection, but he did so vividly and effectively.

In any event, I have not seen Knaus since that meeting some time back, but his keen observations stuck in my mind. In addition, this week I was pleased to see he has not been idle in the interim. On my desk, I found a new report published by the think tank he heads, the European Strategy Initiative, or ESI: "Islamic Calvinists -- Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia."

The research of Knaus and his team was based on the city of Kayseri. By coincidence, Kayseri is a city we at Referans are

paying a lot of attention to these days. The conference series we've launched to explore the dynamism of Anatolia, Star Cities, began two weeks ago in Kayseri and I had the chance to spend a couple of days getting to know the place.

Kayseri's dynamism is hardly a secret, of course, and the ESI report gave serious attention to the tale of this Anatolian Tiger. Last year, it noted, the city's new industrial zone opened 139 new businesses on one single day. The story of Boydak Holding, the conglomerate founded by the family of the same name that now includes 22 companies and a \$1.2 billion annual turnover, is recounted from its birth as a small atelier to its emergence as an international giant. The study walks the reader through the transformation of Kayseri from the time of the Turkish Revolution by local entrepreneurs in sugar, textiles, cable production, furniture and other sectors.

Nevertheless, from there, ESI seeks to take this set of economic facts and this tale of success and place it in a larger sociological context. Moreover, in doing so, this report directly challenges some of the deeply held European assumptions about Turkey.

Among Europeans who are sceptical of Turkish membership of the European Union, it is common to hear the view that Turkey has two souls, only one of which is Western, the report says. They contrast the cosmopolitan outlook of Istanbul with the vast Turkish interior, which is seen as backward, impoverished and non-European' in its values.

The report continues with an exploration of the arguments we have all heard amid standard debate about the clash of civilizations, the worn arguments for a view of Islam as fatalist, anti-innovation, opposed to modernity and averse to risk. ESI offers the example of Kayseri as proof of the baselessness of such characterizations. Knaus and his team refer specifically to the famous sociologist Max Weber and his classic 1905 essay, The Spirit of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic with its references to the role in Europe's economic development of the Calvinist values of honesty, piety, thrift and hard work. The twist is that ESI advances the argument that it is precisely these same pious values, revered by the business class of Kayseri, that are the key to its economic success. The theme of the study is that conservative religious values are a force for progress in development, but they are not necessarily Christian or European but can be Islamic as well. Textile manufacturer Celal Hasnalcaci is quoted: The emergence of capitalism in Anatolia stems from the Protestant ethic.

I realize this report is just the beginning of a broader argument, but it seems to be an argument that can reach an audience larger than the group that can be said to understand

Turkey's EU motives today. Traditional Anatolian culture and values, far from being at odds with the value of Europe's Christian Democrats, are precisely compatible with the values of the continent's Angela Merkels.

You can find the study on ESI's Web site www.esiweb.org. If you can't locate it, drop me an e-mail and I'll send my copy along.