

Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue

Dr. Akçam, who has been one of the foremost proponents of dialogue between Armenians and Turks, enumerates in the first essay of his book the five fundamental taboos on which the Turkish Republic was established: 1) There are no social classes in Turkey; 2) There are no Kurds in Turkey but only “Mountain Turks;” 3) Turkey is a secular, western type of society, and any discussion of Islamic values and Islamic culture is disallowed; 4) There is no such thing as an Armenian genocide; and 5) Since the Armed Forces of Turkey became the guardians of these taboos, any discussion of the non-democratic impact of the Armed Forces upon the Republic, likewise became a taboo subject.

One by one, each of these taboos is gradually fading. The issue of the Armenian Genocide, however, is more difficult than any of the other taboos, because it strikes at the very foundation of the establishment of the Republic. He explains that the absence of dialogue between Armenia and Turkey, and the lack of open discussion and recognition of the Armenian Genocide by Turkey are fundamental obstacles to the process of the democratization of Turkey.

In his lecture, Dr. Akçam explained that there is a process taking place in Turkey, in which the society feels it must organize itself as an open society:

“Someone looking at me sees only one person, but I represent the tip of the iceberg of those involved in the process, who are seeking an open society in Turkey. I am a product of this process in Turkey and I am not alone.

“Civil society in Turkey knows that without coming to terms with history, we can not build a democratic future. Eighty-six years of forgetting has not produced democracy in Turkey. Just the opposite. New national questions have been raised, such as the Kurdish question and human rights violations. Not only should we remember history, but actually to institutionalize remembering is essential for the process of democratization.”

In analyzing the reasons it is so difficult for Turks to deal with the Armenian Genocide, Dr. Akçam starts with the general lack of historical consciousness in Turkey. This was further aggravated by the “revolution” of the introduction of the Latin alphabet in 1928. Today, almost no one can read the writing of his/her grandparents or anything published prior to that time. Thus, there has been a deliberate break with Turkey’s Ottoman past. A very serious factor is the trauma for Turks to acknowledge that the Republic was founded out of the tremendous defeat and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.

Turkish historiography today portrays the Republic as being created out of nothing, and even as a reaction against western imperialism. The truth, however, is that there is an inseparable connection between the Armenian Genocide and the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Among those active in the founding of the Republic and went on to become its officials was a number of individuals who had been involved in the Genocide as perpetrators, or became wealthy by confiscating the property of the Armenians.

“I think that the tabooing of the Armenian Genocide in a republic whose foundation was created in this way is ‘understandable.’ The devastation that would ensue if we had to now stigmatize those whom we regarded as ‘great saviors’ and ‘people who created a nation from nothing,’ as ‘murderers and thieves’ is palpable. It seems so much simpler to completely deny the genocide than to seize the initiative and face the obliteration of the ingrained notions about the Republic and our own national identity.”

Dr. Akçam summarizes the respective benefits for Armenians and Turks in initiating a dialogue with one another.

“As long as Turks and Armenians try to exert influence over each other via third parties, the third parties will use this as leverage to advance their own interests. The survival of Armenia, freedom in the region, and the welfare of the Armenian community in Turkey would be aided by dialogue with Turkey. Membership in the European Union, positive relations with all countries in the region, and to take its place among the modern civilized nations of the world, are all at issue for Turkey.

“I want to get to know the Armenian who lives today and want him to get to know the Turk who lives today. I believe it is imperative that without preconditions, we talk to each other; we have to engage in discussions, and we have to cultivate mutual relationships. We have a common history, and we have to repossess it by snatching it back from those who took it away from us, in short, to start the **Dialogue** now!”

In this respect it is noteworthy that in the Foreword to the book, scholars from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Prof. Fatma Müge Göçek along with Kevork Bardakjian, emphasize that “It is this spirit that has led us, two University of Michigan faculty, working in the field of Ottoman and Armenian history and culture, to work together with a view to promoting a scholarly dialogue and adopting a wider embrace of Armenian-Turkish studies. In our approach and determination to work together, we have derived inspiration from the person and work of Dr. Taner Akçam.”

The ideas expressed in Dr. Akçam's presentation are developed at length in his new book, *Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue*. This softcover book of xii + 101 pages is available from the Zoryan Institute of Canada, Tel: 416-250-9807, Ext. 104, Fax: 416-512-1736, E-mail: zoryan@idirect.ca, for \$14.95US, \$21.95Cdn, plus \$4.00 shipping and handling.