

Interview with Mesrop II, Armenian patriarch of Istanbul

# Don't close that door

The head of the most numerous Christian minority in the Anatolian peninsula explains why it is important that Turkey join the European Union, and declares himself hopeful about the country's new political direction

by Gianni Valente

Certain zealous custodians of the "Christian roots" of Europe have reacted very badly to the notion that the European Union should open the door to Turkey after the recent elections conferred leadership of the country on a party of Islamic tendency, however moderate. But the "Turkish cause" in Europe has found an exceptional spokesman in the pragmatic head of the most numerous Christian minority in Turkey. Mesrop II. In November and December the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul went tirelessly round the European capitals to inform politicians and churchmen of the advantages of extending the Community's frontier beyond the Bosphorus. A possibility looked on with favour by all the Christian minorities in Turkey.

Mesrop II Mutafyan is 46 years old and the spiritual head of 80,000 Armenian Turks. Most recent titular of a see ele-



Above, the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul Mesrop II; right, Tayyip Erdogan with the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, and the commissioner for the enlarging of the EU, Günter Verheugen

vated to patriarchal rank in 1461. In sustaining Turkish fitness to join Europe he has not hesitated to put himself at risk: his frequent criticism of the Ankara government in defence of the rights of religious minorities in Turkey keep him form any suspicion of "collaboration" with the government. And he hopes that the Turkish future will see the re-establishment of what he describes as «the tradition of tolerant co-existence of the Ottoman Empire, when the Sultan invited the Armenian and Greek-Orthodox patriarchs and the Chief Rabbi to Ramadan festivities. Then

everything finished, there was a surge of nationalism that brought deportation and devastation in its wake. But the nationalists had all studied in Europe...».

**Your Beatitude, how did your European tour go?**

MESROP II: It was a "courtesy and goodwill" tour. I visited Copenhagen, Paris, Bruxelles, London and Rome. I met political representatives, such as the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, and various ministers responsible for the political communities of their respective countries. And then I visited bishops and heads of local Churches. In Rome, on 9 December, I was received in audience by John Paul II and I had a meeting with Monsignor Jean Louis Tauran.

**What was the purpose of your trip?**

MESROP II: There have been recent consultations involving the heads of the various Christian communities, of the Jewish community, and of their organisations





Left, a view of Istanbul;  
below, highschool girls in the library



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in Turkey. I came to express the concerns and wishes of the religious minorities in Turkey also on their behalf, to explain why it's important for us that Turkey be admitted to the European Union. It's our joint impression that admission would have positive effects on concrete aspects of the daily life of those belonging to religious minorities. Over recent years things have been slowly improving from

this point of view. Before it was a complicated business even to get a permit to restore a church. Now the new leaders have promised to continue along that road, to reform the regulations that rule the lives of religious minorities so as to make them less restrictive.

**How did your meetings in the Vatican go?**

MESROP II: The Pope was full of affection. Recalling his visit to our country, he renewed his apostolic benediction of Turkey. Monsignor Tauran again said that the Church Catholic in Turkey, like the other ecclesial communities, has its demands, and the Holy See is waiting with interest of see the improvements in the criteria that regulate the life of the religious minorities take hold. But he assured me that the Holy See has no objection in any case to Turkey's joining the European Union.

**What concerns did you express to the people you spoke with in Europe?**

MESROP II: Unfortunately in the last months certain conservative circles have brought up the issue of religion, claiming that Turkey should be kept out of Europe for religious considerations. Quite off the point. The decision is a political decision. Let them make take issue on economic, political, social matters, but leave religion out of it.

**Why do you think the eventual reservations of a religious sort are incongruous?**

MESROP II: Turkey is a secular state. In certain aspects more lay and secular than many European countries, even than France. All civil co-existence is regulated by European standards, including

those derived from the so-called Christian roots of European civilisation. Holidays and Sundays. We follow the western calendar and use the Roman alphabet in writing. When Kemal Ataturk founded the nation, he adopted for our legal system the civil code developed in Switzerland. Religious life is also regulated by secular laws. We are not subject to legislators who have the sacred texts of any religion as their point of reference.

**But the alarmists say that the Islamics won that oint also in the last elections.**

MESROP II: The small party of the extremist Islamics did not get the minimum 10% of the vote required. The Party of Justice and Development that won the elections is a new political formation, created from an amalgamation of two groupings: the moderate Islamics and a good slice of the membership of the Party of the Motherland, close to President Ozal. It's a centre-right party, and having a large majority will ensure governability for the country, till now unstable because of the fragility of coalition governments. In the concrete business of government they will probably take a moderate line.

