

## Questions for Sophia

by Joe Essid, Writing Center Director

### Snapshot One: Strangers Under Sinan's Dome

"Organized religion is over. It is dying here."

I do not believe this for a second as I stand with other Richmond colleagues in Istanbul's Blue Mosque. To be honest, however, I enter my first mosque more interested in its architecture than its spiritual legacy. This masterpiece of Islamic art by Sinan, the famous Ottoman architect, has always been on my short list of places to visit in Turkey. But our guide's prophecy pulls me away from the intricate detail of the dome's ceiling to a group of men praying in front of me. A few of them are now glaring at us. Despite what we have been taught in seminar about the dangers of comparing cultures, such gestures rarely need much interpretation. Do these men understand our guide's English? Or are they staring at foreigners who gawk at the majesty of the Ottoman era, who snap photos in one of their most venerable houses of worship? No matter, really; to these men I would guess that we--secular Turks and Westerners alike--are their Other.

Devout young Islamic men are certainly ours. Their presence here, in the middle of a workday, sets Turkey apart from the Europe it seeks to join. In the cathedrals of Spain, I was often the youngest person at Mass; as with bullfights, religious services there have become spectacles for tourists and the elderly. The more we travel in Turkey, however, the more I realize that despite 80 years of secular government, daily devotion to Allah remains a powerful part of life.

As our guide continues to rail against religion, I feel ready to leave the Blue Mosque. The entire scene strikes me as surreal: the guide's untruth juxtaposed with

obvious signs of religious zeal. I won't need a muezzin's call to prayer to remind me that faith is still strong in this comparatively secular Turkish city. I glance at a screened-off area separate from where the men kneel. A woman, modestly dressed with a *hijab* covering her head and throat, bows toward Mecca. I, like Friedrich Nietzsche, detest guilt, but shame I *can* accept: censure rather than self-torture. So it must be shame I feel, shame at the secular arrogance all too common among academics. Then I feel pity (another emotion Nietzsche detested) for our guide. I hope she is correct about organized religion, but my first lesson about Turkey is that it remains more complicated than her prophecy or even Mustafa Kemal's secular dream.

Since a two-week glance does not qualify me to even begin a scholarly treatment of Turkish life, instead I provide a writer's response to a question, one my nephew Jim put to me shortly after he returned from Iraq's Sunni Triangle. Jim is a First Lieutenant, his wife is a Lebanese Muslim. Our family is proud of his marriage to a woman "from the old country" and his command of conversational Arabic. Now, given the *gravitas* of his military service, when Jim asks me something, I tend to ponder it a long time. After all, he has seen the troubles brought by extremism--be it from Islamic *ihadis* or American neo-conservatives. Cradling a huge chunk of Soviet-era artillery shell that missed killing him by less than a foot, Jim asks me, "Is Islam possible in a liberal democracy?"

I answer that I do not know what, exactly, he means by a "liberal democracy" and that Muslims from different traditions probably define "Islam" differently. Within days of Jim's and my conversation, Ahmed--a follower of Sufism--tells us that to him Islam is an ocean and everyone, holding a share, says "This is Islam." The more important task,

Ahmed tells us, is to return to the source continually for "clean water." Good metaphors, these, but what will they define for those who want no water, who prefer sand or air?

I told Jim that this report would reflect upon the long-term Turkish experiment with the role of religion in a secular state. Even after two months' reflection, I can only provide snapshots.

### **Snapshot Two: *Hijabs, Hyundais***

The green building, about the size and shape of a portable toilet--an unfortunate resemblance in a culture so fastidious about bodily functions--looks forlorn. When discussing Bosphorus University in our pre-departure seminar, we saw a photo of the very spot and were told that devout women must "uncover" when they reach the campus gates.

I surreptitiously photograph the famous changing room when I notice that it looks abandoned. My seat-mate on our bus is edgy about the entire business of asking questions or snapping photos here, hushing me when I say, innocuously, "it's so odd to see a place in person that you saw in photos." I shut up but get another shot, very aware of a campus security guard who walks over and asks us to state our business. Once I realize that she only wants to check our driver's ID and then show us to parking, I relax.

