

Faith issues shape bid by Turkey to join EU: Turkish prime minister works hard to display tolerance

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Early last month, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan presided over the opening of a new synagogue, mosque and church—the last partitioned into Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox sections—in the Mediterranean resort area of Belek.

It was a rather flamboyant gesture on Erdogan's part, designed to convince skeptical Europeans that the secular but largely Muslim nation of nearly 70 million people practices a religious tolerance that makes it a worthy candidate for membership in the European Union. "Beyond its symbolic importance, this project gives the message of peace and brotherhood to the whole world," Erdogan said at the ceremony.

In Brussels on December 17, after two days of tough negotiating, European Union heads of government gave Turkey the official green light for consideration, but the membership process could take years to complete. Two days before in Strasbourg, France, the European Parliament voted 407-262, with 29 abstentions, to urge EU leaders to begin the membership talks.

A key issue for the leaders, and many of their constituents, is the degree to which Turkey is ready to conform to religious freedom standards as they exist in Europe.

Erdogan, who is described as a devout Muslim, is anxious that Turkey cast its future with a secularized but historically Christian Europe. And Turkey has undertaken a host of human rights reforms, including abolishing the death penalty and acting to rein in torture, along with political and economic measures.

But the long scars of history and the impact of contemporary events—including the precarious and fragile situation of the Istanbul-based Orthodox Patriarchate, the headquarters of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos I, and the killing in November of

filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, allegedly by a Muslim militant—threaten the effort.

On December 13, for example, the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches addressed what they called “new pressures and difficulties being brought upon the Ecumenical Patriarchate.” A letter, signed by Samuel Kobia, WCC general secretary, and Keith Clements, general secretary of the CEC, said: “We are pained to read of the public criticisms and attacks being made upon yourself and upon the Christian community in Turkey. Such hostility must be very hard to bear, with the added sense of isolation that it brings.”

The letter was apparently prompted by the furor caused in Turkey early last month when the U.S. Embassy, in an invitation to a reception, used Bartholomeos’s title of Ecumenical Patriarch. The Turkish government does not recognize an international role for Bartholomeos, arguing that the Orthodox leader is merely the spiritual head of Istanbul’s Orthodox community of 3,000.

An angry Erdogan ordered public officials not to attend the reception and later, in a television interview, said, “We find it wrong that although none of our citizens has such a title, invitations are issued in this form.”

For his part, Bartholomeos, knowing that Europe is closely watching events in Turkey, has been pressing the government for permission to reopen a theology school that was closed by the government in 1971, when the secular government ended all religiously based education.

Even as Erdogan was launching the new houses of worship complex in Belek, France’s Catholic bishops were cautioning their government on the Turkish bid, urging President Jacques Chirac to make full respect for religious freedom a precondition for opening EU membership talks.

“Certain basic rights, especially religious freedom, are not fully respected in Turkey, despite the reforms undertaken,” said a statement issued by Bishop Jean-Pierre Ricard, head of the French bishops conference. The bishops urged judicial recognition of minority religions, including property ownership and the right to build new churches and make repairs on existing structures, a right often denied.

The slaying of Van Gogh in the Netherlands on November 2 has inflamed anti-Muslim sentiment among Europeans. Typical of such views was that of French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal Europe* in September wondered “to what extent can today’s and tomorrow’s governments

make Turkish society embrace Europe's human rights values. Do we want the river of Islam to enter the riverbed of [European] secularism?" he asked. -*David Anderson*, *Religion News Service*