**No one will try to introduce the Sharia as the law of the state?**

MESROP II: I have met Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the head of the party, and also Abdullah Gul, possibly the new prime minister. They were very cordial. We discussed minority rights, and they as-

## TURKEY

*Many European countries have a past of colonial exploitation that doesn't look very Christian. The reference to the Christian roots of Europe in the future European Charter is still under discussion and challenged by many. And now, just to close the door on Turkey for political and economic motives, some people are suddenly feeling a new attachment to the alleged Christian "purity" of Europe. Reneging on the welcoming of the stranger that Jesus himself teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan*

sured me that they will continue the reforms to create openness and guarantee equal opportunity for all groups. There is a moderate form of Islam that takes up the tradition of tolerance and religious co-existence that was for a long time the hallmark of the Ottoman empire. In the religious sphere they aim only to ensure Islamic traditions are allowed legitimate public expression at family and community level. They want to loosen the grip of the rigid secularity of the state that makes the life of the religious minorities burdensome as well. That would suit us.

**At your European meetings did anyone raise objections to your argument?**

MESROP II: No. Everyone agreed that Turkey occupies a



Mesrop II con Tayyip Erdogan

strategic position crucial to European interests. That the European Union will be stronger if it becomes a confederation of countries of different colours and experiences. And even those who insist on the Judeo-Christian roots of Europe have to recognise that there is no way of defining the Continent as a Christian club. I find this enlisting of religious arguments so as to be able to close the door on Turkey's face very hypocritical and dangerous.

**To what are you referring?**

MESROP II: Many European countries have a past of colonial exploitation that doesn't look very Christian. The reference to the Christian roots of Europe in the future European Charter is still under discussion and challenged by many. And now, just to close the door on Turkey for political and economic motives, some people are suddenly feeling a new attachment to the alleged Christian "purity" of Europe. Reneging on the welcoming of the stranger that Jesus himself teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan. And all this after the decades in which all the European Churches spent money and resources on conferences and initiatives for inter-religious dialogue ...

**Why is this exclusion in the name of Christianity also dangerous?**

MESROP II: If after forty years of half-promises Europe shuts the door on Turkey on the pretext of religion, I don't think the Turkish government will change its attitude to us, but hostile feelings towards the Christian minorities are bound to arise in the general public.

**It's surprising that you side with Turkey with such convic-**

**tion. For decades relations between the Armenians and Turkey have been cursed by the memory of the Armenian genocide fomented by the "Young Turks" in 1915...**

MESROP II: The Armenian Church in Turkey is interested in Turkish-Armenian dialogue for obvious reasons. Other Armenian communities, especially if under pressure from politicians of the Republic of Armenia and of the diaspora, make an admission of the Armenian genocide committed by the government of Ankara a precondition for any dialogue with the Turks. They insist on the memory, that say it that it has to be remembered to prevent the horror happening again. As a churchman my task isn't that of making historical judgements but of healing wounds, rather than rubbing salt in them. In Turkey, in 1915, something terrible happened, the mere memory of which is enough to drive one mad. Whether one calls it genocide, extermination or something else, it doesn't change the reality of what happened. But the attitude of those who says that before allowing any contact with them, the Turks they must first admit the genocide seems to me too drastic. There is a danger of being stifled under the weight of the past. Whereas if one chooses the way of co-existence, of mutual opening, in time the distrust will melt away. The younger generations will also manage to speak of the past, to acknowledge and confess the sins of their fathers, to cleanse the memory. And without becoming pawns in larger games played by someone else.

**A problem very much felt by the Christian minorities, especially by the Greek-Or-**

L'entrata della Turchia in Europa potrebbe favorire il riconoscimento giuridico della Chiesa cattolica?

## Il moderato ottimismo dei cattolici

La scatola della Turchia di domani è ancora chiusa. Ci vorrà tempo per verificare se la svolta islamica moderata ha portato al potere un partito «laico, riformista e modernizzatore», come ripetono i leader dell'Akp, o se la loro vittoria nasconde un progetto sofisticato e complessivo di egemonia islamica sulla società turca. Durante tutta la campagna elettorale, gli avversari laici di Erdogan e compagni hanno accusato la leadership della nuova formazione di fare "takkiyye", cioè di praticare l'antica prescrizione islamica della dissimulazione dei propri obiettivi reali, quando si è in condizioni di debolezza e di necessità.

