

# Turkey's Christians under Siege

by John Eibner

**T**he brutal murder of the head of Turkey's Catholic Church, Bishop Luigi Padovese, on June 3, 2010, has rattled the country's small, diverse, and hard-pressed Christian community.<sup>1</sup> The 62-year-old bishop, who spearheaded the Vatican's efforts to improve Muslim-Christian relations in Turkey, was stabbed repeatedly at his Iskenderun home by his driver and bodyguard Murat Altun, who concluded the slaughter by decapitating Padovese and shouting, "I killed the Great Satan. Allahu Akhbar!" He then told the police that he had acted in obedience to a "command from God."<sup>2</sup>

Though bearing all the hallmarks of a jihadist execution, the murder was met by denials and obfuscation—not only by the Turkish authorities but also by Western governments and the Vatican. This is not wholly surprising. In the post-9/11 era, it has become commonplace to deny connections between Islam and acts of violence despite much evidence to the contrary.<sup>3</sup> But while this denial has undoubtedly sought to win the hearts and minds of Muslims, as opposed to Christians, Jews, or any other religious group, it has served to encourage Islamist terrorism and to exacerbate the persecution of non-Muslim minorities even in the most secularized Muslim states. For all President Barack Obama's high praise for its "strong, vibrant, secular democracy,"<sup>4</sup> and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "Alliance of Civilizations" rhetoric, Turkey is very much entrenched in the clash of civilizations paradigm. Unless Ankara is prepared to combat the widespread "Christophobia" that fuels violence and other forms of repression, the country's Christians are doomed to remain an oppressed and discriminated against minority, and Turkey's aspirations of democratic transformation and full integration with Europe will remain stillborn.

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1 According to International Religious Freedom Report 2009, U.S. Department of State, Washington D.C., there are approximately 90,000 Christians in Turkey. Vatican sources claim a total of 30,000 Catholics. Catholic News Agency (Rome), Nov. 27, 2006.

2 *Asia News* (Bangkok), June 7, 2010.

3 Daniel Pipes, "Denying [Islamist] Terrorism," *The New York Sun*, Feb. 8, 2005.

4 "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament," in Ankara, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Apr. 6, 2009.

## THE VICTIM AND HIS MISSION

Consecrated bishop in November 2004, half a year following Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's elevation to the papacy, Padovese belonged to the body of intellectually sharp, proactive clerics who share Benedict XVI's ecumenical understanding of the church and its global mission of evangelization, especially in the Islamic Middle East where a century of intensive de-Christianization now threatens the faith's regional existence.

Padovese's mission in Turkey was to help save the country's Christian community from extinction and to create conditions for its religious and cultural renaissance. Rejecting the church's historic *dhimmi* status as a protected religious minority under Islam—which reduced it to little more than a submissive worshipping agency with no other legitimate activity—he viewed Turkey's European Union candidacy as a golden opportunity for winning significant concessions from Ankara and pinned high hopes on the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, which took place in Rome in October 2010.<sup>5</sup> However, the synod ended on a sour note. While confirming the Second Vatican Council's positive shift in attitude toward Judaism and unequivocal rejection of anti-Semitism, the Middle

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Eastern bishops sought to enhance the security of their flocks by playing an anti-Israel card and criticizing Israel—the one country of the region with a growing Christian population—with a directness that was not employed in relation to any Islamic state, no matter how repressive.

Had it not been for his murder, the bishop

5 Bishop Luigi Padovese, "Christians in Turkey: From the Cradle of Christianity to the Persecuted Minority," presentation, St. Louis Catholic Parish, Ansbach, Germany, June 18, 2009.

would have traveled to meet the pope in Cyprus on the very next day for the launch of the synod's *Instrumentum laboris*, the Vatican's strategic plan for reviving Christianity in its Middle Eastern cradle, to which Padovese was a substantial contributor.

Though written in low-key Vatican jargon, the *Instrumentum laboris* is full of radical implications for Turkey and the broader Middle East.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the common post-9/11 predilection to downplay Islamism's less savory aspects, the document does not gloss over the disadvantaged position of Christians in the Islamic world and identifies the issue of human rights, including religious freedom, as central to the well-being of the whole of society:

Oftentimes, relations between Christians and Muslims are difficult, principally because Muslims make no distinction between religion and politics, thereby relegating Christians to the precarious position of being considered non-citizens, despite the fact that they were citizens of their countries long before the rise of Islam. The key to harmonious living between Christians and Muslims is to recognize religious freedom and human rights.<sup>7</sup>

This harmonious living was to be achieved through a policy of dialogue—defined by Benedict XVI at the beginning of his papacy as “a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends”<sup>8</sup>—that would identify the common ground between the two religions: service to society, respect for common moral values, the avoidance of syncretism, joint opposition to the atheism, materialism, and relativism emanating from the Western world, and a collective rejection of religious-based violence, that is—killing in the name of God.

