

Muhammed Cosmas Megalommatis

Turkey has deep roots in Islam despite recent decades of secularism and this could lead to a new relationship between Islam and modern European, democratic, secular society

This is a young man who would be unusual whatever his background. A young man who chose to become a Muslim but was born and raised in a country which is 99.99 percent Christian. A man who knows 10 languages when most people can't even cope with their own native tongue. A man who has studied philosophy, religion, languages and archaeology and takes a keen interest in the millennia old history of the eastern Mediterranean. A courageous man who isn't interested in keeping his ideas to himself and who isn't afraid of openly criticizing the policies and practices of his native country.

His name is Muhammed Cosmas Megalommatis and he is 37 years old. Born in Athens, he graduated from Athens University and went on to pursue postgradu-

ate degrees in Paris, Brussels, Munster, Damascus, Jerusalem and Baghdad. A list of his publications fills half a page, single spaced.

Megalommatis' family comes originally from Turkey. His father was born in Kastamonu and his mother in Izmir. In 1927 his grandfather moved to Istanbul and from there to Athens.

When his grandfather was leaving he entrusted his whole fortune to a Turk because it was illegal for Greeks leaving Turkey to take their money with them. The Turk was eventually able to find a way to transfer the entire fortune to its rightful owner in Athens. They had been obliged to leave as the result of a treaty which stipulated that the Turks in Greece would move to Turkey and vice versa, despite the fact that his family had never had any problems with

the Turks. When they arrived though, they had to change the family name, Gözübüyüközü, number of problems mainly of nature. They had serious financial problems but the worst problem was discrimination since the Greeks in a different view of matters from who had continued to live in the Empire.

Megalommatis' conversion to Islam led from his investigation of Christianity and its similarities with Islam was widely believed in at approximately the same time that Jesus Christ lived. He concludes that this was a deliberate attempt brought about by the early Christians to fit their own views of how they should have been the Messiah which was to be "at the end of time."

Therefore Jesus could not have predicted Messiah. Upon studying the Koran he came to the conclusion that Prophet Mohammed had actually tried to put out the correct interpretation of the Christ and more, had revealed the Koran.

After a number of years during which he considered Islam and discussed it with his people, he accepted it because he saw Islam throughout history and in its philosophy and precepts is a religion of peace, of surety and of unity with the world. Megalommatis looks on Turkey as a country with deep roots in Islam despite the decades of secularism and sees the possibility that the country could be the origin of a new relationship between Islam and modern European, democratic, secular society. This will be very useful for Europe. He is convinced that Turkey and Morocco are the only countries which can speak of Islam to Europe and of Europe to the Islamic world. Moreover this is something greatly desired since there are millions of Muslims living and working in Europe.

That Turkey is a secular state helps in the direction of the country becoming a part of the European Union (E.U.), according to Megalommatis. He wrote as early as 1980 in a Greek publication that Turkey was more republican than Greece when the two were compared and that the former was closer to modern European standards at the state level than Greece was.

He cited the presence of the Archbishop of Athens at the opening of the Greek Parliament and the recitation of prayer in school before lessons could begin. On top of which the Greek Orthodox Church persists in presenting Christianity through its own viewpoint even though this has been refuted by western academics, professors and like.

Accusing the media and books for having distorted the situation where Northern Cyprus is concerned, Megalommatis blames the Greeks on the island for having started the whole sad affair by massacring Turkish villagers in 1964. He rejects the interpretation which is being put on the 1974 coup d'état on Cyprus and the subsequent Turkish intervention saying that it was quite normal and necessary for Turkey to send troops



If Greece officially recognized the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, this could be a final step toward a federation of the two separate zones in Cyprus

Megalommatis scholar and historian



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the island. He also points out that Archbishop Makarios, who was the head of the Cypriot state at the time, had to flee for his life during the coup which was carried out by Greeks and Greek Cypriots concur with this. Megalommatis suggests that one has to accept the reality of Cyprus as Cypriot rather than Greek. He bases his argument about the reality of the situation on historical considerations dating back to Phoenician times in the first and second millennium B.C. (The word Cyprus itself is of Phoenician origin.)

