

# INTERVIEW WITH BARTHOLOMEW I\*



\* Bartholomew I is the current Ecumenical\*\* Patriarch of Istanbul.

\*\* Turkish law contests the Ecumenical status.

**H**ow do you assess the position and status of the Christian population in Turkey, especially in light of the political and economic developments that have occurred over the last five years.

For us, the last five years have been a period during which truly remarkable changes have taken place. The most important changes have been related to how Christians are viewed. The constructive approach taken by the state regarding the fact that non-Muslim minorities in particular are citizens of the Republic of Turkey and their acceptance as an indispensable part of the social order has resonated with society. Today, one can comfortably talk about the very unfair and unjust practices of the past and consensus can be reached regarding the fact that these practices have hurt not only non-Muslims but the entire country. Of course, it will take more time for such an understanding to take root and bear fruit.

***Why is the clergy important for the Patriarchate and what makes the Heybeliada (Halki) Seminary so crucial?***

The clergy play a key role in the Christian religion. An ordinary service cannot be conducted much less baptisms, weddings and funerals until a priest is consecrated by a bishop. Because this difference between the two religions is not well understood, our urgent need for an institution that trains clergy is not fully appreciated.

After all, the global role of our Patriarchate has only recently begun to be understood in our country. Until recently, and even now, several authors have viewed the Patriarchate's jurisdiction as being limited to meeting the religious needs of the Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul. This understanding is said to be based on the Treaty of Lausanne. However, the Treaty of Lausanne liberated the Patriarchate of worldly authority that it did not want and which conflicted with the requirements of the Greek Orthodox faith. Not only is there no restriction regarding its religious duties, but no restriction has been encountered in practice either, for example with regard to choosing and appointing bishops to serve abroad.

In short, our school's objective is to train clergymen who will serve both here at home and abroad just as it did in the past. Unlike an ordinary theology school, the Heybeliada Seminary is located in a monastery, which provides intensive hands-on application as well as theory.

***From 2003 until now, the Turkish government has said that there is no legal obstacle to opening the Heybeliada (Halki) Seminary. Can we say that there has been continuing dialogue on this topic and can you tell us a bit about the obstacles that are blocking efforts to open the school?***

Heybeliada Seminary is an institution of religious education which belongs to a minority group and whose existence is guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne. This is exactly why it continued to exist and operate until 1971. The school, which dates back to the Ottoman era, continued its operations during the time of the Great Leader Atatürk when the Republic was founded and operated under the Ministry of Education. During this time, inspections were constantly carried out by inspectors representing the Ministry of National Education and no harmful activity was ever identified.

Our school was shutdown in conjunction with a law that prohibited private higher education in Turkey. However, international treaties, such as the Treaty of Lausanne, supersede laws and constitutions. In this regard, the decision to close the Heybeliada Seminary is a violation of our country's laws and regulations. Our assessment of the unjust decision made at that time is that it was political retaliation not a legal decision, and we view it in parallel with the developments in Cyprus.

Before his death, the late Turgut Özal told my predecessor in person that he would open our seminary. Turgut Özal is a man we have the utmost respect for and he had also granted permission for the restoration of our Patriarchate, which was reduced to ashes by a fire in 1941.

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Today, however, we would rather look to the future and await a reasonable and legal solution that will remedy this error than to try and hold someone accountable to international standards for an event that took place in the past.

The government has expressed positive views for reopening the seminary. We pray that these words, which have given us hope, will be fulfilled in a short time. Forty years is a long time!

To be specific, what we want is for our seminary to be opened and operate just like it did in the history of the Republic of Turkey for 48 years under the Ministry of National Education.

***What are your thoughts on the orphanage that was turned over to the Patriarchate being used as a center for environmental studies?***

The Orphanage building, which is one of the largest wooden structures in the world, is in very poor condition today. It has been neglected due to the uncertainty which clouded the issue of ownership for years, and it will take significant resources to make it useable again. When making plans about how the building will be used, a solid plan must be made for covering the cost of initial repairs and the maintenance expenses in subsequent years. Until these two issues have been settled, all the talk is no more than the wishes of people with good intentions.