The *Instrumentum laboris* also encouraged a search—together with Muslim reformers—for a

6 “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness. ‘Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul’ (Acts 4:32);” Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Middle East, Vatican City, June 6, 2010.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

8 “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” meeting with representatives of Muslim communities, Cologne, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Rome), Aug. 20, 2005.

new system of church-state relations, which it referred to as “positive laicity.” But the Vatican does not uphold Turkey’s secularism—which the George W. Bush and Obama administrations have praised as a model for the Islamic world—as the answer. “In Turkey,” the *Instrumentum laboris* notes—undoubtedly on account of the influence of Bishop Padovese—“the idea of ‘laicity’ is currently posing more problems for full religious freedom in the country.” The working document did not elaborate but simply stated that the aim of this “positive,” as opposed to “Turkish laicity,” would be to help eliminate the theocratic character of government and allow for greater equality among citizens of different religions, thereby fostering the promotion of a sound democracy, positively secular in nature, which also fully acknowledges the role of religion in public life while completely respecting the distinction between the religious and civic orders.<sup>9</sup>

These were the principles that guided Padovese’s Turkish mission. He worked in the clear knowledge that “faithfully witnessing to Christ”—as the synod’s preparatory document acknowledges—“can lead to persecution.”<sup>10</sup> And so it did.

## CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

Within hours of Padovese’s death, the provincial governor preempted the results of police investigations with the announcement that the murder was not politically motivated but rather committed by a lone lunatic.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in an attempt to eliminate any Islamic motive, NTV Turkey announced that the murderer was not actually a Muslim but a convert to Catholicism.<sup>12</sup>



*The brutal murder on June 3, 2010, of the head of Turkey’s Catholic church, Bishop Luigi Padovese, seen here in 2006 leading the funeral procession of another slain priest, Andrea Santoro, was met by denials and obfuscation—not only by the Turkish authorities but also by Western governments and even the Vatican.*

Then the police leaked word—allegedly from the assassin—that he had been “forced to suffer abuse” in a homosexual relationship with the bishop and that the killing had been an act of “legitimate defense.”<sup>13</sup>

It is true that Turkey’s minister for culture and tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, issued a short message of condolences on behalf of the government<sup>14</sup> and that the foreign ministry expressed regret to the international media. But neither President Abdullah Gül nor Prime Minister Erdoğan expressed their own condolences or publicly addressed the murder of the head of their country’s Catholic Church, and even the foreign ministry’s statement took care to highlight the murderer’s alleged “psychological problems.”<sup>15</sup>

Erdoğan’s silence in response to this national tragedy was particularly striking. Together with Spanish prime minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, the Turkish prime minister and leader of

9 “The Catholic Church in the Middle East,” pp. 10-12.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

11 ANSA News Agency, Vatican City, June 3, 2010.

12 Agence France-Presse, June 4, 2010.

13 *Asia News*, June 7, 2010.

14 Press release, Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, June 3, 2010.

15 CNN, June 3, 2010.

the ruling Islamist Peace and Justice Party (AKP) has been a principal architect and cosponsor of the U.N.'s flagship program to promote a global "Alliance of Civilizations." Diversity, cross-cultural dialogue, and opposition to isolation of "the other" were among the principles articulated by Erdoğan in his attempts to present Turkey as "the best panacea against 'clash of civilizations' theories."<sup>16</sup> The beheading of a senior

**Pope Benedict endorsed the Turkish government's denial of a religious-political motive.**

Christian cleric by a Muslim zealot could not but send an unmistakable message that this very clash was in full swing on Erdoğan's home turf.

Moreover, at the time of the murder, Erdoğan was both sending thinly veiled threats of Turkey's growing im-

patience with the slow progress of its EU application and seeking to enhance his stature throughout the Islamic world with menacing anti-Israel diplomacy in response to its interception of the Turkey-originated Gaza flotilla.<sup>17</sup> He thus had nothing to gain and much to lose by generating headlines about Padovese's execution.

So did Washington and its European allies. If Western diplomats spoke at all about the bishop's murder, it was in the same hushed tones that are used when referring to Turkey's Armenian genocide of World War I, its subsequent use of terror against remnant Christian communities and Kurdish villages, its 1974 invasion of Cyprus and subsequent ethnic cleansing of the occupied Christian population, and its blockade of neighboring Armenia.

Well aware of the absence of backing from Western powers, the Vatican acted swiftly to avoid confrontation with Turkey. Notwithstanding an early observation by Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi that the murder highlighted the "difficult conditions" of the church in the

region,<sup>18</sup> the official explanation was swiftly harmonized with that of Ankara. In a statement broadcast on Vatican Radio on the same day, Lombardi negated his previous comment by stating that "political motivations for the attack or other motivations linked to socio-political tensions are to be excluded." He also stressed the killer's "mental imbalance"<sup>19</sup> as if solo psychopaths might be a primary source of the church's difficult conditions in the Islamic world.

