

Cultural Values : Identity and Religion

Prof. Dr. Emel DOĞRAMACI

- * What is identity?
- * What is religion?
- * What is culture? What are its values?

Before advancing concrete responses to these queries, one may venture saying that regardless of nature, scope and manner of each of the above questions, all of them combined compose the essence, the core of a "nation". This prompts us to ask immediately:

- * What is a nation?
- * What makes a nation?

These are two questions that probably never will be answered in any satisfactory and definitive manner. Nevertheless, we can all recognize a nation when we see one, even though we cannot pinpoint its special characteristics or date its appearance in the history of mankind. Yet, a typical definition of a nation is "A people or a race distinguished by community of descent, language, history, or political institutions." (Oxford Pocket). This stresses that something is shared and, indeed, probably has been shared from a time way back in history. Still, as a definition this is rather loose and indefinite. The dictionary, however, has further help to offer for there is an etymological connection, via the Latin, between the words 'nation', 'nature', 'natural', 'nascent', and 'natal';

* Professor, Dean, Faculty of Letters, Hacettepe University.

and this word family can be seen as throwing an interesting light on the word "nation". It offers for our consideration the idea that a nation is a "natural" phenomenon; that it comes into being from hidden beginnings and by secret processes; that it is not a final state but a continuity of development; that it has its own being and its own life force; that it has an order and a form beyond the comprehension of man.

This seems to me to suggest a suitable mood against which one can start to consider the cultural values of a nation, this present case being the Turkish nation.

The cultural values of a nation must surely reflect the process by which that nation has come into being and has become what it is. Since the process is a continuing one, one can also imagine it moving on into the future. Presently, it is sufficient to briefly look back into history and consider a few, key situations that have contributed towards making the Turkish nation what she is, and Turkey's cultural values what they are.

The major, obvious start of the process is the emigration, in the 10th Century, of spreading from the region that is now Iran across into Syria. Then, as their power there began to wane, they began to attack and conquer large parts of Byzantine Asia minor, better known as Anatolia. It was here that these Turkish tribes or Turkomans who had for long been nomadic, finally began to settle. Theirs, then, is the basic race.

An outstanding characteristic of this ancient Turkish race in pre-Islam times, is the position accorded to women. At this period men and women enjoyed equal rights and equal obligations. The Turkish law then required that the responsibility of administration be evolved equally on the two sexes. Historians and story tellers alike give vivid pictures of the equality that prevailed:

"In the Turkish legend, God is personified as omnipotent and sympathizing and as inspired by Ak Ana (White Mother) to create the universe. Later, in the Orhun inscriptions (8th Century) Turkish women are held in esteem, and reference is made to the social and political activities of the Oguz princess.

"In the Orhun inscriptions the following phases always went together: 'The Sovereign who continues the State' and 'The

Queen who knows the State'. An order beginning with the words 'The King Orders...' was not binding, it had to begin with 'The King and The Queen Order...'. Foreign diplomatic envoys were not ushered in if the King was alone. They were introduced to the royal couple with the King standing on the right. Women performed the same services as men: in time of war, in political meetings, and in social activities women always stood beside their husbands. Guardianship in the family was not reserved for the father alone, the mother also participated. A widow was the only guardian of her young children and the sole manager of her house. The patriarchal system was unknown to the old Turkish people. Their family existence was based on a special system like the 'paternal system' of the old Germans, that is, a system where mother and father had equal responsibility for the family.

"Girls used to engage in duels with men who wished to marry them and would not marry any man defeated in such a contest. This custom proves that women were well trained in the art of combat and could fight competently with men."¹

When the Turkish race embraced the Moslem religion a contrary influence began to set in. This was not, in any way due to the teaching of Mohammed himself. Quite the contrary, in fact, for, Mohammed put the case for women quite distinctly in the following words: "Women is the equal of man and the other half of the society", and "He who respects his wife's rights is a good Muslim", and again, "Paradise lies under the feet of mothers." But the Moslem religion began to come under the influence of the countries that had adopted it, and in particular the Persian influence with its patriarchal system and a long tradition of withholding rights from women. The veil and the harem, for instance, were Persian and Byzantine traditions.