"One has to be realistic in approaching the issue politically. There are two opinions there and they have to live with this. In order to do this, one has to have full guarantees that it can be done and this means that there have to be an initial understanding and a mutual recognition. I think this mutual understanding and mutual recognition would be greatly helped if Greece was to recognize officially the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and I think this mutual recognition of Greece and Turkey of Greek and Turkish Cyprus would mark a final step toward a federation of two separate zones in Cyprus."

Asked how he viewed the human rights issue in Turkey and the problems with the Kurds and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Megalommatis said that he had lived for a year and a half in eastern Turkey and while visiting archaeological sites, he stayed at times in remote villages where he became acquainted with the Kurdish people. According to what they told him, their main problem in fact is the PKK which presents a continual threat to their normal everyday life.

"Violations of human rights in Turkey are not the same as in several other countries. Besides Turkey is a full democracy. These people in the eastern provinces have voted repeatedly for their own deputies and the only wish they have, according to what I have seen there, is just a way to get rid of the PKK."

Regarding Armenia, Megalommatis refutes the Armenian argument that genocide took place in 1915 and 1916, characterizing it instead as a normal part of history and a response to their own actions. Pointing out that it had been known at the time that for nearly a century, the Armenians were working against the Ottoman Empire in collaboration with Czarist Russia, this was exacerbated during the First World War because it meant the Ottoman army had to fight with enemies at their back.

He believes that many of the Armenians also were killed by Kurdish and Arab villagers who were perturbed by the Armenians crossing their lands. As he also says, the Ottoman administration of the time was quite different from the Turkish government today. He finds the support for Armenian terrorist groups just as reprehensible as that for any terrorist group.

He believes that one reason for the Greeks' support for the PKK is their poor knowledge of the real situation. Despite the many books which have been written about the Kurds in other countries, they have not appeared in Greece. One book in Greek is filled with errors and he suggests that people who do want to learn about the Kurds should go to universities or research centers and start studying in cooperation with someone who does.

Asked why there are no Oriental studies in Greek universities, Megalommatis notes that in those institutions less than 5 percent of the disciplines that make up the Humanities are taught. Describing this as a tragedy for a state which is a member of the EU, he points out that it means that 95 percent of the history of mankind is not taught.

The serious result of this is the pseudo-historical dogma that Greece is the birthplace of civilization and that the Greeks are the elect, the chosen people. This is completely contradicted by historical evidence which has established that civilization started in the Mesopotamian area of the Middle

East as early as the fourth millennium B.C. long before the Greeks were ever heard of. Moreover, Greece was not the birthplace of democracy, only the word is Greek, but instead was first practised between 3500 and 2900 B.C. in the Mesopotamian area as well.

That idea of Greece being the birthplace of civilization, he believes, comes from the last century and in the meantime many advances have been made in research on previously civilizations in the Middle East even though academicians and others, who are a small minority, still believe it to be true. Spreading such knowledge would mean the end of Greco-centrism. He cites the example of the professor of Islamology in Athens who has never studied a single course on Islam nor does he know Arabic or Persian or Turkish or Urdu.

In response to a question about the Lausanne Treaty, which deals with among other things, how the minorities in two countries should be treated, Megalommatis insists that treaties cannot be used to determine how a people should be called. Referring to the Turks who were called Muslims in the Lausanne Treaty, he insists that it doesn't mean that they were of Muslim nationality or used the Muslim language.

But when further asked whether or not he was Greek even though he was a Muslim, he stressed that he was a European since Greece was a member of the EU, but first of all he was a human being. But when it was pointed out that he had said to someone that his parents were Turkish, he commented,

"Yes, I don't think there is much difference between Greek and Turk. When you study character and behavior, especially that of the Greeks of today, whose fathers were born in Anatolia or in Istanbul, you will see that they are quite the same and that there are similarities at social and other levels; then you are really astonished when you see such a problematic political situation."

The Turkish-Greek Question

Interview by Leyla Tavsanoglu with Prof. Muhammed C. Megalomatis, Historian and Nazmi Akiman, Former Turkish Ambassador to Athens.

(Only the introduction and the interview with Megalomatis is translated)
Cumhuriyet, January 23, 1994.

