About the Course

Turkey is a nation at the crossroads. Its geographic location astride Europe and Asia makes it a bridge between the civilizations of “the West” and the broader Middle East, and an historical site of contest and exchange between Islam and Christianity. It is a key player in the geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as it vies with Iran, Egypt and the Gulf States for leadership of the region’s many Islamic states. But Turkey is also at a crossroads in its own cultural and political history. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has led a movement since 2002 to shift Turkish law and culture away from the strict secularism embraced by its elites for many generations, toward a new openness to religion in public life that has worried religious minorities and nonreligious Turks.

This month-long summer course will examine a wide array of issues at the intersection of religion and public life in Turkey today. We begin with historical background crucial to understanding contemporary debates about Turkish culture, identity and politics. The core of the course is a focused study of the recent transition from strict secularism to what many describe as “moderate Islamism” as the dominant cultural and legal norm; we will investigate this transition in law, education, religion and politics. We close the course with case studies that illustrate the challenges Turkey faces in managing this transition while dealing with transitions in the European Union, the MENA region, and its relationship with the United States and Israel.

Course Activities

The class will regularly visit sites that connect our coursework with the lived experience of Turks present and past. Guest speakers will join us for some class sessions, and we will visit the offices of several important religious, political and cultural leaders. Among the highlights:

Istanbul:
Sights: Topkapı Palace, Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Bosphorus boat tour, Ortaköy mosque, Galata Tower, Jewish Museum, Taksim Square, Grand bazaar; walking tours of Kadiköy, Fener, Sultanahmet and other neighborhoods, etc.

Meetings: Bogaziçi University, Zaman newspaper, Imam-hatip school, political offices of the CHP and AKP, etc.

Ankara: Grand National Assembly, foreign ministry, religious directorate (Diyanet), U.S. Embassy, Ataturk Mausoleum/Museum

Konya: Mevlana/Rumi tomb and museum, Alaeddin Mosque, Nevsehir, Derinkuyu Underground City; Goreme Open Air Museum

Program Details

Location: Istanbul, Turkey (with a trip to Ankara and Konya)
Dates: May 24 - June 20, 2015
Credits: 3
Pre-approved for:
- Cultural diversity core credit
- Theology major/minor elective (THEO1224)
- Islamic Civilization & Societies major/minor elective (ICSP1224)
- International Studies major/minor elective (INTL1224)

Program costs: See BC Summer Abroad site (bc.edu/international) for cost estimates. Precise costs will be announced in March 2015.

Professor Erik Owens is associate professor of the practice in theology and international studies, and associate director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, at Boston College. His interdisciplinary scholarship focuses on the challenge of fostering the common good of a religiously diverse society, and draws upon religious ethics, political philosophy, law, education and public policy. His edited volume The Sacred and the Sovereign: Religion and International Politics was called a “must read” by Foreign Affairs in 2009. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, an M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School, and a B.A. from Duke University.
Tentative Course Schedule

We will read analyses of contemporary religious and political developments, along with a selection of scholarly works from the fields of international relations, political science and political theory, sociology, religious studies and law. Course readings and discussion will be supplemented by frequent visits to important historical, religious and cultural sites as well as scheduled meetings with politicians, civic and religious leaders, activists and academics.

**Week 1:**
- Introduction: Comparing American/Turkish contexts
- Historical background: Byzantine and Ottoman Periods
- The Modern Republic of Turkey
- The Armenian genocide and its contemporary impact

**Week 2:**
- Kurds and the Kurdish question
- Turkish Islam(s)
- Hizmet and the Gülen Movement
- Religious minorities and religious freedom
- Kemalism and the secular state

**Week 3:**
- Republicanism and Turkish nationalism
- Religion and state: public education
- Religion and state: the Diyanet (religious directorate)
- **Academic/cultural excursion** (June 11-14): Ankara, Konya, Cappadocia

**Week 4:**
- Free speech, social media and the Gezi Park protests
- Human rights and gender issues
- Turkey, MENA and the Arab Spring
- Turkey, the EU, and the “clash of civilizations” thesis
- Erdogan, the Ottoman revival and the future of Turkey

Course Objectives

- Understand the history and context of modern Turkish secularism and its impact on contemporary religions, politics and culture in Turkey;
- Witness the lived religious practices of different communities by visiting multiple houses of worship, joining an iftar dinner, and spending time in different neighborhoods;
- Research and write a substantial scholarly essay on Turkish religion and public life.

"If Turkey can show that a secular regime can find a place for religious discourse and human rights, it will rehabilitate the word ‘secular’ among Muslims everywhere. If it can allow Islamic political voices while maintaining secular government and constitutional rights for all, it will reassure secularists worldwide that Islam has a place in political discourse."


For more information:

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