The day after the murder, while en route to one of Europe's hot spots of Muslim-Christian communal tension—the divided island of Cyprus—Pope Benedict XVI himself sought to quash speculation about its motivation. He admitted that he still had "very little information" about the killing, yet endorsed—much to the bewilderment of Christians in Turkey—the Turkish government's reflexive denial of a religious-political motive when he declared, "We must not attribute the fact [of Bishop Padovese's murder] to Turkey ... What is certain is that it was not a religious or political assassination."<sup>20</sup>

## THE LESSONS OF REGENSBURG

Why did the pope so swiftly deny political or religious motives for Padovese's murder when so much about the crime was still shrouded in mystery? Benedict XVI provided a motive when he explained, "We do not want this tragic situation to become mixed up with dialogue with Islam or with all the problems of our journey [to Cyprus]."<sup>21</sup> A quarrel with Ankara at this particular juncture could certainly have had damaging repercussions for the church, but behind the pontiff's timidity, lay his keen awareness of how easy it was to trigger the destructive rage of the Islamic powers and the temporal weakness of his church.

Indeed, a few months before his ascendancy in May 2005, the pope-to-be caused consterna-

16 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, statement, opening session, Alliance of Civilizations Forum, Madrid, Jan. 15, 2008.

17 *Ynet News* (Tel Aviv), June 1, 2010.

18 Associated Press, June 3, 2010.

19 Radio Vatican, June 3, 2010.

20 *Ibid.*, June 4, 2010.

21 *Ibid.*

tion in Turkey by declaring his opposition to its application for EU membership because “historically and culturally, Turkey has little in common with Europe.”<sup>22</sup> Upon Ratzinger’s election to the papacy, Erdoğan opined that his “rhetoric may change from now on ... because this post, this responsibility, requires it.”<sup>23</sup>

Benedict XVI did lower his tone but not before the mass demonstrations, violence, and threats that followed his now famous Regensburg University lecture of September 2006—just two months before he was scheduled to travel to Istanbul for his first papal foray into the world of Islam. At Regensburg, the pope broached one of the key issues obstructing harmonious relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds: the sensitive question of violent jihad as a legitimate means of advancing the Islamic faith.<sup>24</sup>

In his address, the pope overstepped a red line drawn by Muslim political elites throughout the world. Erdoğan joined angry Muslim clerics and statesmen, demanding that the pope apologize for his “wrong, ugly, and unfortunate statements” and calling into question whether the planned papal visit to Istanbul would take place.<sup>25</sup> He was followed by Director for Religious Affairs Ali Bardakoğlu—the overseer of the Turkish state’s massive financial support for Islamic institutions, including those in Europe, especially Germany<sup>26</sup>—who condemned the pope’s message as reflecting “anger, hostility, and hatred” in addition to a “Crusader and holy-war mentality.”<sup>27</sup> The deputy chairman of Erdoğan’s AKP Party, Salih Kapusuz, announced that the Regensburg speech would place Benedict XVI in the “same category as Hitler and Mussolini.”<sup>28</sup>

Left isolated and exposed by Washington and Europe, the pope quickly succumbed to pressure. To be sure, he did not retract a single word uttered at Regensburg, and his apology was more of a regretful explanation than an admission of error, but his humble and appeasing demeanor was conciliatory enough to salvage his church’s dialogue with Islam and keep the door open to Istanbul. Since then, he has taken extraordinary pains to temper his language and make flattering gestures to avoid frenzied Muslim responses.

**Pope Benedict has taken extraordinary pains to temper his language to avoid frenzied Muslim responses.**

Consider Benedict XVI’s November 2006 visit to Turkey—his first as pope to a Muslim-majority country. While reiterating the Vatican’s customary plea for religious liberty, his remarks were overshadowed by his gestures of goodwill aimed at underscoring his esteem for Islam and Turkey’s Islamist government, notably his prayer facing Mecca in Istanbul’s Blue Mosque and his praise for Erdoğan’s role in launching the Alliance of Civilizations.<sup>29</sup>

The biggest plum for Erdoğan was the indication that the pope would now welcome Turkey’s membership in the EU.<sup>30</sup> Although the Vatican made no mention of it, the Turkish press announced that Benedict XVI had endorsed Erdoğan’s plan to establish a bureau of Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs in Brussels to “counter efforts to inflame Islamophobia.”<sup>31</sup>

The Regensburg speech led to the harmonization of the Vatican’s diplomatic language with that of Turkey and the Alliance of Civilizations, on which the Padovese murder had no apparent effect. Anti-Christian violence remains a powerful factor in influencing the language of the church as it struggles to balance its fundamental, unwavering

22 *Le Figaro* (Paris), Aug. 13, 2004; CatholicCulture.org, Dec. 17, 2004.