***Can you share with us your thoughts regarding the steps that have been taken to have the legal status of religious minorities in Turkey accepted?***

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The legal status of non-Muslim citizens in Turkey is already guaranteed by both the constitution and the Treaty of Lausanne. All that needs to happen is for the principles specified in these documents to be properly applied. The negative actions taken in relation to our community of faith have generally been executed by secret executive orders and regulations shaped by powers behind the scenes.

framework. As I stated, the problem is not with the texts but with perceptions and practice.

With regard to recognition as a religious institution, the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne and the European Union *acquis* provide an adequate

***There have been some reports in the press occasionally that people are immigrating to Turkey from Greece. What are the problems, if any, that people settling in Turkey will face, and what is your view of difficulties that students in particular encounter, if any, regarding registration in Greek Orthodox schools?***

Following the economic crisis in Greece, the idea that Greeks from Istanbul living in Greece as well as some native Greeks would settle in Turkey has been discussed. However, there is a long road between an idea and its implementation, and putting this into practice presents will raise a number of challenges. There are many Greek businessmen who have invested in Turkey. However, you can count the number of people who have immigrated to Turkey from Greece on your fingers.

In addition to the economic and social reasons, there is a special handicap related to education. Except for Greek diplomatic personnel, Greek citizens are unable to send their children to minority schools. The Ministry of National Education has imposed this restriction.

***In Turkey, there are some misunderstandings and inadequate knowledge regarding the definition of the Ecumenical. Can you tell us what this title means for the Patriarchate in Istanbul?***

This title has been used by the Istanbul Greek Patriarchate since the sixth century and not only has historic significance but also expresses its position and importance for the global Orthodox community. Unfortunately, in our country, the term “ecumenical” is viewed as synonymous with the Ottoman title “National Chief” and values belonging to our material world are ascribed. Ecumenical is a purely religious term, and the Patriarch and the Patriarchate were only granted authority over the material world during the Ottoman era through the office of the “national chief.” During the Byzantine Empire, which was a Christian state, the Patriarchate did not have such authority and when these were granted during the Ottoman era, it disrupted the fulfillment of religious duties. In the Orthodox faith, the philosophy that worldly government falls outside of the jurisdiction of the church is completely compatible with the principle of secularism. In this regard, I recommend that you read the recently released book entitled “Ecumenical Patriarchate.” It was compiled by Mr Cengiz Aktar.

***Do you think that Turkey has realized the value of having the spiritual leader of several hundred million Orthodox Christians residing in Istanbul? Is Turkey giving this issue the importance it deserves?***

Recently, we heard, for the first time, a very nice expression from a government representative, Mr Egemen Bağış, who said, “Turkey is proud of the Patriarchate.” Our Patriarchate is a well-established religious institution that keeps its distance from politics. It is a center that is esteemed, valued and respected by Orthodox around the world and by all Christians. Not only have officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who follow our travels witnessed this personally, but the interest and attention shown by state and government leaders as well as religious leaders visiting our Patriarchate from around the world is proof that this is true.

The fact that the administrators of our country have begun to see this truth delights us. What we hope and wish for is the implementation of sincere measures befitting to our recognized position.

***Can we say that the steps Turkey has taken towards EU membership have had a positive effect on the Greek Orthodox population of Turkey? How does the Greek Orthodox community view Turkey's membership in the European Union?***

We believe that the process of EU accession has affected not just the Greek community but all minorities in a positive way. However, when we voluntarily provided support for different governments during the European Union process, we did this not just for our own community, but because we believed it was for the good of all of the citizens of the Republic of Turkey. Today, even those who oppose the European Union support the application of European Union standards in our country.

As far as we have been able to see, our community has a positive view of the developments that have taken place.