

Mr. Erdogan! How Well Read Is He? By Bishop George Khodr

Two sentences stopped me in the speech which the Premier of Turkey, Rajab Tayyeb Erdogan, addressed the Foreign Ministers of the Arab World in Cairo with; the first is “Turkey and the Arabs share the same faith, culture and values.” The Creed referred to here is undisputedly Islam. His words indicate that the Premier does not recognize the presence, in this part of the world, of, at least, twelve million Arab Christians who do not expect to have their national identity be affirmed by a foreigner (Erdogan). In regard to culture, the language that has had a significant impact on the Anatolian language is Farsi. After Mehmet the Conqueror, Constantinople became a pole of attraction for poets of the Arabs and the Persians until the entrenchment of modern Turkish. But in general, and around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was no Arab impact left that has not been affected by the Persian influence.

With the emergence of organizations in the Nineteenth Century, Turkey swayed towards the West. And then the Turks became more closed and fanatic with the War of Independence and the Declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923 until the revolutionary Nazim Hikmet (1902-1963) came to power. After that, the horizons were widened with the translations and the trend towards communal and political thought. What survives now in Turkish literature has no connection to Arabism. But in regard to the values that Mr. Erdogan refers to as “in common” between us and them, some are ancient and some are modern. There is no doubt that what is ancient does not put pressure on us not to make us eager for modernity (which we are) and moreover, we have tasted much of Europe, while the Turks are strongly attached to what is ancient and Europe is for them a hope for political fusion thus complementing the NATO which brings both Turkey and Europe together making Turkey the stronger one in the regions of the Arabs in the hope of an Ottoman-like situation in which the Arabs are only a “small” ally.

But what is more frightful than what he previously said is his statement: “There came in the history of Turkey a young man who put an end to a “black” culture and inaugurated an modern-ancient culture when he conquered Constantinople; and that man is Mohammad (Mehmet) the Conqueror. I do not argue the greatness of the Turkish culture and its ancience, but I have a question for Mr. Erdogan which is not supposed to shock him. Has he read the Byzantine culture which he calls “black”? The Turks are a strong military people who, with the help of the Western fleets that conspired along with them, were able to overcome the greatest civilization in the year 1453. Yet how is it that Mr. Erdogan wants to convince us that the civilization which is whole and integrated in all its elements, the civilization that is creative, the civilization the spirituality of which

reaches the heavens, was BLACK. How can he not see that the Renaissance of Europe emerged only when the brain drain to the West (from Byzantium to western Europe) took place? Such brain drain from which Greek thought was adopted in developing modern thought.

What is most prominent in Byzantine civilization is culture. We have witnessed Greek and Latin calligraphy in the works of Historians, in articles on agriculture and military art, in medicine and veterinary practice, in dream interpretation; and all that constitutes a huge library part of which was that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate which used to contain the works of the Ecumenical Councils and the Fathers of the Church. Besides that there were private libraries which also contained Liturgical books. The rarity of books springs from them being expensive. Only rich families can afford buying books. The elementary school, in which a young child learns arithmetic, reading and writing, used to be overseen by the Bishop. The main book used for learning was the Book of Psalms. Learning how to make sentences took place at school as did also the singing of hymns.

All the children used to go to middle school. People learned what there was in ancient cultures: Homer, architecture, rhetoric and mathematics. The study of philosophy included theology, mathematics, music, astronomy and natural science. Translation of books to Farsi, Arabic and Latin took place in the Thirteenth Century. People adopted the vocabulary of the study of administration from Latin, and from Arabic they adopted the terms used in the art of weaving. The Church used to cling to ancient language. There were several universities in Constantinople and the Patriarchate itself used to offer university education.

Higher knowledge and learning had to include the interpretation of the Scriptures. Also the theological terms used emerged when the creed was defined. Asceticism and Mysticism had their impact on education and the study of the creed focused on the books of John of Damascus. The great mystics of the time were Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas and Nicholas Cabasilas.; and so here come the lives of the Saints and the liturgical books that were written in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries'; the Orthodox consider those as their daily bread. Also, knowing how to use the Liturgical and prayer books for the different seasons and feasts is a basic aspect of Byzantine culture.

Besides the abovementioned concerning Byzantine culture, we have the written works accomplished by men of knowledge and scientists; and these works deal with History, Geography, Military Art, Rhetoric, Novel Writing, Philosophy, Linguistics and Grammar.