23 Inter-Press Service (Rome), Apr. 20, 2005; Agence France-Presse, Apr. 21, 2005.

24 Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” University of Regensburg, Sept. 12, 2006.

25 *Yeni Şafak* (Istanbul), Sept. 17, 2006; Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Special Dispatch, no. 1297, Sept. 22, 2006.

26 Ali Bardakoğlu, “The Structure, Mission and Social Function of the Directorate of Religious Affairs,” accessed Dec. 31, 2010.

27 MEMRI, Special Dispatch, no. 1297, Sept. 22, 2006.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Catholic News Agency, Nov. 29, 2006.

30 *The Sunday Times* (London), Nov. 29, 2006.

31 *Today’s Zaman* (Istanbul), May 14, 2009.

vering advocacy of religious freedom and opposition to killing in the name of God with the pursuit of dialogue with Turkey and other Muslim majority states.

## THE PLOT THICKENS

Not all Christians in Turkey accepted the denials and obfuscation of Ankara and the Vatican about the circumstances surrounding the murder. Foremost among them was the archbishop of Smyrna, Ruggero Franceschini—Padovese’s successor as head of the country’s Catholic Church—who rejected the official explanation of his

colleague’s murder and maintained that the pope had received “bad counsel” prior to his denial of the murder’s political or religious motives.<sup>32</sup>

The archbishop had lived in Iskenderun, where the murder took place, and had known the assassin and his family personally.

In the hope of ascertain-

ing the true facts, he immediately visited the scene of the crime, subsequently telling the press that he could not accept the “usual hastily concocted, pious lie” about the murderer’s insanity. He also dismissed the claim that the assassin was a Catholic convert, confirming that he was a non-practicing Muslim.<sup>33</sup>

The archbishop did not doubt the murder’s religious and political motivation. “I believe that with this murder, which has an explicitly religious element, we are faced with something that goes beyond government,” he said. “It points towards nostalgic, perhaps anarchist groups who want to destabilize the government. The very modalities of the murder aim to manipulate public opinion.”<sup>34</sup>

What the archbishop suspected was a crime stage-managed by Turkey’s “deep state”—an

opaque underworld where powerful elements within the state, especially the military and security services, act in conjunction with violent extremist groups, such as the ultra-nationalist Grey Wolves and the Islamist Hezbollah, as well as the apolitical criminal underworld, to undertake special, illegal operations in the political interest of the country’s ruling elite.<sup>35</sup>

Until recently, the deep state was imbued with the secularist ideology of the republic’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. But since coming to power in 2003, Erdoğan’s AKP has vigorously endeavored to lay hands on all levers of power including the deep state with a view to promoting its Islamist, “neo-Ottoman” vision for the country.<sup>36</sup> This has in turn produced a schizophrenic deep state with older elements loyal to the Kemalist opposition and newer elements loyal to the AKP’s Islamist agenda.

Since 2007, the Turkish media has feasted on a steady stream of revelations about an extensive deep state network called “Ergenekon.” Government prosecutors have secured the arrest and indictment of scores of retired and still-serving military and security officials for allegedly plotting to destabilize the AKP-dominated government. Show trials are already underway.

Deep state documents released by the prosecution, if taken at face value, point to Ergenekon as a source of anti-church activity, including the torture and Islamic-style ritual murder of three evangelical Christian book publishers in the town of Malatya in April 2006.<sup>37</sup>

The Ergenekon conspiracy has been similarly linked with the murder of the 61-year-old Catholic priest, Fr. Andrea Santoro—shot and killed in his Trabzon church in February 2006. Witnesses report that the convicted killer, a 16-year-old, shouted “Allahu Akbar” immediately

**Plain-speaking about persecution of Christians invites hostile reactions, sometimes deadly.**

32 Documentation Information Catholiques Internationales (Menzingen, Switzerland), June 28, 2010.

33 *Asia News*, June 10, 2010.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Gareth H. Jenkins, “Between Fact and Fiction: Turkey’s Ergenekon Investigation,” Silk Road paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C., Aug. 2009; H. Akim Ünver, “Turkey’s ‘Deep-State’ and the Ergenekon Conundrum,” The Middle East Institute, Policy Brief, no. 23, Apr. 2009.

