

# BOISI CENTER

# INTERVIEWS



NO. 82: APRIL 17, 2013



**ERIK OWENS** is the associate director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life and adjunct assistant professor of theology and international studies at Boston College. He spoke with undergraduate research assistant **Kevin Durazo** before his presentation on religion, state and education in Turkey at the Boisi Center.

**DURAZO:** Turkey is in the midst of a controversial constitutional overhaul and reform that could have particularly important consequences for religious and political minorities. Can you start by providing the context for this movement within Turkey's political history?

**OWENS:** I am not an expert in Turkey's political history, so I need to say at the outset that my knowledge here is limited. Turkey's present constitution was ratified by popular vote in 1982 in the wake of its third military coup in the previous twenty years. Though the constitution has been amended many times since 1982, it retains certain elements that reformers, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as well as many who oppose him, would like to change.

One major concern revolves around the recognition and protection of minority groups. At present only Armenians, Greeks and Jews are formally recognized as protected minorities, while the Kurds (who comprise eighteen percent of the population) have no legal protection of their language, culture, etc. This should change under the new constitution, but the precise contours of the change, and the scope of its impact on other minority groups, is not yet clear.

Another major constitutional issue centers on executive powers. Turkey's parlia-

mentary system divides the leadership of government and state between the prime minister and president, respectively. In a move reminiscent of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Erdogan is pushing to expand the power of the presidency in advance of his bid for that office when his prime ministerial term expires in 2015.



There are also controversial criminal laws rooted in constitutional powers that reformers would like to change, including those criminalizing insults against Turkey, the Turkish ethnicity, or Turkish government institutions.

**DURAZO:** When you were in Turkey last summer, did you observe a shift in the atmosphere of the country, with the

national identity? What were your main observations during the trip?

**OWENS:** Because it was my first visit, I can't say I personally saw a shift over time so much as a snapshot of the current situation. The energy and dynamism throughout the country was truly striking. Nearly everyone I spoke with noted how much Turkey had changed in the last twenty years as a result of its vast economic expansion and its integration into the global economy of capital, labor and knowledge. These enormous changes have brought great anxiety as well as gleeful optimism. Some people I spoke with were deeply concerned about what consumerism is doing to citizens now that more Turks are capable of buying more things from across the country and the world.

I also heard many worries about Turkish identity and the role of religion in public life. Religious groups have gained considerably more power and the strict Kemalist secularism for which Turkey was known until the 1990s has morphed into a more accommodationist mode. What does it mean to be Turkish in this new context? What does it mean to be religious, or a religious minority, in this context? Religious nationalism is growing at the same time that Turkey's political and economic power is growing, leading many in Turkey to look back to

the Ottoman Empire for inspiration in ways that critics have found unsettling.

Amidst it all, though, I saw great optimism about the country's future as it approaches the centennial anniversary of the modern Turkish republic.

**DURAZO:** Turkey has a history of rigid secularization with regard to religion in public life. Can you speak a little bit about that history as well as your experience in Turkey?

**OWENS:** I think the current changes are coming from the bottom, as it were. A new generation of pious middle- and upper-class Muslims in Turkey practice their faith more openly and don't see a need to suppress the public expression of religion in ways that prior generations did. Some groups see this as a dangerous Islamicization of society. Others see it as a sign that society has matured enough that the danger of radicalism has passed, and that the blinders imposed upon people for eighty years can finally be removed, allowing more freedom, including religious freedom.

There is a history of modern Turkish secularism that runs from Atatürk through the military coups of the 1960s-1980s, and into the present day, but the current set of changes began to take shape in 2002 with the Erdoğan's election as prime minister. He has been reelected twice since then with ever-increasing percentages of victory. The party he leads, the AKP (Justice and Development Party), is seen as the central expression of this movement to accommodate more religion in public life.

But there are tensions among many groups. For years, the language and culture of the large Kurdish minority was officially disadvantaged (though this is improving). Alevis also face discrimination, and there is a very small contingent of Orthodox Christians there who have struggled in recent years. So while there has been an expansion of religious expression in public life—most visibly

when the headscarf ban was lifted for colleges and public schools—there are other areas where change is occurring too slowly for some citizens.

**DURAZO:** You mentioned that this kind of religious accommodation in society is a ground-up movement, and you mentioned the school system. Can you talk about Turkey's educational system and how its civic education contributes to the shift toward greater religious accommodation?

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**OWENS:** I think this is one of the most interesting angles of entry into this conversation about Turkish identity: how society—through its government—chooses to educate its young children to be future citizens of a certain sort. When citizens think about what their society should be like, they frequently turn to education as a means of expressing their desires and hopes for their children.

Unlike in the United States, where state and local governance is most important, in Turkey the national government closely controls key aspects of every school

in the country. Private religious schools of the sort that are common here in the United States are illegal in Turkey; this was quite a surprise to me when I first started reading about Turkish education. Crucially, though—and again, surprisingly, to me at least—historically secularist Turkey does have a large system of state-funded, state-operated middle and high schools that train the nation's religious leaders.

Turkey's state religious directorate, the Diyanet, operates all of the mosques in the country and hires every preacher (imam) and prayer leader (hatip) that works in these mosques. In the past ten years nearly 17,000 new mosques have been built, so there is a huge need for such staff. To train religious leaders the state created vocational schools called Imam-Hatip schools, which occupy a very interesting part of the Turkish educational landscape. Imam-hatip schools were first founded in the 1920s shortly after the founding of the republic, and they have risen and lowered in size and scope over the years along with the rising and lowering fortunes of religion in Turkish public life. These days they are bustling; they comprise a reinvigorated part of the educational landscape.