Introduction: The Turkish-Greek problem seems to be an insolvable problem and at least for the close future it seems it will remain as such. This predicament, in addition to some miscalculated steps taken by Ankara, is impacted heavily by Athens' tight hold on to entrenched beliefs and to official history. The Greek professor, Muhammed-Cosmas Megalomatis, who a short while ago visited Istanbul, relates how he was ostracized from the academe because he had challenged the official Greek history and dogmas. He claims the establishment of a Turkish-Greek friendship to be impossible as long as there exist such entrenched ideas. And we, in turn, question ourselves on what sort of mistakes Ankara is committing, thus we have consulted the former Turkish ambassador to Athens, Mr. Nazmi Akiman.

Prof. Muhammed-Cosmas Megalomatis. Born in Athens, 1956. Graduate of Athens University Department of Literature. He has worked on subjects in the fields of classical languages, archeology, religion and literature. He knows Greek, English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Farsi and Turkish. Forced to leave Pantheos University, Athens on account of his objection to traditional politics and opinions. In 1986, he received the Abdi Ipekci Award for Journalism. Last year he converted to Islam at the Al-Azhar in Cairo.

(Nazmi Akiman. Born in Ankara, 1929. Graduated from Istanbul University Law School. Graduate work at Columbia University in political science. Employed as the first Turkish ambassador to Havana, Cuba. Later, served as Foreign Ministry Assistant Consultant and Speaker. Appointed as ambassador to Athens in 1984. He served greatly to smooth the Aegean crisis that erupted between Ankara and Athens in 1987. He masterminded the Davos dialogues between prime ministers Papandreu and Özal. After five years in Athens, he served as ambassador to Madrid for two years. He retired in 1991.)

You have been proclaimed persona non gratta within the academic circles and your university tenure has been terminated. What were the events that led to this?

Megalomatis- I began to realize that fabricated and untrue information that passes as true history is spread and published in Greece.

Who was it that does this?

Megalomatis- Everyone. For example, there is only one person who instructs a course in Islamic history in the university at which I worked. Included in this course is political history of the Islamic world. However, this person has not even read a line about the political history of the Islamic world. There are fabrications and mistakes in the book that s/he has published on the subject.

Unbelievable. For example, according to this book, Mohammed the Prophet had assigned Abu Bakr, the first caliph, as first Imam. Whereas, as you know, Abu Bakr was never Imam, he served as caliph, in addition he was never appointed by Muhammed.

This is just one example. As I began to notice these fabrications, I began to react. My reaction stemmed solely from academic concerns, from concerns that any scientist would have. Consequently, I published a critique of this book. I also distributed my article to the teaching staff and the professors at Pantheos University. This event I am talking of took place in 1988.

When there was no response to the article from any of the professors, I published it in quite a few Greek newspapers. As a result hell broke loose.

So, what did they do after it was published in the papers?

Megalomatis- That Islamic history professor sued me. All the teaching staff of Pantheos University showed solidarity with him. This Islamic history professor claimed that I had slandered him/her by saying that s/he had not done any research related to Islam and that his book was full of mistakes.

How did the trial end?

Megalomatis- The professor recanted the complaint. Because s/he knew s/he would be humiliated. The trial thus fell. But it was not over yet. S/he went and told the Greek newspapers all sorts of things about me. That I was crazy and that my assertions that Islam is a progressive religion and the Ottoman Empire was a civilized state were testimonies to my insanity.

So, why do you think they were doing this?

Megalomatis- Look, this is only one example among many. I have had experiences with professors even more ignorant in their subjects. At the root of the problem in Greece lies this. There is one underlying reason to the behavior of Greek politics, Greek foreign policy, Greek relations with her neighbors.

What was this reason?

Megalomatis- In Greece an official history, a historical dogma is created. This has been formed and disseminated through all of Greece. If you try to challenge it, you would be pushed out of the society and be erased. They will not give you the right to live, they will not publish your books. This is a truly serious dogma. According to it, human civilization was born in Greece. Human civilization begins with the Hellenic civilization. But at this juncture, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Cartage, Hitite civilizations are not regarded.