36 Michael Rubin, “Erdoğan, Ergenekon, and the Struggle for Turkey,” *Mideast Monitor*, Aug. 8, 2008.

37 *Today’s Zaman*, Nov. 22, 2008, Jan. 17, 2009, Apr. 13, 2010.

before firing his pistol.<sup>38</sup> Bishop Padovese said at the time that the assassination “did not seem incidental” as it occurred while passions were aroused by the Danish cartoon affair.<sup>39</sup> The former papal nuncio to Turkey, Msgr. Antonio Lucibello, had similarly argued that there was a mastermind behind Santoro’s murder.<sup>40</sup>

Prosecutors also ascribed the January 2007 murder of the Armenian Christian journalist, Hrant Dink, by a 17-year-old, to the Ergenekon.<sup>41</sup> A vigorous and well-known campaigner against Turkey’s denial of the Armenian genocide, Dink had been convicted of having violated article 302 of the penal code banning “insults to Turkishness.” The hanged body of Dink’s Turkish lawyer, Hakan Karadağ, was found in suspicious circumstances the day after the Padovese murder.<sup>42</sup>

It is far from certain whether the alleged anti-AKP Ergenekon conspiracy is a reality, or whether it is largely an AKP fabrication, designed to cover the efforts of Erdoğan’s Islamists to turn the deep state into an instrument for promoting their own agenda.<sup>43</sup> But whoever may be pulling the strings, Kemalists or Islamists, the deep state is no friend of Turkey’s Christians.

## A TURKISH ANTI-CHRISTIAN AGENDA

Persecution, however, is by no means limited to the deep state. Like their counterparts in most



*Inside Istanbul’s 17th century Blue Mosque, Pope Benedict XVI (center; with the Mufti of Istanbul, November 30, 2006) prays silently. The pontiff dismayed many Turkish Christians by declaring, a day after Bishop Padovese’s murder, that Turkey should not be held culpable for the tragic event and that what “is certain is that it was not a religious or political assassination.”*

of the Islamic Middle East, Turkey’s Christians are effective hostages to the arbitrary actions of powerful elites, made up of Islamic state and non-state actors who collectively monopolize violence. The oldest Christians retain living memory of the state-sponsored mass deportations and massacres that culminated in the World War I Armenian genocide. During the twentieth century, Turkey’s Christian population has dropped to the verge of extinction.<sup>44</sup> The last anti-Christian mass violence was the 1955 deep state-sparked, anti-Greek pogrom in Istanbul, which also took a heavy toll on the city’s Jewish and Armenian populations.<sup>45</sup>

Such memories are reinforced in the younger generation of Christians by continuing acts of smaller scale and more discriminative violence.

38 Reuters, Oct. 4, 2007.

39 Catholic News Service, Feb. 6, 2006.

40 *Asia News*, Feb. 7, 2006.

41 *BBC News*, Feb. 4, 2008.

42 *Today’s Zaman*, June 5, 2010.

43 Rubin, “Erdoğan, Ergenekon and the Struggle for Turkey.”

44 Ahmet Igduygu, Sule Toktas, and Bayram Ali Soner, “The Politics of Population in a Nation-building Process: Emigration of Non-Muslims from Turkey,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Feb. 2008, p. 363.

45 Ünver, “Turkey’s ‘Deep-State’ and the Ergenekon Conundrum.”

In February 2006, for example, a Slovenian priest was attacked by a gang of teenagers in the parish compound in Izmir (Smyrna), and five months later a 74-year-old clergyman was stabbed by young Turks on a street in Trabzon, following which Padovese told the media, “The climate has changed ... it is the Catholic priests that are being attacked.”<sup>46</sup> In December 2007, another priest was knifed by a teenager as he left his church following Sunday mass.<sup>47</sup>

A leader of the Turkish Protestant community, Rev. Behnan Konutgan, recently recorded cases of violence against church property and the

**The Turkish public as a whole sees Christians as dangerous, subversive aliens within society.**

physical harassment of church members while a noted Turkish sociologist of religion, Ali Carkoğlu, has argued that no non-Muslim religious gathering in Turkey is completely risk free.<sup>48</sup>

What little protective law there is, whether national or international,

does not have the strength to provide adequate defense. Plain-speaking about persecution invites hostile reactions, sometimes deadly. The church’s language of dialogue is powerfully influenced by this reality. But there are some voices in Turkey that do not always cower to the violence-backed taboos of official Christian-Muslim dialogue or of the Alliance of Civilizations.