The primary manifestation of this is the broadening of the imam-hatip curriculum. Students who attend them are no longer expected simply to be prayer leaders or to work for the religious directorate managing mosques or things like; they are instead receiving more of a general education that also includes religious instruction. Recent curricular and structural reforms of imam-hatip schools have had a big impact. Imam-hatiplis (as the students of such schools are called) are now attending more prestigious colleges and universities, and consequently are more visible in government and business positions. These reforms have been championed by the AK Party and Erdoğan, who is the first imam-hatipli prime minister.

There is a certain paradox in a secular state providing a religious education for its future leaders, but that's where much of the energy is focused in Turkish education right now.

**DURAZO:** What is the significance of these reforms in Turkey? Why have these schools and this movement received attention from American scholars over the last ten years? What can Americans learn about the separation of church and state from Turkey?

**OWENS:** I think there are a couple of good questions in there. One relates to the larger impact of this internal change to Turkey's foreign relations. Turkey has frequently been held up during the so-called Arab Spring as a stable Muslim democracy with a thriving economy. Turks want to be a model for other countries, and Turkey is seen by many around the world to be such a model. President Obama said as much when he visited Ankara in 2009. The world is watching how Turkey adapts to new forms of religion in public life, to new views on religious minorities, to evolving conceptions of human rights.

The changes in Turkey have also caused Europeans to question their own identity. Turkey is a bridge between Europe and Asia, between predominantly Christian Europe and predominantly Muslim Middle East and North Africa. Turkey's accession talks with the European Union have raised important questions of what makes Europe European. If Turkey meets all the economic and legal criteria for accession, will the religious and cultural differences still preclude EU membership?

Turkey has been an important ally of the United States for many years. Turkey is part of NATO, and we have promised to defend the country against its external enemies. And yet that relationship has been endangered, or perhaps just frayed, by Turkey's reluctance to assist in the American war in the Gulf in the 1990s and its strident criticism of Israel in



recent years. Israeli prime minister Netanyahu recently apologized to Erdogan for the killing of Turkish citizens during an attempt to run through Israel's naval blockade of Gaza, so relations there are improving a bit.

Finally, I'd say that American scholars can look at Turkey and see a country that has set the boundaries of religion in public life in very different ways that we have. Turkey lacks the equivalent of an Establishment Clause that in our country prevents a formal relationship between church and state, and we can see this crucial difference at work in Turkish schools, civil society, politics, everywhere. There may not be direct lessons here for what we do in our schools, but certainly there are instructive lessons about how these systems come together and how we can think about the issue.

**DURAZO:** One final question. In the United States, church/state controversies occasionally pop up in the national news, but they seem to be rare. Do you see a movement toward more or less accommodation, or have we found a fixed point in church/state law that will last for a while?

**OWENS:** I don't want to overstate the level of conflict, but when you are looking for them (as I am) there are actually quite a few church/state controversies bubbling these days. Perhaps most notably, many

American Catholics are arguing that the contraception coverage in the Affordable Care Act violates their freedom to create institutions faithful to Catholic values. There are persistent controversies about whether and how American foreign policy should promote religious freedoms abroad. In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings we've seen a debate about whether the state should monitor Muslim religious communities to detect religious extremism that might lead to violence. The same-sex marriage debate is frequently cast in terms of religious freedom.

In the big picture, I'm not sure there are more or less church/state conflicts than there have been in other times in our history, but the contours of the church/state boundary have changed quite a bit in the last twenty years. I'd say that we are in the middle of a generation-length pendulum swing toward greater accommodation of religion in public life after another generation-long period from the 1960s-1980s in which a more separationist mode was dominant. We see this shift in all sorts of ways.

I have a special interest in education cases, so I would highlight the expansion of indirect public funding for religious schools, the equal access granted to religious groups who want to use public

school facilities after hours, and the expansive rights of students to express their religious beliefs in public schools. Public school students can form religious groups like any other extra-curricular student groups, and they can pray alone or together during the school day, so long as the educational process isn't disrupted and the school (i.e. government) is not sponsoring or endorsing the religious or anti-religious activities. (Of course the courts have also maintained restrictions on the religious activities of teachers and administrators when they are acting on behalf of the schools. Schools can't encourage students to pray or allow teachers to proselytize while they are acting as

teachers; they can't offer a curriculum that endorses or denigrates religions. All these things are unconstitutional even in what I consider an accommodationist phase.)

Outside the realm of education we can see this accommodationist shift in things like the seminal Religious Freedom Restoration Act and other federal laws and court decisions that have expanded religious freedom in areas like local zoning, employment disputes and prisoner rights.

As it happens, a parallel process of federalism is pushing more and more issues—including religious freedom

issues—from Congress and the federal courts to state legislatures and state courts. The upshot, as I see it, is that all of us need to be better informed citizens so that we can make the crucial decisions that affect the basic rights of all people in our society. We need to know—and our students need to be taught—a lot more about religions and about the history of religious ideas and institutions and organizations in our country in order to make those informed decisions. That's one of the many reasons I am focused on questions of religion, education and the state in my own work.

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