As you know, much of the hieroglyph, stylography was deciphered in the last century. From these writings, the international academic circles learned one thing. That was that human civilization began in 4000 BC in Mesopotamia. The teaching of this information in Greece is prohibited. Show me a single scientist in Greece who would write a book about the Sumerians or a single publisher who would publish it.

These Greeks do not want to teach the true history that is being taught all over the world. The problem is that simple.

Then, why are they doing it?

Megalomatis- Very simple. With the dissemination of this knowledge that amazing dogma that the human civilization was born out of the Hellenic civilization will come tumbling down.

In other words, is this done with the fear that the "megali idea" will disintegrate?

Megalomatis- Have no doubts. As a matter of fact, there can be no mentality as unreasonable as this "megali idea." This mentality has caused Greece to be defeated in many fields. Examine the universities. Up to only five percent of the disciplines that teach world civilization are taught in Greece. Is there such a thing as a university without Russian, Turkish, Indian, Chinese, Arabic, Assyrian, Babylonian, Spanish, Latin literatures departments?. There is in Greece. At Greek universities only Greek, English, French and Italian literatures are being taught. There is not even a Latin literature department. You can take courses in Latin but you can not graduate from Latin literature and philosophy. Because there is no such Latin department.

If such dogmatic minds are prevalent in Greece, how will the hopes for improving Turkish-Greek relations be realized?

Megalomatis- I speak for the Greek people. If something else is not read, if something else is not taught to you, what can be done? Let us leave primary, secondary and university curriculums aside. Every darn day, the radios, the televisions, the magazines are broadcasting in the same direction. This is the case even in books.

Research is zero. Look at the condition of Greek politicians and diplomats. Every darn day, they re-heat and re-serve the same old dogma. Then, they themselves become the victims of this dogma.

They pretend that by seceding from the Ottoman Empire in 1828, they have proclaimed independence. How faulty. The most qualified Greeks (Rums) of the Ottoman Empire, for example, Sinan the Grand Architect, had become a Muslim. The true civilization is the works of Sinan, not the few tiny churches in the Godforsaken hilltops of the southern Balkans. Of course, it can not be reduced to the comparison of two buildings. It is a more general problem.

A bunch of books by Aristotle, Herodotus and Plato are being published, yet it is curious that the Greeks do not know classical Greek. But if an average French, German, British citizen has taken lessons in Latin or in classical Greek, s/he can read and write these languages well. But the knowledge of an average Greek person who has studied classical Greek in Greece can not even be compared to a French citizen's.

As far as I know, you have brought 20 kilograms of mail with you to Istanbul in order to mail abroad..

Megalomatis- Of course I did. Most of the registered letters I had sent from Greece have not reached their addresses.

You mean the Greek Intelligence Service is following you?

Megalomatis- I could not say that they follow me everyday. But they bug my phone.

From what you tell, should we deduce that there is intense xenophobia in Greece?

Megalomatis- I believe I was able to convey my trouble to you. Have you ever heard of the Greek phrase "koutofrangi"? This means stupid French. That is, according to the Greek, the French are stupid. Another Greek word is "Amerikanakya." That is "small

Americans." In Greece xenophobia is not just directed towards the Middle East, Europe or America, it is also directed towards simple workers. If you write and defend ideas against the dogmas, you will be proclaimed as an enemy of Greece. There is even a phrase for that. They will call you "Misellinas," that is the person who hates Greece. They have even elaborated the concept to the term "misellinismos" which means the ideal of hating Greece. Absolutely incomprehensible.

I return to my previous question. How can the Turkish-Greek friendship be promoted with xenophobia and dogmas?

Megalomatis- According to me, if in Europe all the historical facts are explained analytically at the institutions and academic organizations, then the problem of Greece would be revealed, and there would be effort to solve this problem.

When one considers this xenophobia, is it possible to assume that the Greeks (Rums) who left Turkey are facing important problems in Greece?

Megalomatis- Yes, they live in quite hard conditions. Also there are the west Thrace Turks. Up until the last decade these people were called Turks, now it has been decided against the use of this word. Moreover, whomever says "I am Turkish" is being thrown in jail.