Ci si può fidare? Mentre in Europa qualche appassionato dello scontro di civiltà agita lo spettro dell'invasione turca pescando in atavici incubi dell'immaginario occidentale, le piccole comunità cristiane presenti a Istanbul e sparse nella penisola anatolica auspicano che l'Unione europea mostri segnali di apertura verso Ankara che bussa alla porta. E i capi delle Chiese cristiane di Turchia non mostrano chiusure pregiudiziali neanche verso la matrice islamico-moderata del Partito che ha vinto le elezioni. Anzi. Louis Pelâtre, vescovo cattolico alla guida del vicariato apostolico di Istanbul, con alcuni dirigenti dell'Akp ha una certa familiarità che risale a quando il capo del partito, Erdogan, era sindaco della città sul Bosforo, e anche le municipalità e gli organismi di quartiere erano in mano a militanti del suo gruppo politico. «Solo loro», dice a *30Giorni*, «ci hanno fatto visita prima delle ultime elezioni. Hanno garantito che la loro linea politica favorirà la vita di tutte le comunità di credenti. Mi hanno invitato anche ai festeggiamenti per la fine del Ramadan insieme ai capi della comunità ebraica e al capo del Dipartimento Affari religiosi». Perfino l'arcivescovo di Smirne Giuseppe Bernardini, che nell'ottobre 1999, nel suo intervento al sinodo dei vescovi, aveva denunciato il «chiaro programma di espansione e di riconquista» musulmana attuato dall'islam fondamentalista, non pare allarmato della svolta politica della Turchia: «È presto per fare previsioni, ma sono moderatamente ottimista, non credo che le cose peggioreranno. Forse, l'atteggiamento aperto verso i temi religiosi dei nuovi dirigenti li aiuterà a capire e ad affrontare meglio certe esigenze».

Nei dossier che rinfacciano alla Turchia la distanza dagli standard europei di garanzia dei diritti civili, vengono citati spesso gli impedimenti che gravano sulla vita delle minoranze cristiane locali. Le difficoltà discendono soprattutto dal mix di rigido controllo statale sulla sfera religiosa – eredità del laicismo "mistico" della rivoluzione kemalista – e di pulsioni xenofobe che percorrono i gruppi dell'ultradestra nazionalista, disposti anche a servirsi del richiamo islamico come elemento catalizzatore della purezza identitaria nazionale. Negli ultimi tempi alcuni casi controversi hanno coinvolto persone e istituzioni cattoliche. All'inizio di febbraio è stato fatto chiudere a Mersin un centro per lo studio delle lingue animato dai frati cappuccini, accusati di usare l'iniziativa come copertura per svolgere attività catechetiche e di formazione cristiana fuori dagli spazi consentiti. Mentre a metà ottobre, una riunione di vescovi europei sul tema delle migrazioni organizzata a Smirne dal Consiglio delle Conferenze episcopali europee, che secondo programma avrebbe dovuto svolgersi nei locali dell'arcivescovado, si è "trasferita" in un hotel su richiesta delle autorità locali, che hanno inoltre chiesto alla polizia di essere presenti per sorvegliare i lavori. Il tutto per non contravvenire al cavillo legislativo che vieta di tenere in luoghi di culto adunanze che non abbiano carattere religioso.

In questa situazione, la Chiesa cattolica di Turchia ha tenuto dal 5 al 7 dicembre la sua prima "assemblea sinodale". Duecento partecipanti, compresi tutti i vescovi e i rappresentanti delle comunità di diverso rito (latino, caldeo, armeno, siro), si sono incontrati a Istanbul presso la chiesa di Santo Stefano per pregare e raccontarsi le esperienze di testimonianza fiorite senza troppo rumore in tante regioni della penisola anatolica. Il raduno di tutte le componenti ecclesiali è stato preceduto da una riunione dei vescovi, che hanno affrontato i problemi giuridici e normativi che pesano sulle istituzioni cattoliche nel rapporto con l'ordinamento civile. Una congerie di difficoltà e di impacci che vengono fatti risalire a una carenza di fondo: il mancato riconoscimento di uno status giuridico per la Chiesa cattolica. Sarà questa l'istanza che nei prossimi anni i vescovi cattolici porteranno davanti alla nuova dirigenza turca. È nella speranza che sia favorito questo passo che auspicano con tanta sollecitudine un futuro europeo per la Turchia.

**thodox Church, is that of being allowed to run schools of theology and training institutions in autonomous fashion. The school of theology on the island of Halki, where Bartholomew I studied, has been closed for years...**

MESROP II: We also discussed that with the new leaders. They seem ready to find a solution, provided the schools of theology come within the framework of national education in some way. My brethren who head the other

Christian Churches should also be sympathetic to this need for state control. If Turkey were to allow the creation of totally autonomous centres for theology, it would soon have to recognise the same right to all the Islamic sects. We have seen what an excrescence of fundamentalist centres there has been in the heart of the West, in England for example. In Turkey the phenomenon would be on an even more massive scale.

**The storm clouds are thickening over the East. What do**

**the Christians of Turkey think of a pre-emptive war on Iraq?**

MESROP II: I appreciated the messages sent by the Pope and of Bush for Ramadan. They rid the field of the ambiguities of those who insist the conflict is between civilisations of religious mould. International relations are determined by economic, political, strategic interests. When cultural or religious pretexts are dragged in they almost always serve as ideological cover for the manipulation of naive minds. □