History starts with creation and ends with the time-period of the writer. Moreover there is Greek Philosophy from which Christian thought borrowed terminology that can be used complementarily with the Revelation which is

immutable in essence and several methods were used in building the theological structure. Also there were few main philosophers but there were many of those knowledgeable of ancient Greek literature, many language experts and tragedians and writers for the theatre.

Perhaps some of the most beautiful written works were the religious poems like the Kontakions and others used in the prayers of the Church. Moreover there was in Byzantium popular poets and story writers in both the vernacular and formal dialect.

The Byzantines also knew applied Zoology and Botany and the use of medicinal plants. They also adopted the study of Chemistry to be used in the industry of metals, medicines, dyes and glass.

In the medical realm and health organization, many hospitals were established and the doctors received systematic education and fixed earnings. They were famous for their ophthalmic practice; Paul of Aegina knew much in surgery and gynecology and had an influence on the medical practice of the Arabs. Another has put a dictionary of diseases. They wrote specific books on dentistry and were well known for their knowledge in veterinary medicine and animal nutrition. The study of Pharmacy was a part of the medical curriculum and they had adopted some things from the Arabs and Persians in that.

As for Rhetoric, it was used as a means in political and religious campaigns. St. John Chrysostom was famous for his eloquence in the fourth and fifth centuries in Antioch and Constantinople and we have his sermons in Greek but they were translated to most of the European languages and some to Arabic.

In Graphic Art, icon painting on wood or as murals was popular in the Empire and it was used to teach those who cannot read. As of the Fourth Century, Mosaic art spread in the land; and one of the oldest mosaics (those of St. George and the Theotokou) are now in Thessaloniki. A few were kept in the Aegia Sophia and many icons were discovered during the days of Ataturk. There are also some in Cyprus and still more in Ravenna in Italy. And due to the high cost of making mosaics, murals were painted instead; and this became popular in the Arab world and is now widely spread in Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, books and scripts were adorned with drawings especially the Book of the Gospels. The same was true in textile embroidery and goldsmith industry.

The Church was aware of the importance of the Icon and in the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Church defined the doctrine governing the veneration of icons. Devotion through icons spread in the year 787 A.D. and homes were full of them. It was St. John of Damascus who first explained its position and function in the Church. He lived in Palestine as a monk; the Church adopted his thought concerning the icon namely that the Divine Incarnation of the Logos leads us into the theology of the icon. The faith of the Orthodox people was kept partly because

of the spirituality resulting from venerating of the icons and finding inspiration in them.

All the Byzantines, as historians affirm, were believers; when they meet a monk on their way, they would ask for his blessing. And such a way of life can tell you about their concern and care for the sick and the needy.

Among the emperors of Byzantium were those who were in darkness; but among them also were those who left the throne and joined the monastic life in monasteries. That society, amidst its sinfulness, wanted to inaugurate, in purity of life and orthodoxy of doctrine, the Kingdom of God here on earth; its stamp is the shedding of tears for sins (repentance), kindness, forgiveness, peace, compassion, ungreediness and asceticism. All the aforementioned is wrapped up in one word which is "love for the Lord".

All what there is in the matter is that one would pay more attention to the internal aspects of one's person than the external ones. In that sense the belief of the people of that culture was mystical in nature whereby one would dwell in God's "mysteries" in a dispassionate manner invoking unceasingly in your heart the name of the Lord Jesus until your heart becomes itself the prayer.

Those who know Byzantine worship find in it richness that is above every richness. All the prayers of Matins and Vespers and the Midnight carry in them the certitude which we express on the Sunday of the Resurrection saying: "Christ has risen from the dead". In the Liturgy, you receive hope from God to have you in the fullness of the Kingdom of God free from judgment on the last day. All those intense, profound and pure prayers as you stand or as you bow down with your body, while your soul is pure springing from the Divine Book so that, with the rest of the community, it (the Divine Book) becomes its verse.

When Mr. Erdogan reads the above, can he say that the great splendor that we described is a "black civilization"? You (Mr. Erdogan) are not excused when you read us and understand us wrongly. You are not excused when you see the light as darkness. The city which your ancestors invaded was known then as the sole bearer of civilization and culture in the world. Render justice to what was glorious before you came and read it well because the responsibility falls on you.