The Persians accepted Islam before the Turkish people did and their influence on Islam and on the Islamic world at large, has been both deep rooted and powerful:

The Seljuk Turks began to arrive in Anatolia (now Turkey), as already stated above, during the 10th Century. They now gave up

1 Emel Dogramaci, *Status of Women in Turkey*, METEKSAN Co., Inc., Ankara, September 1989, pp. 1 - 2.

their nomadic way of life and began to make permanent settlements. They brought Islam with them, but their own customs and traditions were still strong. Both men and women were equally active in the various affairs of life, at least until the emergence of the Ottoman State at the end of the 13th Century. For with the Ottoman Empire which spread east and west from Anatolia, the Islamic world was one and united. Thus, from the 14th Century and on into the early decades of the 20th Century, Turkey was outwardly not so very different from her Islamic neighbours:

"The Turkish family of the Ottoman period had the characteristics of a patriarchal family system with the man as its sole head. The family consisted of grandparents, wife, children's spouses, grandchildren and some close relatives. They were required to accept the absolute authority of the head of the family. In matters of inheritance women always received half that of men, and polygamy began to be practiced.

"Architecture reflected the Ottoman way of life and houses were built in two sections, namely the Harem and the Selamlık. The only allowed into the harem were the husband and very close relatives of the women who, by Islamic law, they could not marry, such as uncles and brothers. Thus Turkish women of the Ottoman era, especially in the cities, spent their lives in the complete seclusion of the harem. Their occupation consisted mainly of doing or supervising the housework, looking after the children or embroidering. Their social life was restricted to family gatherings." ²

Clearly, however, a set up of this nature did not suit the Turkish temperament and a 'Reorganization' or 'Westernization Movement' began as early as the end of the 18th Century. In fact history dates the movement from the start of the rule of Selim III in 1789, that is the date of the storming of the Bastille and the start of the French Revolution; in other words, an age in which grievances were being aired and reforms demanded.

To start with the Westernization Movement in Turkey affected "external matters only, modifying the machinery of the

² Emel Dogramaci. *Status of Women in Turkey*, METEKSAN Co., Inc., Ankara, September 1989, p. 5.

administration and revolutionizing titles and costumes as a result of political and commercial relations and greater facilities of communication with Western States. Gradually its influence penetrated the thick walls of the Sultan's palaces, the 'konaks' and 'yalis' of all classes. European fashions of dressing, manners and customs received a warm welcome, especially from Turkish women, who, having for centuries lived modestly between the four walls of their houses, began to imitate the European women in their outlook and ways. This imitation of the West had first started among men and only later affected the world of women in harems. Presently the Tanzimat leaders began to recognize that to save the Empire from its external foes further reforms had to be introduced in the military organization, judicial systems, economic structure and methods of education.³ The Movement now seemed to move forward on the strength of its own impetus, and following Turkey's War of Independence (1919 - 1923) and the establishment of the Republic by Ataturk, Turkey's commitment with the Western world was formalized.

Before coming to that, however, it will be useful to consider briefly the nature and character of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire stretched across a vast area and comprised peoples of various races and religions. The Empire was far from being homogenous, and therefore it is difficult to generalize about it. But nevertheless a characteristic pattern does emerge, and that is the pattern of minimal change. The Turkish Empire was typically nominal and administrative. Following the conquest, an administrative class was sent to the conquered regions but changes were rarely introduced into the social, cultural or economic structure of any given area. As a result, the various races within the boundaries of the Empire, whether they were Christians, Jews or Muslims, continued to live their own lives according to their own customs and traditions. Obviously much would depend on the character of the individual administrator, and upon the character of the people in the various regions. But I would like here to quote from Jean Thevenot, a Frenchman who travelled widely in the Ottoman Empire in the period 1655-56. In the following he is describing the situation or

³ Emel Dogramaci. *Status of Women in Turkey*, METEKSAN Co., Inc., Ankara, September 1969, p.6.

the way of life on the Island of Chios, now a Greek Island, but situated close to the Aegean coast of Turkey, off Izmir. He wrote:

"This is one of the islands which preserved its freedom despite the Turkish rule. The inhabitants live as they please; they worship freely; are subject to Turkish rule on the surface only; they pay their taxes; they are never tortured and nothing has ever been imposed on them by force. Almost all people in Chios are Christians, there are very few Turks. Most of these Christians are Catholics; some are attached to the Orthodox church. All these Italians and Greeks have adopted a Genoese way of life, as a reminder of the days when Genoese people ruled the country. There are many families in the island who are said to descend from the Justinian dynasty; these people from the nobility keep themselves aloof from the tradesmen. Chios people are dressed like Genoese. They are very ugly; they are tall of stature and their appearance is frightening; they are very arrogant. Like everybody else they sometimes go to the town or market place to buy what they need and they often carry their own loads. They do not like French people, they adore Spanish people and prefer Turkish rule to that of Christians. (J. Thevenot, p. 227)."⁴ Here the rather personal comments on the inhabitants of the island throw, I think, much light on the author himself, showing an active observer and a man with a high degree of confidence in his own judgement together with a considerable degree of objectivity.

