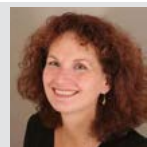


BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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JENNY WHITE is a professor of anthropology at Boston University. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before her presentation at the Boisi Center on religion, politics and nationalism in contemporary Turkey.

OWENS: One of the key metaphors that people use to talk about Turkey is that it's at a crossroads, both geographically and politically. Do you feel like Turkey is taking a new, different path, and if so, what that might look like?

WHITE: Frankly, I don't know. I've talked about Turkey being at a tipping point, but it could take a long time to tip, or it could tip tomorrow. That's part of the problem: we don't actually know what's going on. It used to be that social scientists could predict what was going to happen by looking at interest groups, social trends, and that sort of thing. But that doesn't work anymore, because since 2011, we have increasingly had a one-man show in Turkey. When you have one person making the decisions that will affect which way the country is going to go, the situation becomes unpredictable. Every day I read the newspaper and there is a surprise.

But certainly something is happening, and there are a number of forces at play. The AKP [Justice and Development Party] had a good run. For about ten years, it did a lot of things that needed doing in Turkey—politically, economically and socially. It created the conditions for the development of an entirely new middle class and a globalized youth. About half of the country is under the age of thirty, and those people grew up under the AKP regime. The AKP built on previous

economic legislation and ushered in a period of economic growth, stability, and openness to the world. This whole generation of people, both pious and secular, now has expectations of being upwardly mobile, of being globalized, and of hav-



ing choices in their lives.

Now we are at a point where the AKP, the government that had allowed this to flourish, is no longer on the same page with its own population, which has very different expectations. Some of that came out in 2013 with the Gezi protests. Most of the street protesters were secular, but I saw a poll that showed that passive supporters of the movement actually represented a cross-section of Turkish society. There were just as many Kurds,

pious Turks, and secular Turks in the ranks of those who supported the aims of the protests. There was a kind of silent majority. Many in this silent majority are young, and don't feel comfortable going out onto the street—especially young pious women who might be liberal but who lack an outlet. Young people and women don't have any way to be politically active in Turkey beyond NGOs, grassroots work and protesting in the public arena, so the only thing they can do is go out on the streets. Then the question is, does anyone hear them?

This was the first time that this new generation had raised its voice. What were they raising their voice about? They were not doing what their parents did in the 1960s and 1970s. They were not members of organized leftist or rightist groups that were agitating according to some ideology. They just wanted their trees. They were environmentalists, really, advocating for global ideas and values that they had grown up with. Many of them asked, why doesn't anyone else in the government respond to these concerns? There is a real disconnect between the government, which is made up of old men who grew up in the twentieth century, and the young people, who grew up in the twenty-first century—under the AKP regime, ironically.

There are also a lot of conservative young people, of course, but the polls show

that they are not predictable in the old way. Even if someone is conservative, you can't predict what party they will vote for. You can't say that a conservative pious Muslim will necessarily vote for the AKP; they might actually vote for the Republican People's Party. Some people who claim to be Kemalist might vote for the AKP because it's in their economic interest.

The old, predictable categories have gotten mixed up, and now it's very hard to distinguish between Islamists and secularists. Those people are now very close to each other in terms of lifestyle, expectations and aspirations, especially the younger generation. The market has played a huge role in this. You can now choose to be a Muslim any way you like, and you can choose to be Turkish in any way you like, in contrast to the rigid, iron shirt Turkish identity that characterized the twentieth century. These changing dynamics in Turkish identity make a lot of people very nervous.

To go back to the AKP, they get between 45 and 50 percent of the vote in each election from different constituencies. There is a core of people that is very pious, and they see the AKP championing people like themselves, with the hope that they too could become upwardly mobile—although a lot of this is illusion. There are also people who are terrified of chaos and who are just so grateful to have stability. They don't care about liberal values like freedom of expression. They are willing to tolerate a ban on the Internet as long as the government can keep chaos away and maintain stability.

OWENS: You mentioned that there are many ways to be a Turk now, which is an issue at the center of your published work. For readers who may not be so familiar with the Turkish context, can you explain why the ethno-national concept of Turkishness is in flux right now? What did it look like, and where is it headed?

WHITE: During the Ottoman period, being Turkish just meant that you spoke

Turkish. But at the beginning of the republic, the new Turkish government had to decide who gets to be a Turkish citizen, of all the former Ottomans that were now within the republic. They had to come up with criteria, and the main question was whether they could be assimilated. If they weren't Turkish, could they be Turks? The government was primarily made up of Western Europeanized people from the Balkans. They thought, for instance, that Jews could be assimilated, as long as they

“Turkey is going down a road of more governmental control and less institutional independence. It is very dangerous and suggests Turkey is at the tipping point.”

learned Turkish and gave up their public institutions. Albanians and Kurds, on the other hand, were tribal people, and were therefore suspect. Even if they were Muslim, the idea was that tribal people could never have loyalty to a nation-state, because their first loyalty would always be to their tribe. There were all kinds of interesting debates about who could become citizens, and it wasn't just about who was Muslim. Soner Cagaptay writes about this in *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*.