At the end of 2009, Bartholomew I, the normally subservient Ecumenical Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, appeared on CBS’s *60 Minutes* and shocked Turkey’s political establishment. Speaking to Bob Simon, the patriarch reported no significant improvement in conditions for the church. Instead, he argued that Turkey’s Christians were second class citizens and that he personally felt “crucified” by a state that wanted to

see his church die out. Asked whether Erdoğan had responded to the petitions submitted to him in the course of many meetings, Bartholomew answered, “Never.”<sup>49</sup>

Turkey’s rulers lashed out angrily. “We consider the crucifixion metaphor an extremely unfortunate metaphor,” argued Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. “In our history, there have never been crucifixions, and there never will be. I couldn’t really reconcile this metaphor with his mature personality.”<sup>50</sup> President Gül endorsed the foreign minister’s assessment while the head of the ruling AKP’s international relations section, Kürsat Tüzmen, menacingly retorted, “If there is someone who is being crucified, it is the politician, security officials, and others. If he [the patriarch] is a religious and spiritual leader, he should be much more cautious when making a statement. Someone who really loves his country has to be more responsible.”<sup>51</sup>

Bartholomew seems to have touched a raw nerve. For all its Alliance of Civilizations rhetoric, Erdoğan’s Islamist government has maintained a tight stranglehold on the country’s Christian institutions and blocked reforms that could lead to the growth of Christianity. True, the government has made some minor concessions to Christian institutions, including legislation that creates new but very limited possibilities for Christian foundations to recover some confiscated property,<sup>52</sup> but this was little more than a ploy to please the European Union and Washington and pales into insignificance by such hostile measures as the refusal to reopen the Halki Theological Seminary—the only institution in Turkey where Orthodox clergy could be trained—before Greece and Bulgaria improved the conditions of their Muslim minorities.<sup>53</sup> In other words, Ankara does not recognize the right of the Orthodox Church, or any other church for that matter, to run a theological seminary as a religious liberty but merely

46 *Asia News*, Feb. 9, 2006; *BBC News*, July 2, 2006.

47 *Voice of America*, Dec. 16, 2007.

48 Behnan Konutgan, “Christians Still Second-class Citizens under Turkish Secularism,” *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 1 (2009): 99-110; *Compass Direct News*, Dec. 4, 2009.

49 *60 Minutes*, CBS, Dec. 17, 2009.

50 *Today’s Zaman*, Dec. 22, 2009.

51 *Hürriyet* (Istanbul), Dec. 21, 2009.

52 Otmar Oehring, “Turkey: What Difference Does the Latest Foundations Law Make?” *Forum 18* (Oslo), Mar. 13, 2008.

53 *Hürriyet*, Dec. 21, 2009.

as an instrument of deal-making with Western powers for the purposes of enhancing the position of Islam.

Indeed, while Turkey's churches have long enjoyed freedom of worship, they have remained without legal status to this very day. Most of their work takes place in the legal framework of foundations that operate under the strict supervision of the General Directorate for Foundations<sup>54</sup> and other state institutions—including a secret national security department whose mandate is to control non-Muslim minorities.<sup>55</sup> They have, moreover, been entangled in labyrinthine negotiations and lengthy and expensive court cases for the return of confiscated property as well as permission to expand their engagement with society through the provision of education and other charitable activity. Churches have experienced grave setbacks in addition to the above mentioned murders, notably: The state conducted a four-year prosecution of two Turkish, evangelical Protestant converts from Islam on charges of “insulting Turkishness.” Although these charges were dropped for lack of evidence in October 2010, the converts were forced to pay fines of \$3,170 each or go to prison for seven months for “collecting information on citizens.”<sup>56</sup>

Ankara is taking legal action to confiscate lands that historically belonged to the Syriac Orthodox Monastery of Mor Gabriel (founded in



*During the twentieth century, Turkey's Christian population has dropped to the verge of extinction. The oldest Christians retain living memory of the state-sponsored mass deportations and massacres that culminated in the World War I Armenian genocide; the younger generation has experienced numerous acts of smaller scale and more discriminative violence. Here Orthodox faithful journey to the Black Sea Sumela Monastery, on August 15, 2010, after the government authorized prayer on the site in fulfillment of its pledges to the EU to expand minority rights.*

379 CE), whose bishop has encouraged persecuted Christian refugees to return to the area and rebuild their villages.<sup>57</sup>

Less than a year before his death, Padovese was especially disappointed by the rejection of his appeal for the status of the Church of St. Paul in Tarsus to be changed from a museum to a functioning place of regular worship. Not only had the pope made a personal appeal in this respect, but the archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Meisner, had asked Erdoğan for the return of the church “as a gesture of European cooperation.” The Turkish media reported that Ankara turned down these requests from the pope, Cardinal Meisner, and Bishop Padovese, notwithstanding the Catholic leaders' pledge to support the building of a mosque in Germany on condition that the Turkish government hand over the holy site to the church, together with permission for the con-

54 Orphan Kemal Cengiz, “Minority Foundations in Turkey: From Past To Future,” part 1, *Today's Zaman*, June 16, 2010, part 2, June 18, 2010.

55 “Religious Freedom in Turkey: Situation of Religious Minorities,” European Parliament, Directorate General External Policies of the Union, Policy Department External Policies, Luxembourg, Feb. 2008, p. 10.