Earlier Thevenot had described the religious life in the principal city of the island. From the following we can see that Christianity was not merely tolerated but was actually allowed to flourish and display itself in all its splendour. Here he begins by describing the activities of the Capuchins, that is the Franciscan friars there who had:

"magnificent houses and churches in the city. Their houses were built in an elaborate way: they had large garden but no water. These benevolent priests taught social sciences and Christianity to children who came to be trained there. Jesuits, too, had a church and a college in the city; all Jesuits living in Chios were natives

4. Emel Dogramaci. "An Example of Muslim and Christian Co-Existence from a Historical Perspective", Proceedings of the 4th Muslim - Christian Consultation, Amman, Jordan, November, 1989, pp. 43-44.

and they were composed of three *tarikats* - 'communities.' Moreover, Jacobean and Cordelians also lived in this city and they had beautiful churches. In the villages there were churches of Italian Catholics attached either to the bishop or to these pious people. In fact, all over the island there were numerous churches, 500 of them belonged to Greeks and more than thirty to Italians. All of them functioned well and all kinds of religious ceremonies could be performed here as in the main centres of Christianity. Turks allowed everyone liberty of worship and respected their religious beliefs. The religious ceremony was held publicly and the wine and bread ceremony of the Holy Sacrament was carried without interference from the Turks through the streets of the city; the sculpture of Jesus Christ was also carried with a lantern before the procession.

"The people in the city, as was the case all over the island, were free to organize their own affairs (except perhaps on some very important issues) under the Ottoman rule and in fact the city was governed by the Christians themselves. To make them attentive to municipal affairs one half of the administrators were elected from among the Greek community and the other half from among the Italians (J. Thevenot; pp. 220 - 22)." ⁵

From the period of the Ottoman Empire itself, and from the above account of it, several important and characteristic qualities emerge. Of first importance among these is the principle of tolerance, both religious tolerance and tolerance as regards customs, ceremonies and modes of life. The words of the religious 13th Century Turkish mystic poet Mevlana - "come, whoever you are, come" are the most quoted in illustration of religious tolerance, but other instances abound. Of like importance is the concept that the State and the Religion are separate entities. This, it should be stressed, is not typical of Islam in general. The term "Islam" actually means not simply the religion of Mohammedism but the countries that accept this belief and are governed accordingly. The third point of importance is that during this period the Turkish people went West, grew familiar with western manners, customs and beliefs, and lived alongside them

5. Emel Dogramaci "An Example of Muslim and Christian Co- Existence from a Historical Perspective", Proceedings of the 4 th Muslim - Christian Consultation, Amman, Jordan, November, 1989, pp. 42 - 43.

comfortably. These points are important because they furnished suitable conditions for the reforms of Ataturk following the Turkish War of Independence.

By definition, the leader leads, whereas the dictator dictates. The leader takes the people where they want to go; he may have to bully them and drive them; but he will certainly have to gain their confidence and inspire them. The goal is shared from the beginning. The genius of Ataturk was the genius of the great leader in that he sensed what was needed, knew what the people he was leading really wanted long before they could articulate it for themselves, and had the force and personality and courage to lead them there.

The Republic of Turkey was from the start a secular state which put her in a position of startling contrast with the Arab world, and this fundamental difference was rapidly reflected in numerous practical ways that were also of symbolic significance and further strengthened Turkey's westernization process. Among other things, the Arabic script was replaced by the Latin alphabet; the Fez, the last relic of male Muslim attire, was replaced by the hat, and for women the veil was banned and European style of dress encouraged to reflect the idea that the status of women in Turkey resembled that of women throughout Europe. Polygamy was prohibited, marriage and divorce became matters of court, and in matter of inheritance women received equally with men and finally in 1934 they were entitled to all legislative rights.

What I have been trying to suggest is that there is some intangible perhaps, but nonetheless powerful, relationship between what we are, what happens to us and what we become. Whether we consider the individual or the nation, what happens to that is what we *allow* to happen to us, is in some way connected with ourselves; our destiny is at least in part in our own hands, if not in the immediate present, at least in the long run.