In the late 1920s, however, something changed. I suspect it had to do with influences from Europe, where racial categories in science were really important, and

people were measuring heads to see what racial category they belonged to. Race was introduced into the definition of Turkishness. This affected, for instance, the Donme, a group of Ottomans who had been Jews in the seventeenth century under the messianic leader Sabbatai Zevi. When he converted to Islam, they all converted, and lived for centuries as Muslims in Salonica. They were endogamous and had their own society, but they were very much involved in modernizing Salonica and setting up the new Turkish republic. And then several years later, people suddenly started asking: “Who are your ancestors? If your ancestors are not Muslim, then you can't be Turks.” This destroyed the Donme community and to this day, it's still dangerous in Turkey to be considered a Donme. There is a very good book about this subject by Marc David Baer called *The Donme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks*.

The ethno-religious definition of Turkishness arose within just a few years. Essentially, it held that you could not be Turkish if you were not Muslim. This meant that Jews, for instance, could be citizens but not Turks. This had a very bad effect down the road, unleashing a series of pogroms and decades of harassment. This phenomenon had its roots in the idea that Jews or Christians were potential inside enemies whose loyalty must lie outside Turkey. This concept has followed Turkey all the way to the present.

OWENS: How has the surge of Turkish prestige and power in the past fifteen years brought this ethnic-religious-nationalist mix to the forefront again?

WHITE: Well, I don't think it has anything to do with Turkey's standing on the world stage. It's rooted in internal developments. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Turkey had its first Islamist party, there was a rehabilitation of the Ottoman Empire. The early republic basically denied the Ottoman Empire as a corrupt

Muslim state that Turkey had triumphantly emerged from, and it didn't even teach Ottoman history in school. In the 1980s, the Ottoman Empire was rehabilitated with the sense that Turkey used to be a world power and can be one again. The founding moment of the nation-state was no longer 1923, when Turkey was established after World War I. It was 1453, when the Muslim Turks conquered Christian Constantinople. Suddenly all over town there were reenactments of this event and even a new 3D museum where you can actually "live" through it. There was a new, very jingoistic movie about the 1453 conquest. There are tiles in the subway in Taksim that show the conquest. It's now taught in schools and it appears in political rhetoric all the time. It has become a romanticized model that bears no relation to real history. About three to four weeks ago, several potential candidates in an upcoming local election appeared on posters in full Ottoman dress, which looked very clownish, almost like Halloween costumes.

OWENS: And President Tayyip Erdogan met a dignitary recently with the steps behind him lined with the peoples of the Ottoman Empire in their period dress, right?

WHITE: Right. And though he was ridiculed for that, some people liked it, and now he's doing it all the time. He seems to be completely immune to public opinion. In the newspaper, by the way, they compared the big silver helmet that one of the guys wore with the original from that period in the museum. They were completely different. The original had beautiful carvings on it, and this looked like a tin can. It makes you wonder why they don't bother to get the historical details right. It's almost like a sketch of history—they are sketchily referring to the past, but they are not really concerned about the details of the past.

OWENS: It's an idea of history, suggesting that there is some latent truth in there that they want to grasp on to.



WHITE: Yes, there is something going on there, and it connects with your question about the identity issue. One recent phenomenon in Turkey is the development of a Muslim bourgeoisie. This has to do with the economics of Turkey and the opening of the economy in the 1980s, which allowed provincial businesspeople who had previously lacked government support to burgeon their businesses, to export and import more frequently, and to increase their factory size. This economic transformation changed everything. To me, that's the turning point, because that allowed a whole new segment of the population to become wealthy and powerful for the first time, and that formed the bedrock of the AKP.

There is also the Gulen movement, which is a whole different story, but they have the same foundation. One of the new social phenomena was that young pious Muslims suddenly had an entire industry catering to them, with everything from novels to fashion to leisure activities designed for the pious set. They can choose from those things to be Muslim in the way that they want to. Young people, particularly women, have often said to me, "I am a conscious Muslim. I may look like Aisha down the road, but she is covering her head because it's tradition and I am covering my head because I chose to do so. I am doing it in the way I chose, which makes it modern

and valuable." That is a whole new way of being Muslim.