56 Compass Direct News, Oct. 19, 2010.

57 *The Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 7, 2009.

struction of a center for pilgrims.<sup>58</sup>

The Islamist Erdoğan maintains continuity with his ultranationalist predecessors by refusing to respect the historic, ecumenical character of the Patriarchate of Constantinople—i.e., its titular ascendancy over the other patriarchates of the 300 million-strong Orthodox communion worldwide—and by requiring that the patriarch be a Turkish citizen by birth. Last October, the Turkish authorities allowed the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party to conduct Islamic prayers at the ancient Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Virgin at Ani.<sup>59</sup>

## RAGING CHRISTOPHOBIA

Padovese believed that there would be no end to the war against the church in Turkey until the public as a whole rejected the widely-accepted negative stereotypes of Christians as dangerous, subversive aliens within society, and he especially blamed the popular Turkish media for perpetuat-

ing a climate of hate. He highlighted as an example two cases involving the late Fr. Santoro. In the first, he was run out of a village near Trabzon by a group of children while local adults incited the youth with applause. The local newspaper reported the incident with the headline “Priest Sighted on the Coast Road,” as if his

presence there justified the mob action against him.<sup>60</sup> The second case followed Santoro’s murder when the daily *Vatan* alleged that the assassinated priest had been guilty of distributing money to young people to entice them to visit his church.<sup>61</sup>

Turkey’s Christians were especially alarmed by the mass popular hysteria whipped up by the 2006 blockbuster *Valley of the Wolves*, an action-packed adventure film set in post-Saddam Iraq. Reviewing the movie in *Spiegel*, Cem Özdemir—a member of the European Parliament of Turkish descent—decried its pandering to “racist sentiments” and its making “Christians and Jews appear as repugnant, conspiratorial holy warriors hoping to use blood-drenched swords to expand or reclaim the empire of their God.”<sup>62</sup>

Far from distancing themselves from the movie, ultra-nationalists and those at high levels in the Islamist camp praised it. “The film is absolutely magnificent . . . It is completely true to life,” exclaimed the parliament speaker (and later deputy prime minister) Bülent Arınç. Unconcerned about the damaging implications of the film’s negative images of Christians and Jews, Turkey’s President Gül refused to condemn it, saying it was no worse than many Hollywood films.<sup>63</sup> Erdoğan’s pious wife is reportedly a fan of the racist film.<sup>64</sup>

The Christophobia of the boulevard press and “Istanbulywood” can also be found in state documents. A national intelligence report, exposed by the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper in June 2005, revealed similar dangerous sentiments that are at odds with the principles espoused by Erdoğan at showcase Alliance of Civilizations events.

Titled “Reactionary Elements and Risks,” the report put Islamist terrorist groups on a par with Christian missionaries, who, it claimed, cover Turkey “like a spider’s web” and promote divisions in sensitive areas such as the Black Sea and eastern Anatolia. According to the report, the Christian evangelizers included Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, as well as other Christian and non-Christian groups such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Baha’is, with the latter concentrating on government officials, liberal businessmen, and performing and other artists.<sup>65</sup>

Echoing the tenor of the intelligence report,

**More than half of Turkish Muslims believe that Christians should not be allowed to express their religious views in public.**

58 Catholic News Service, Aug. 3, 2009; *Hürriyet*, Aug. 6, 2009.

59 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Oct. 1, 2010.

60 *Asia News*, Feb. 8, 2006.

61 *Ibid.*, Mar. 14, 2006.

62 *Spiegel Online* (Hamburg), Feb. 22, 2006.

63 *The Times* (London), Feb. 17, 2006.

64 *Deutsche Welle* (Bonn), Feb. 20, 2006.

65 Compass Direct News, June 22, 2005.

Turkish state minister Mehmet Aydın, who oversees the state's Directorate for Religious Affairs and who has served as an advisor to the National Security Council on religious issues, argued that the goal of Christian missionaries was to "break up the historical, religious, national, and cultural unity of the people of Turkey," adding that much evangelizing was "done in secret."<sup>66</sup> This claim was echoed by Erdoğan's interior minister Abdülkadir Asku, who told the Turkish parliament that Christian missionaries exploited religious and ethnic differences and natural disasters to win the hearts of poor people. Having highlighted the secret and subversive nature of this allegedly devious effort, he noted an embarrassingly small success rate: 338 converts to Christianity (and six converts to Judaism) out of 70 million Turks during the previous seven years.<sup>67</sup>

## DEEP PREJUDICE

When Erdoğan, as an Islamist opposition politician, announced in 1997 that "the minarets are our bayonets, the domes our helmets, the mosques our barracks and the faithful our army"—lines from a poem of by Ziya Gökalp, a nineteenth-century architect of Turkish nationalism based on a synthesis of Islam and Turkish ethnicity—he was not only making a statement about the role of Islam in promoting the interests of the Turkish state but also indicating the unity of religion and nationalism in Turkish perception. As historian Bernard Lewis explained, "One may speak of Christian Arabs—but a Christian Turk is an absurdity and a contradiction in terms. Even today, after thirty-five years of the secular republic, a non-Muslim in Turkey may be called a Turkish citizen, but never a Turk."<sup>68</sup>