So now, I want, in the light of this brief history of the Turkish people, to stress again some of the cultural values of the nation.

Some of the main cultural values have already been suggested. Perhaps first among them comes tolerance, and in close association with tolerance adaptability and democracy. We see

these qualities throughout the history of the Turkish people and Ataturk counted on them when he introduced the reforms which accompanied the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey. But it should also be pointed out that another quality is tenacity. There is no great break or change in the character of the people as one condition or stage evolves into another; the process that can be seen as a continuous one, but there is also a fundamental that remains unchanged. The Turkish race, it seems will tolerate other ways, can adapt and live comfortably with them, and yet stay, at core, Turkish. There are so many instances of this phenomenon in the different countries of Europe. In the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, to take three compelling examples, the Turkish minority has remained Turkish. The third, even the fourth, generation is now growing up but they continue to speak Turkish, to give their children Turkish names and to regard Turkey as the Motherland. Another quality can be seen as fostering this condition, and that is the importance given to family, including the extended family and the very great importance and respect afforded to the mother.

Finally, I would like to say something about the general attitude of Turkish people towards life at large. Here in particular I suppose a subjective judgement is bound to creep in but I do feel one can say that Turkish people are basically not materialistic though during the last two decades a materialistic surface crust has crept into the towns and cities, and they have great capacity for enjoyment.

They are a very sociable people and extremely hospitable and generous, and the community spirit is strong. To give just one example, the village wedding is for those not familiar with such an event, an overwhelming affair. A village wedding lasts for three or four days, and the whole village is involved. There is music, dancing and singing; huge quantities of food are prepared and eaten and young and old alike turn out in their best clothes (always brightly coloured) and usually a startling display of gold too, often in the form of gold coins sewn to the women's head-dresses and chests. A death is no less an affair of the community; the bereaved are never left on their own and for a period of several days neighbours will send in plates of food so that the family and

the visitors can be fed. From the point of view of the State, social welfare in Turkey admittedly lags way behind the standards of the West, but somehow help is given where help is needed. In a class of university students, for instance, if it is discovered that one of them is in need the others will club together and help look after him - not just once but regularly each month. In many primary schools the mothers of each class will often set going a system whereby each in turn prepares a mid-morning -break snack for all the children in the class - this is to avoid disparity as to what each child eats and the poor families are never asked to join in so their children get something good to eat at least once - a - day with nothing to do in return.

I think now we have moved into the "identity" aspect of our topic. The concept of identity is not an easy one to define. In fact it has been suggested that trying to define it one should be content to understand identity as the response to the question "Who are you?" The sense of identity or self-image of each person being different this question will bring forward not only different responses but different types of responses, and different kinds of material will be put forward by way of illustration. The identity of the individual person, moreover, is further complicated by his relationship with society at large and his identification with a group as for instance an ethnic community, a religion, a political party.

As pointed above, Turkey is a secular state and religion stands separate and subordinate. In Turkey, Islam takes on a Turkish character. For instance the time when the fast is broken each evening in the month of Ramadan depends upon the time when the sun sets; the time lag between east and west Turkey is considerable but it is felt that the whole of the country should behave like one large family and break the fast at one and almost the same time and so a middle -way time is selected and followed. According to Islam, the month of Ramadan begins when the "new moon" is first seen immediately after the end of the preceding month. In Turkey, however, this is determined by official authorities as they prepare the official calendar for the following year.

I am suggesting then that for Turkish people it is the state, the nationality that is of first importance in the identity; religion is

important, but its public character is centred within the family, within the locality, within the country; its private character rests within the individual himself. For the Muslim there is no intermediary between man and God and there is no compulsion put upon the individual to go to the mosque to pray - the prayer is considered neither more nor less effective on account of the place in which it is uttered.

Having said so much I would like to close by suggesting just how very important religion and prayer is in the ordinary, everyday life of the people of Turkey, whether or not they regard themselves as religious. When we leave someone our "goodbye" is "May God stay with you", when the mother feeds her child she prays "In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful." The term "Insallah" more or less equates with the English "If God is willing" but the average person uses it perhaps 20 times a day; and the term "Masallah" equates with "wonderful" plus "touch wood" or "May God grant it stay wonderful". Religion is thus a part of the way of life, a part of the culture, a part of the identity of the people. It is basic, it gives confidence; it is rarely examined, it is tolerant and all embracing. Above all, it is typically, characteristically Turkish!