In my book [*Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*], I follow the trajectory of several young Muslim people, including some who went from not being covered to being covered, or some who joined an Islamic movement, or their religion brought them into an NGO that does social justice work. That's another trend, which the AKP is somewhat out of touch with. Piety has become a major social identity that you can use politically and economically. It was never that before. Throughout the twentieth century, you would have kept it behind closed doors because under Kemalism, piety had no place in the public sphere. Being Muslim had its place, as a racial characteristic to make you a Turk, but piety did not. Now we are seeing a return of piety as a social identifier that has some power in society.

OWENS: How would you characterize the status of various religious and ethnic minorities in the country? For instance, how would you characterize movements for Kurdish recognition vis-a-vis other groups?

WHITE: Let me talk about the non-Muslim groups first, because like the Kurds they suffered a great deal under Kemalism. They were considered to be inside enemies, pawns for outsiders trying to undermine Turkey, and they couldn't be

Turks. Kurds, on the other hand, were considered to be really Turks who had just forgotten their language. There was a lot of oppression of these groups. So when the AKP came in with its Ottoman framework, it became possible to step away from this formulation somewhat because the empire was quite diverse. They talked specifically about using the millet system in the Ottoman period as a way to deal with their own non-Muslim minorities. This was very problematic because that was not an equal system, and they didn't mean it to be an equal system either.

That's sort of fallen away, though, and before the big turning point of 2011, the AKP reached out to non-Muslim minorities in very substantial ways. It gave back some of the properties that had been confiscated during the Kemalist period. It didn't give back all properties, it didn't open the Halki Seminary, for example. For reasons that I don't quite understand, they keep saying the seminary would have to be part of the national educational system and therefore they can't open it. So overall, it was two steps forward, one step back. They would give back some property and keep some. It wasn't completely open-handed and open-hearted.

The other huge thing that happened concerns the Armenians. Fifteen years ago, you could be arrested for talking about Armenians. I remember in the 1980s, some poor tour guide was out in Van and he mentioned to some tourists he was guiding that Armenians used to live here, and he was arrested for that. That's all he said! You could never talk about the Armenians. If you said the word genocide, you would be hauled off to jail. Under the AKP, because of this Ottoman framework, you could begin to talk about this stuff. People are actually having conferences in Turkey where they use the word "genocide." It's still controversial, but it can be discussed. Amazingly, that opening to discussing the Armenian issue is ongoing.

OWENS: And of course April 2015 is being marked worldwide as the centenary year of the Armenian genocide.

WHITE: Yes. Again, it's two steps forward and one step back, but for a long time, there were no steps forward at all. The very ability to discuss the question is huge, and all of these taboos have been broken under the AKP.

The other taboo has to do with the Kurds and the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party]. Until ten years ago, if you mentioned that you were a Kurd in the wrong place at the wrong time, your life might be endangered. If you suddenly spoke Kurdish on a bus, people might try to lynch you. If people got up to sing in Kurdish, they would be arrested. These days, the tensions have begun to wane. Part of the explanation is economic. Now Kurdistan in northern Iraq is pretty stable, and Turkish companies have done a lot of the building there, and they have oil and want it exported through Turkey. The last thing they want is more PKK insurgency and military rule. For financial reasons, the Turks want this area to be stable.

The Turkish government has every reason now to push for peace with the PKK, and the PKK is interested. Abdullah Öcalan has been in jail now for many years and I'm sure wants to get out, and the time seems to be right. The irony of it is that this willingness to engage the PKK is what caused a lot of the problems that Turkey is experiencing now. The Erdogan government started these talks in 2010–2011, sending the head of the MIT, the Turkish equivalent of the CIA, to Paris to talk to the leadership of the PKK. The Gulen movement is very nationalist and against talking to the PKK, and it's believed that they had a heavy presence in the police force. They sent the police to try to arrest the head of the state intelligence agency for treason for doing this, even though he was sent by the government. As an observer watching this, it often looked confusing. Who is arresting whom for what?

Then, parliament pushed through a rule that says that a civil servant cannot be arrested for doing something that the prime minister has told him to do. It was the most bizarre thing, and in retrospect, it seems to have been the first salvo of the split between AKP and Fethullah Gulen's Hizmet movement.



That started off a chain of events that led to the government declaring outright economic and political war on the Hizmet movement, which it officially named a terrorist movement. Then the police tried to arrest people very close to the ruling circle for corruption. In response to that, Erdogan, now taking control himself, started undermining the balance of power. He fired and moved thousands of police and judges and started changing the institutions themselves, to make the judiciary and other formerly independent institutions beholden to the government. He calls these institutions, which he alleges are under the sway of the Hizmet movement, a parallel state. Everything is now the parallel state. Everyone who does anything critical of the government is accused of being part of the parallel state and therefore a traitor. That's the road Turkey is going down, of more and more control, government surveillance, and lack of institutional independence. That's new and very dangerous, and it suggests that Turkey really is at the tipping point.

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