

# Continental drift

Two years ago, 75 per cent of Turks supported joining the European Union. Today, less than half want to join a club that appears not to want them, following public attacks on their country which they perceive have been orchestrated by the Catholic Church

Cardinal Kasper Opens War against Turkey's EU membership," read the headlines in the Turkish press last week, and perhaps they were not wide of the mark. *Corriere della Sera* reported that the cardinal, the Vatican's top ecumenical officer and president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said: "It is not the right moment for Turkey to join the European Union ... Turkey must change many things and it is not just a question of laws but of mentality, and you can't change mentality in one day."

The cardinal's remarks seem to have been prompted by a knife attack on 2 July on Fr Pierre Bruinessen, a 74-year-old priest serving a minuscule parish in the Black Sea port of Samsun. It was the third attack on a Catholic priest in Turkey this year. In the worst of them, the parish priest of another Black Sea port, Fr Andrea Santoro, was murdered by a 16-year-old boy who cried "God is great" as he fired a pistol at him after Mass. The assailant in Fr Bruinessen's case was a 47-year-old man, said to be mentally disturbed. In a third case, also in February, a priest in the western port of Izmir was harassed and chased.

Do these events have a common strand, and, if they do, should it be considered grounds for excluding Turkey – now an industrial nation of 70 million people, the leading democracy among Muslim nations, and a country that has been knocking at Europe's door for more than 40 years – from EU membership?

Cardinal Kasper apparently answers all of these questions with a resounding yes. He told *Corriere della Sera* that he did not see the recent attacks on Christians in Turkey as "individual acts". "The nationalism displayed against foreigners there has reached dangerous levels. In this sense it is clear that Turkey has not reached the level of maturity to allow it to share in European culture..."

That seemed undeserved to Turkish commentators. "We should remember that thousands of Turkish people face racist and discriminatory attacks in Western Europe each year," said Dr Sedat Laçiner, head of the Turkish International Strategic Research Organisation. One or two Turks suggested to me that the attacks might have been a response among fringe radical Islamic groups to earlier reported hostility to Turkey from the Vatican.



Cardinal Camillo Ruini touches the coffin of Fr Andrea Santoro, killed by a gunman in Turkey, during his funeral in Rome on 10 February. Photo: CNS

They were referring to remarks, made almost exactly two years ago to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, describing Turkey as a country that "had always existed in permanent contrast with Europe" because of the wars between the Turks and the Byzantines, the sieges of Vienna, and the Balkan Wars, and so was unfit for EU membership. "If you say that sort of thing about a country, you stir up its lunatics," a friend said to me.

He was despondent because Turkey's EU accession process has become ensnarled in the debate over the future nature and character of Europe that has so concentrated minds in the West. Before the autumn of 2004, the prevailing view in the Commission was that the EU needed to anchor Turkey, the strongest and most advanced and most westernised Muslim country, in the EU and boost its commitment to secularism and democracy. Cardinal Ratzinger's comments emboldened Turkey's foes in the EU to come out of the shadows. Within a couple of months two senior retiring EU Commissioners publicly challenged the Turkish candidacy and all over Europe, Christian Democrats and Catholics had lined up against it: every syllable of theirs was noted keenly in Turkey.

Since then relations between Turkey and the West have gone downhill almost all the way. In December 2004, Turkey got a flickering green light to go ahead with negotia-

tions, but unlike every other previous and now subsequent application, the Turkish negotiations do not imply a promise of eventual EU membership. The current Enlargement Commissioner, Mr Olli Rehn, berates the Turks for having lost their enthusiasm for EU reform while warning them simultaneously that they must make immediate changes and be prepared to wait as much as another decade for membership, even though Bulgaria and Romania, and even Croatia, will all become members by 2010. EU/Turkey relations have also become entangled in the Cyprus dispute because in 2004 the EU admitted Cyprus without a settlement after the Greek Cypriots voted against one, but excluded the Turkish Cypriots who voted for one.

Turkish public opinion has grown predictably sour towards Europe and the European Union. "Why should we join a club whose members keep telling us that they don't like us, don't understand us, and don't respect us?" another Turk asked me recently. Support among the Turks for EU membership has dropped from around 75 per cent two years ago to 43 per cent today.

But it is the Vatican's intervention in high-profile newspaper interviews that has ignited a religious dimension to the Euro-Turkish rift. The Vatican has strikingly declined to enter discussion with the Turks, even though Pope Benedict is due to visit the country to pay his respects to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul in November.

Senior Turkish figures wrote politely to Cardinal Ratzinger in August 2004 via the Ankara Nunciature defending their country's place in the EU. They received no answers.

This, then, is why Catholicism is suddenly perceived in Turkey as a religion hostile to an entire nation, reversing the situation a few decades ago when Catholicism was seen there as the most friendly version of Christianity – a tradition going back to Pius X. Right-wing newspapers mutter about the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate turning into another Vatican City. In fairness to the Vatican, it should be added that there is a side to the row of which ordinary Turks are unaware. Cardinal Ratzinger's remarks followed more than a decade of behind-the-scenes rebuffs to Vatican attempts to win some form of legal recognition for the Church in Turkey. Through a fluke of history, foreign Churches exist without legal status in Turkey except as outposts of foreign embassies. This is a serious anomaly in any modern state, but particularly strange in an EU candidate.

During the Ottoman Empire, foreign Churches used to rely on charters from the Sultans but these went into abeyance when the Republic was founded. In 1926, through what seems to have been a miscalculation by the French, the Church turned down the chance of new law to regularise the situation. So foreign Churches operate on a day-to-day basis, though – like mosques – they often get some local customary privileges such as free electricity and water.

**B**ut all non-diplomatic Church property runs the constant risk of confiscation: a five-star hotel is now rising in the Istanbul district on the Bosphorus on a spot where only 10 years ago a disused Catholic orphanage stood. In theory at least all other foreign Churches in Turkey could also lose their buildings if someone took them to court and their embassies did not intervene. Correcting the situation requires primary legislation by parliament. Turkish secularists fear that this could open the floodgates for radical Islamic movements. Hard-line Islamists would see the change as a Christian intrusion. So the bureaucrats dig in.

In the 1990s, the dispute was essentially a legal wrangle but one on which the authorities would not bend, but if it had not happened it is unlikely that we would have seen the Ratzinger and Kasper pronouncements. The Vatican has never, so far as I know, put its problems to Turkish public opinion which, despite the fears of officials, would probably not be unreasonable. By preferring instead to give high-profile messages about Turkey's EU eligibility to European papers, it has unleashed a storm with far-reaching consequences for European politics and disastrous ones for the tiny Church in Turkey.

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*Photo: Marcelia Hekblad*

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