

George Weigel on the Pope's Trip to Turkey

When Benedict XVI goes to Turkey, the media talk will be of Islam, but the pope's visit could advance religious liberty for Orthodox Christians.

By George Weigel

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Dec. 4, 2006 issue - Rome and Constantinople formally parted ways via mutual excommunications in 1054, after centuries of controversy in which geography and language played perhaps as large a role as controverted questions of theology and liturgical practice. However we understand the reasons for the split between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, those mutual excommunications opened up a religious and psychological fault line that would have profound historical consequences throughout the second millennium of Christian history. Ever since the historic 1964 meeting in Jerusalem between Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, Catholic theologians and Orthodox scholars have worked to close the breach formalized almost a thousand years ago so that the church could once again "breathe with both lungs," as the late Pope John Paul II liked to put it. So when Pope Benedict XVI, successor of the apostle Peter, goes to Istanbul on Nov. 28 to meet Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, successor of the apostle Andrew, the pontiff's primary concerns will be ecumenical: how might he and Bartholomew (who did some of his doctoral work in Rome) advance the dialogue between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, so that Peter and Andrew and the churches they embody might, one day, find themselves again in full communion with each other?

In the days when the world knew him as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI expressed reservations about Turkey's accession to the European Union, which he believed would mark the end of the EU as the political expression of a common culture. Instead, Ratzinger suggested, Turkey should be associated with the European Union in such a way that it would enjoy the economic benefits of EU membership without becoming a member, with full voice and vote, of the EU's political deliberations. Perhaps Ratzinger has reconsidered his position as pope; but in any case, his questions about Turkey's EU ambitions, plus his September lecture in Regensburg, Germany, in which he raised hard questions about the ways in which certain Islamic conceptions of God led to lethal worldly consequences, have conspired, in the global media's mind, to cast Pope Benedict's impending visit to Turkey in a light that both he and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew dislike: as far as most of the world is concerned, the pope is going to Islamic Turkey, not to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the real issue being engaged in Istanbul from Nov. 28 through Dec. 1 involves Catholicism and Islam, not Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Given the ecumenical priorities that both pope and patriarch assign to this historic encounter, however, it is very unlikely that the papal pilgrimage will see Regensburg II, a major statement from Benedict XVI on Christianity and Islam. That is not because the pope is retreating from what he said at Regensburg; it is because this pilgrimage has a different purpose.

There is, however, a link between what Benedict XVI thinks he's doing during his Turkish pilgrimage and the world's expectations of another episode in the confrontation between the West and Islam. That link involves the dramatic restrictions under which Patriarch Bartholomew and the Ecumenical Patriarchate must operate, thanks to the obstacles put in the patriarchate's path by the Turkish government—restrictions that raise serious questions about Turkey's ability to meet EU human-rights standards. Should the papal visit to the Phanar (sometimes referred to as the "Orthodox Vatican," much to the aggravation of the Orthodox) focus world attention on the gaps in Turkey's practice of religious freedom, the situation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate might be improved—and so, in consequence, would Turkey's chances of a closer relationship to the EU.

Although the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople does not exercise the jurisdictional and doctrinal authority in world Orthodoxy that the papacy exercises in world Catholicism, it does enjoy a historic status as "first among equals" in Orthodoxy, plays an important role in coordinating Orthodox affairs globally and is regarded as the spiritual center of global Orthodoxy by Orthodox believers. Yet it is Turkish law, not the canons of the Orthodox Church, that determines who is eligible to be elected ecumenical patriarch, and Turkish law limits the pool of possible candidates to Turkish citizens living in Turkey. As a recent memorandum from the Ecumenical Patriarchate put it, "the result of these restrictions is that in the not so distant future the Ecumenical Patriarchate may not be able to elect a Patriarch."

The Turkish government closed the patriarchate's seminary, the Theological School of Halki, in 1971, and has refused, despite numerous requests, to reopen it.

Turkey will not grant the Ecumenical Patriarchate legal "personality," in defiance of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which defined the legal position of minorities in Turkey; this refusal to deal with the patriarchate as a legal "person" (as churches are regarded throughout the West) is, according to the patriarchate memo, "a major source of many other problems." For to deny that the patriarchate is a legal entity with certain rights, an entity that can work with the Turkish government within the framework of the law, means that all issues between the patriarchate and the state become political issues, subject to political pressures and counterpressures—especially problematic, since less than one tenth of 1 percent of the Turkish population is Orthodox.

The Turkish government blocks work permits for non-Turkish citizens who wish to work at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, such that the 10 Greek clergymen, one American layman and one British layman now working at the Phanar are doing so illegally, and must leave the country every three months to renew their tourist visas.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is not permitted to own property; thus it owns none of the churches under its religious jurisdiction. Turkish authorities have also confiscated houses, apartment buildings, schools, monasteries and lands that were once owned by the Ecumenical Patriarchate; the state seized the patriarchate's 36 cemeteries, which are now the property of various legal subdivisions of the city of Istanbul; and, earlier this year, the state confiscated the boys' orphanage run by the patriarchate (which is the oldest wooden building in Europe and of great historical value).

The Turkish government also determines who may teach in the elementary schools that serve the Orthodox community, and enforces a six-year "approval" process to control the flow of books to Orthodox school libraries.

No Christian community in the West would tolerate such conditions, which involve violations of basic human rights. If Turkey is to be the model of a modern Islamic society, it must remove restrictions on the exercise of some of the most fundamental aspects of religious freedom: the freedom of religious communities to educate their people, perform works of charity and choose their leaders according to their own theological self-understanding. Might Benedict XVI's pilgrimage to Turkey focus the world's attention on the stranglehold the Turkish state attempts to exercise on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and his people, such that that stranglehold begins to ease? If the 79-year-old pontiff managed that, Christian unity and the dialogue between the West and Islam would both be advanced.

Weigel is senior fellow at Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author, most recently, of "God's Choice: Pope Benedict XVI and the Future of the Catholic Church."

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