

Interview with His Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

This exclusive interview with the Ecumenical Patriarch was carried out by Jean Catsiapis on behalf of *Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies*. This is the second time that the journal has been honoured by an interview with His Holiness.

His Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I took over from Dimitrios I on October 22, 1991, after being elected by the Holy Synod in Constantinople. Honourable Primate of Orthodox Christians, the 260th Patriarch of the Eastern Church maintains the Orthodox faith in Constantinople, Turkey, a country which has been under unrelenting pressure from Muslim fundamentalists over the past few years. Bartholomew I strives to uphold cordial relations with the Turkish political leaders and approves of the country's EU candidacy.

*Bartholomew I was elected head of the Orthodox Churches precisely as Communism was falling in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Given the situation, he made his mission one of Orthodox renewal wherever this Church had been persecuted. Favourable to the reconciliation of all Christians, Bartholomew I has been in regular dialogue with Rome. In fact, on June 29, 1995, the Ecumenical Patriarch and Pope John-Paul II issued an appeal for the reunification of the Christian Churches. The Patriarch's reflections on moral issues are surprisingly modern for unlike the head of the Catholic Church, Bartholomew I does not intrude upon the privacy of the couple, thus he pardons divorced Christians and recommends safe sex to prevent the spread of AIDS. One could say that he embodies the wisdom of Orthodoxy; in other words, "union without separation and without confusion of the divine and the human." **

Q. The European Council in Helsinki has accepted the principle of Turkey's EU candidacy. What do you think of this decision?

* *La vérité vous rendra libre*, Entretiens avec le Patriarche de Constantinople, Bartholomée 1^{er} par Olivier Clément, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer et J. C. Lattès, 1996.

- R. We warmly support Turkey's European orientation for it will benefit all of us.
- Q. The European Council in Helsinki has confirmed the candidacy of the Republic of Cyprus, where both Orthodox Greeks and Muslim Turks live. Do you think this candidacy will promote peace in Cyprus and bring Christians and Muslims closer together?
- R. With all our heart, we hope that this will help lead to a peaceful solution to the Cyprus problem. By *rapprochement* between Christians and Muslims, we mean *rapprochement* between Christians and Muslims as individuals and as societies. Rapprochement, cooperation and the peaceful coexistence of both groups naturally will help erase certain prejudices and will contribute to peace, which is a gift from God to all of us.
- Q. Populations that are primarily Orthodox, like Bulgarians and Roumanians, wish to join the European Union in the future. What do you think the role of Orthodoxy will be in Europe?
- R. The role of Orthodoxy was not subject to the rationalization of faith and secularization. It has maintained the original youthfulness of light before the palpable energy of the Lord. A Europe that seeks its childhood needs this 'eternal youth' that the Orthodox Church provides. We believe that despite persecution from Communist régimes and despite the modern ways of thinking and living introduced from the West, the youthfulness of the Orthodox faith has survived and is being reborn from its ashes and can contribute to the regeneration of Europe.
- Q. Since the earthquake that devastated part of Turkey on August 17, 1999, relations between the Turkish and Greek peoples have been improving. Do you think that this improvement will last?
- R. With all our heart, we hope that the improved relations stabilize and we believe that the stability of these relations is the only possible and salutary path for both countries to take.

- Q. What is the current situation of Christians living in Turkey? What relationship does the Ecumenical Patriarch have with the Turkish Government? Can we expect the theological school of Halki to reopen?
- R. After the population exchanges and well-known historical events, relatively few Orthodox Christians enjoying equal rights remained in Turkey. There have been problems, such as the closing of the Halki seminary and the administration of Greek Orthodox community institutions and charities. We have already presented claims to the Turkish Government in these matters.
- Q. The Western media condemned the Serbian action taken in Bosnia and in Kosovo as well as that of the Russians in Chechnia. They ask: Should we be afraid of the Orthodox? What reply do you have for them?
- R. Neither all Russians nor all Serbs are acting in accordance with the wishes of God, as taught in the Orthodox Church. They are living in former Communist countries where the Orthodox faithful and their Church were persecuted. It is not at all correct to connect the actions of Russian and Serbian leaders with those of the Orthodox Church, as if the Church had instigated fighting. His Holiness, Patriarch of Serbia, Pavel, has repeatedly expressed the Church's opposition to racist and religious persecution, regardless of those involved. No one should be afraid of the Orthodox Christianity of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. Anyone who disagrees with the political actions of a people or state called Orthodox must realize that these are not the actions of the Church. Responsibility for such actions should not be imputed to the Church, but rather to those who take such actions.
- Q. At what stage are we in terms of dialogue between Catholic and Orthodox Christians? Has there been progress made towards Christian unity?

- R. There are some difficulties, especially with regards to the Uniates but also on other topics. We have hope and continue to work so that the truth will prevail.
- Q. In several countries religious sects have developed and threaten the influence of major religions. How can you explain this phenomenon? Do you consider some sects dangerous, especially for young people?
- R. Religions and beliefs based on catastrophes that destroy the individual and his/her freedom and have a negative influence on his/her judgement are pernicious to youth and create irrevocable proselytism. These beliefs or religions are not a threat to the great religions but they are a threat to impressionable people who become like robots, without freedom or free will.