We drive on, and in seconds I see my first student wearing the *hijab*. Why is a covered girl allowed on campus? Her presence in a place dedicated to advancing human knowledge stuns me. I view all conservative religions in a dualistic, and probably simplistic manner, not unlike Benjamin Barber's divide of globalism/tribalism in *Jihad vs McWorld* or Thomas Friedman's flat/unflat distinction in *The World is Flat*. Thus my reaction is as instantaneous as it is ethnocentric. In quick succession I feel anger at a society where religion can tell a woman that she must wear a bulky overcoat and scarf,

whatever the weather. Next I feel anger at the student's parents, who allow such "nonsense" to go on, who cannot be "modern and civilized." Finally there is anger at myself for being such a callous dunce, oversimplifying with a glance one of the salient moral and political issues of Turkish democracy.

When I see my next head-scarf, I realize that the university's policy has changed. Although university employees cannot cover, under the current government students no longer need the green booth; they can wear the *hijab* on campus, though not in class. This shift in Turkish policy, and polity, may seem fragile, but it seems just the sort of compromise about deeply divisive moral issues that a healthy democracy should make. Such concessions to religion form one part of Turkey's delicate balancing act. In one of our group's briefings, a professor reminds us of just how delicate it can be. The EU has agreed with Turkey's position that the *hijab* is part of a broader security issue, not simply a matter of civil rights. Presumably that same reasoning informs The UK's crack-down on extremist speech and France's outright ban on head-scarves and other, more complete forms of covering.

As our group travels east into the more traditional countryside, I try never to take the scarves for granted, as I come to realize that these often beautiful pieces of cloth hold a power almost talismanic over Turks, much like the ubiquitous charms against the Evil Eye seen everywhere (even in my own pickup truck, these days). Orhan Pamuk makes the debate over the *hijab* a significant element in his novel *Snow*, a book pessimistic about the prospects for democracy in Turkey. After our visit, I disagree with critics who find the book deliberately written for Westerners.

A gesture is underway to question Atatürk's secularism, to test its limits. Like Pamuk's protagonist Ka, I start noticing scarves everywhere. Covered mothers pushing covered girls on a swing-set; covered girls using cell phones; covered women pouring my tea and cleaning my hotel room; grandmothers in scarves shouting "One lira, sir! Please, sir! One lira!" as they hold out bracelets and charms; a young professional woman in a resplendent *hijab*, during rush hour, driving a Hyundai in Istanbul's maniac traffic.

That last act would be forbidden in Saudi Arabia, where there is no public talk of substantial civil-rights reform for women. The ongoing Saudi debate over the ban on driving shows the distance between Riyadh and Ankara, where I see shops for scarves, shops for wigs, too. I begin to wonder, in a way more academic than salacious, if Turkish pornography features covered women. Do any Turkish transvestites go about covered, getting laughs by imitating old ladies, as did the members of Monty Python? I say nothing of this to my colleagues but feel that a small truth about democracy in Turkey emerges: Ankara's and Istanbul's second-story "erotic shops." As I continually snap photos from inside our bus, ever on the lookout for unusual but emblematic parts of the culture, I see no erotic shops in the smaller towns and very few billboards featuring models in swim-suits or lingerie. In publications and lectures I have been told that a "line of modernization" moves east gradually, even as villagers flock to the big cities. One sign of that would be erotic shops and liquor stores: sex and intoxication as commodities.

### **Snapshot Three: Sunlight on Ancient Stone**

Self-recognition is always one reward of visiting ancient sites, and Turkey shocks the under-informed visitor with the richness of its antiquities. In the remains of ancient

cultures--be they ruins or surviving texts--I find more evidence about the relationship between democracy and religion.

For self-improvement I read a Classical text or two each year, and currently that means Thucydides' Peloponnesian War. The world of the Greek historian tore itself to pieces in a conflict as apocalyptic as any dreamed of today. We console ourselves that the intellectual and scientific heritage of the Enlightenment and the political and economic strengths of our representative democracy are stronger than the seductive call to chaos. Yet Athens could produce a Pericles, a Socrates, then still fall so low so quickly. Athenian democracy, one quite different from ours of course, could execute Socrates and take part in a war that brought only ruin to the entire region.