Much has changed in Turkey over the past half century but not the fundamental character of Turkish nationalism. The Turkish nation still thinks

of itself in terms of Islam and Turkish ethnicity, leaving little scope for the full integration of non-Muslims into the life of the nation. Most Christians in Turkey belong to ethnic minorities. In the case of the Greeks and Armenians, they are identified in the public mind with historically hostile states. Roman Catholics and Protestants are linked with the Western powers that imposed humiliating conditions on the Ottoman Empire, notably the capitulations for the protection of non-Muslims and the sponsorship of Christian missionary activity.

Four academics of Turkish background have highlighted this Islamo-Turkish supremacism in a 2008 EU-commissioned report. They argued:

Despite laicism, the Turkish state has not been able to overcome the segregation of non-Muslim minorities and to integrate them into the nation as citizens with equal rights. While the Muslim Turks have been the "we," the non-Muslim minorities have been categorized as "the other"... they have been rather perceived as "domestic foreigners."

The authors make further observations about the prevailing concept of nationality in the context of the need for the state to end religious-based discrimination:

Notwithstanding the spirit of the founding text of the republic, the notion of Turkish citizenship was shaped according to the legal context that prevailed before the Tanzimat reforms of 1839. Although the new republic defined itself as a secular state, Sunni Islam has been functional in the nation-building process as a uniting, common cultural factor of the majority of Turkey's inhabitants. A person who is not a Muslim is usually referred to as a minority person or a Turkish citizen, but not a Turk. Turk designates an ethno-religious characteristic of a political community.<sup>69</sup>

**There is little scope for the full integration of non-Muslims into the life of the Turkish nation.**

<sup>66</sup> *Forum 18*, July 10, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> *Compass Direct News*, June 22, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 15.

The extent to which this cultural phenomenon still influences Turkish society at the grassroots level is evident from the findings of an EU-financed public opinion survey conducted in 2008 by two Turkish scholars as a part of the International Social Survey Program. It discovered that

- One third of Turkish Muslims would object to having a Christian as a neighbor.
- More than half believe that Christians should not be allowed to openly express their religious views in printed publication or in public meetings.
- More than half are opposed to Christians serving in the army, security services, police force, and political parties.

**There is a lack of political will to break from Turkey's tradition of Islamic and Turkish supremacism.**

- Just under half believe Christians should not be active in the provision of health services.<sup>70</sup>

The road from such views to outright discrimination and a heightened threat of violence is very short indeed.

## CONCLUSION

All available evidence points to the presence of important religious and political elements in the assassination of Bishop Padovese. If truth is to prevail over “pious lies”—as the archbishop of Smyrna desires—Ankara and the Vatican will have to cooperate to ensure a full and transparent en-

quiry into the bishop's death. The credibility of an enquiry will depend on open examination of the details of the murderous act itself as well as on the broader circumstances surrounding it, including other violent acts of Christophobia and the encouragement of xenophobic attitudes by the media, the entertainment industry, and the educational system. This means penetrating the netherworld of connections between the Turkish government, the deep state, and radical political groups, and examining the institutional sources of Turkish Christophobia.

Such a joint investigation, perhaps with the assistance of the deceased bishop's homeland, Italy, or with the United States as Turkey's most important ally, would be an expression of Christian-Muslim dialogue in practice. A government-sponsored campaign to combat Christophobia in Turkish society would demonstrate Turkey's commitment to bring to an end its own historic clash of civilizations and replace it with a strong, equitable alliance of civilizations.

In the months that have passed since Padovese's beheading, Erdoğan and his Islamist government have not taken such steps. This failure is a sign of a lack of political will to break from Turkey's historic tradition of Islamic and Turkish supremacism. Unless determination is publicly demonstrated, Turkey will entrench itself still deeper in an Ottoman-oriented Islam that is increasingly at odds with its Christian minorities, its former non-Muslim ally Israel, and the West.

The soft power of the modern papacy, with its appeals for religious liberty, can exercise a positive influence on Turkey and the rest of the Islamic world. But Islamic powers can see, as did Stalin, an absence of papal military divisions in the current clash of civilizations. Unless the thoroughly secularized nations of what was once Christendom provide firmer backbone, the Vatican will have little choice but to bend with the breeze.



69 “Religious Freedom in Turkey. Situation of Religious Minorities,” pp. 2, 10.

70 Compass Direct News, Dec. 4, 2009; *Hürriyet*, Nov. 17, 2009.