As I look at the Temple of Zeus in Pergamon and the ruins of its theater, I think of what had happened to that Greek world. Such a complex society should not have collapsed. Likewise, my wandering among Roman and Byzantine ruins makes me consider the course of empire and the fate of all of those who know their way is the only way, especially when religion becomes an instrument of state power. For Pergamon's Greeks, their religious festivals demanded sacrifices, yet I cannot imagine the intelligentsia actually *believing* in the gods as more than handy moral metaphors. Have I committed the historian's sin of presentism? But then I am not an historian; I deal in analogies and metaphors. Before the Peloponnesian War started in earnest, various parties appealed to the Oracle at Delphi for advice. Now both Bush and bin Laden believe that they are doing God's will, and the President has claimed that God speaks directly to him.

*Hubris* is a word I teach to my students whenever our subject permits, and with this concept I begin to bridge some important cultural and chronological gaps. A passage by Thucydides forcefully demonstrates an attitude present some 2400 years later. Frankly, it could apply to any imperial and self-assured society, including the Ottomans or, currently, the United States. Here, in order to convince Athens to ally with them, Corinthian ambassadors describe their enemies harshly:

Their insular position makes them judges of their own offenses against others, and they can therefore afford to dispense with judges appointed under treaties; for they hardly ever visit their neighbors. . . .And all the time they screen themselves under the specious name of neutrality, making believe that they are unwilling to be the accomplices to other men's crimes (42).

Self-righteousness, a lack of introspection, justification of misdeeds: empires need these to exist and even post-imperial states employ such rhetorical strategies to re-shape the past and denigrate enemies. In Turkey I see this in the Atatürk Mausoleum. Its classical style, a majestic and windswept temple housing the great man's remains, reify his ideals. And to me they already call to mind romantic ruins, ruins that force a visitor into stunned silence. Walking past Kemal's sarcophagus, I see myself just as easily processing past the altar in Zeus' or Dionysus' temples or making a blood-offering to the Magna Mater.

#### **Snapshot Four: Tank Factory, University**

The father of modern Turkey is everywhere. Atatürk is a golden visage on the wall of a restaurant where we stop to eat donner kebab. The same mask glows, backlit by a nimbus of blue neon, in the Ministry of Defense's briefing room. Busts of Atatürk are in

every park and at every university we visit. Despite the near deification, my respect for Mustafa Kemal grows throughout our visit; after all, in a few years he not only expelled the foreign armies from Asia Minor but also pulled off a miraculous transformation of Turkish society from a fallen empire to a modern nation-state. A multi-party democracy did not emerge in his lifetime. Today that does exist, and the victory of a party with Islamist roots shows the progress Turkey continues to make.

Yet I become disturbed that no one I encounter critiques the grandiose way in which Atatürk's monumental burial becomes conflated with a certain telling of Turkish history. As I first-time visitor, I have no idea whether any Turks publicly discuss the contents of the exhibits in the mausoleum complex in the way that others have debated Japan's *Yasukuni* shrine or the Smithsonian exhibit about *Enola Gay* and Hiroshima. The Ottomans may be gone, yet their attitude, that of the Corinthian ambassadors, lives on. Heroic murals and dioramas of the War of Independence show Turkish troops repelling Australian attacks at Gallipoli and wrecking the Allied fleet in the Dardanelles. We expect that from a war memorial. But the Turkish artists took great pains to emphasize their soldiers tending wounded enemies; while I can accept the reality of this on any battlefield, the evolution of the murals shows that I am moving from historical recounting to propaganda.

In another scene Greek troops bayonet women and children as a wild-eyed Orthodox priest, crucifix held high, whips them into action. Izmir burned at the hands of retreating Greeks: that much is fact. For a moment, my reaction is comic. It's hard for me to think of the Greeks I know as burning anything, except an order of *saganaki* cheese. Then the questions begin to rush at me. Were the soldiers' eyes really that crazed as they

committed arson? And what was in the Turks' eyes who "repatriated" Greeks in the 1920s, when 1500 years of monastic life ended in Cappadocian monasteries carved out of solid rock? And what religious impulse could drive the new possessors of those holy places to scratch out the eyes of the Virgin, of Christ, in frescos hundreds of years old?

I mention none of this in the mausoleum; I do not wish to find out if the law forbidding criticism of Atatürk extends to specific displays in his memorial. And it was not only the government that concerned me. Given widespread public outrage over Pamuk's use of the term "genocide" to describe what happened to Armenians in 1914, I was not eager to put the good will of Turkish citizens to the test by critiquing what I saw as a one-sided depiction of events.

I have learned that in Turkey, enemies need not only be carping foreign professors or rampaging Greeks. I get an object lesson about this in Kayseri, a city named for Roman Caesars and a birthplace of both Leopard tanks and college degrees. Tank factory and university are prominently placed in the middle of town, as if squaring off against each other. To me the Turkish military is saying, "Make no mistake. We are the final guarantor of democracy, whether the threat to it comes from the mosque or the campus." We learn that imams have their sermons vetted by the government. Apparently the same scrutiny applies to universities. After we left, one campus we visited canceled an academic conference, under government pressure. A Turkish colleague of mine from graduate school still cannot return home to teach, unless she revises certain parts of her Master's thesis found objectionable by the authorities.

It is not that the Turkish government can completely let down their guard, and democracy's guarantor has difficult work to do. On a lovely road we take along the shore

in Kusadasi, a PKK soon bomb rips apart a minibus like ours, killing foreigners and threatening to realize a threat to "bring the war to the cities" and the tourist economy. I am certain that reprisals we will never hear about occur, are still occurring, somewhere far beyond the dreamlike mountain ranges that define the Turkish landscape. Meanwhile, Turkey momentarily flickers like a firefly for easily bored American news-consumers. It then vanishes in favor of some tidbit about Tom Cruise. Briefly the same stupid questions assail me, the ones that pissed me off before I left for Turkey: "Is it safe?" Look at New York, look at London and Madrid, I answer. Look at the seething rage every day, behind more steering wheels than you'd care to admit. Get over it: where *is* safe?

One of the generals who briefs us notes the outrage Turks feel about the Bush administration's decision not to consult Turkey before plunging into Iraq. After all, the general says, Turkey has 80 years of coping with Islamist extremism. And a badly beaten group of leftist radicals, I add mentally. Dissent is permitted, up to a point. Then, apparently, it is crushed. I am not certain, intellectually, whether the iron fist is better than American habits of discrediting dissent with misinformation, ignoring it in our corporate-controlled media, or shuffling off protestors to "Free Speech Zones." But on a visceral, emotional level I know that I prefer any of these things to a phalanx of tanks rolling down my street.

One of my intellectual hobby-horses is to mull over how societies rise, evolve, and fall. Now I can add to my list how modern and secular Turkey can define itself both against and within Europe, both distancing itself from a moribund and crumbling Ottoman Empire and holding an emotional attachment to the Empire's days of greatness. Telling details mean much to writers. Turkey is dynamic today, yet a printing press

became available in Istanbul only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, after nearly two centuries of failed attempts suppressed by religious authorities. It is no wonder that the Ottoman Empire was not known as a source of innovation and became, in that famous cliché, "the Sick Man of Europe."

### **Parting Snapshot: Before the Goddess**

Sophia, a pagan goddess of wisdom also seen by Gnostics as a deific manifestation of Mary, stands before me in marble, part of the preserved façade of the library of Ephesus. The library burned, like the more famous one in Alexandria, but not in a religious riot. Fearing Ephesus' rise as a center for learning, competitors are believed to have set the fire.

So I have a jumble of odd fragments: smashed printing presses, burned libraries and cities, hair from the Prophet's beard and his footprint on display at the Topkapi Palace, a quick sip of bitter nectar in the basement of Sinan's home, iconoclasts' images covered by defaced Orthodox frescos, pock-marked buildings in Cyprus' UN zone, old and damaged records in archives thrown open to convince Armenians to please read them. I come to understand Eliot at the end of "The Wasteland": "these fragments I shored against my ruins." I am left with little wisdom beyond the slant of light through a high window in Hagia Sophia onto Qu'ran-stands, where before Mehmed's conquest Byzantine Empresses were carried to mass so their feet would not touch the corrupt earth. I'm also left with the earth of Ephesus, fertilized by sacrifice to the gods of copulation and war: those great impulses for much of the literature we canonize.

Jim's question comes to me again and I ask Sophia. Perhaps she can teach me something about democracy in Turkey today. Comparisons to other nations or even to

family history have failed me. I cannot square Turkey's continued struggle to define itself with that of Spain, a nation I pretend to know far better.

Can Islam co-exist with liberal democracy? An important starting point for an answer lies in Turkey. I recognize this even as I ponder the juxtaposition of tanks and university buildings, of cell-phone towers and minarets, of my desire to return and to be wary.