

PLATEFORME DE PARIS
POUR LE DIALOGUE INTERCULTUREL

**Pope Benedict XVI's Trip to Turkey
in the French Press**

*Elodie Maurot
French Federation of the Catholic Press
Istanbul – April 2007*

I have been asked to give a presentation on how the French press covered Benedict XVI's trip to Turkey from November 28th to December 1st of last year. First of all, I should specify that my study only deals with the print media – newspapers and magazines.

I would like to begin by emphasizing that the daily French newspaper press realized the importance of this trip to Turkey. They sent correspondents and covered each leg of the journey. We can certainly not say as much of the weekly news magazine press, which hardly covered the event, with the notable exception of Catholic weekly magazines that have, however, a more limited readership in France.

Let's get back to the topic at hand – the daily press. The interest sparked by this trip must first be put into perspective with what is now called the "Regensburg Controversy." Let's think back for a moment. When the Pope's trip began last November 28th, everyone, including the journalists, had in mind the serious media-related, religious crisis caused by Benedict XVI's remarks at the German University of Regensburg on September 14th.

It is an understatement to say that the French press had difficulty deciphering the lecture given by Benedict XVI in Regensburg. The polemical reactions accusing Benedict XVI of negative remarks about Islam were skyrocketing even before the French translation of the lecture was available on the Vatican website! There would be a lot more to say about the role of the media in this crisis . . .

Let's briefly recall what happened. Benedict started his highly speculative theological reflection on the relation between faith and reason with the harsh criticism of Muslim religion and the Prophet by the late fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Palaiologos. The Pope did not sufficiently distinguish Manuel II's perspective from his own opinion. Those who have read the entire lecture know that the Pope's remarks were not directly aimed at Islam, but were rather about the relation between faith and reason in all religions. The choice to use this example was, however, very awkward and not easily justifiable because an example drawn from the Christian tradition, which has also had to confront the daunting faith-reason question, would have served the same purpose.

We know the rest of the story:

- the media-related religious scandal;
- the indignation and anger of Muslim people often instrumentalized by radical Islamic movements and political parties;
- and, not as publicized but just as real, the chagrin and confusion of many Muslims who did not understand Benedict XVI's remarks as reported in the worldwide media.

We also remember:

- the Pope's personal expression of regret on several occasions;
- the Holy See's attempt to clarify the Pope's thought and dissipate what he considered to be a misunderstanding;
- and the September 25th meeting with twenty-two representatives of Muslim countries where the Pope emphasized his "profound respect" for Muslims and reiterated the need for "authentic dialogue."

The Regensburg affair is by no means beside the point for the issue we are discussing today. If the French daily press covered the Pope's trip to Turkey so well, it is because they realized the importance and significance of this trip after the commotion in September (and commotion is an understatement . . .)

There are two more factors that made this trip crucial or "*incontournable*" as we say in French. First, as the press pointed out, this was Benedict XVI's first visit to a Muslim country. Furthermore, less than two years after his election as Pope, Benedict XVI was still "under observation" for the French media. Even though they were more or less familiar with Cardinal Ratzinger's ideas, French journalists were relatively curious about the beginning of Benedict XVI's papacy and his vision of worldwide current events. Given the international context – the situation in Iraq, in Iran, in the Middle East – and the national context in France – where the question of Islam's relation to secularism is frequently discussed – the Pope's visit to a Muslim country could not be ignored. Another factor on this list is the issue of Turkey's possible membership in the European Union. The French voters' mistrust and fear concerning Turkey's membership, which had its part in the non-ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, as well as the expectation of new from the European Commission on membership negotiations, also favored good coverage of the visit. In short, all of these factors resulted in particular attentiveness to the Pope's trip in the French press.

Perhaps it would be useful to point out a fact that might seem surprising to you. Religious current events do not usually generate much interest in France, a very secularized country. It can be said that French daily newspapers publish very little religious news. *La Croix*, a daily Catholic newspaper, is the exception. It provides a sort of religious news "public service." The broad coverage of the Pope's trip is thus all the more noteworthy.

Let's now turn to our focus and analyze how the trip was perceived and what the press said about it. As an "*apéritif*" – I don't know if this is done in Turkey, but in France, the "*apéritif*" is almost "*incontournable*," it seemed interesting to begin by looking at the front-page headlines on the trip. The Pope's trip made the front-page headlines seven times in the daily newspapers, which is a lot.

Le Figaro, a conservative newspaper with a circulation of 320, 000 copies, published a dozen pages on the trip over four days. The day before departure, the front-page headline read "Benedict XVI's Trip to Turkey under Pressure." On the second day of the trip, the front-page headline read "The Pope Encourages Turkey to Draw Closer to Europe."

Libération, a left-wing newspaper with a circulation of 132, 000 copies that doesn't always cover religious news, published six pages on the trip. The front-page headline read, "Turkey: The Pope Goes through the Back Door."

La Croix, a politically moderate Catholic newspaper with a circulation of 96,000 copies, published three front-pages and eleven pages on the Pope's trip. It was the record. On the first day, the front-page headline read, "Benedict XVI: A Complicated Trip to the East;" on the second day, "The Pope Reaches Out to Muslims;" and on the last day, "Benedict XVI Drew Believers Closer Together."

Le Monde, the leading newspaper in France with a circulation of 350, 000 copies, did not publish a front-page headline on the Pope's trip. It did, however, publish a picture on the first day of the trip with a caption that read, "Benedict XVI in Hostile Territory." In the middle of

the trip, it published a header on the front page that read, “The Pope Gives Conditional Support to Ankara.”

Let’s now turn to the content of these articles and the angles chosen by the journalists to cover the event.

I will develop the following points:

- 1) The insistence on the risks of the trip
- 2) The special consideration given to the Pope’s outreach towards Islam and Muslims
- 3) The issues of secularism, religious freedom, and Christian minorities
- 4) The question of Turkey’s joining the European Union

To conclude, I will sum up what seems to come out of this trip in terms of Turkey’s image

1. A High-Risk Trip

A high-risk trip, this is the press’ first impression – a “perilous” trip politically speaking, but also hazardous in terms of the Pope’s personal safety. Many journalists draw attention to the extraordinary security measures that had been taken for the Pope’s trip, similar to or even more important than the measures taken for George W. Bush’s visit. At the start of the trip, pictures of police in uniform surrounding Hagia Sophia and others of Islamic radicals demonstrating against the visit vie to illustrate newspaper articles.

“A Papal Trip to Turkey Sown with Snares” reads the title on the inside page of the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*. “Turkish Peril for Benedict XVI” reads the title of an editorial in the leading newspaper *Le Monde*.

On this point, however, the Catholic newspaper *La Croix* chooses not to add to the impression of danger. The director of the newspaper stresses that the Pope is potentially in danger on all of his trips, and not only on a trip to a Muslim country. As the article emphasizes, “The danger incurred by the Pope during all of his journeys, including even short trips in Rome, is real, whether the threat be politically motivated or from a person suffering mental illness. Because of what he represents, the Pope is not welcome everywhere, even in France, as we all remember.”

The French press further explains that the trip is risky mainly due to religious and political tensions. As a journalist for *Le Figaro* states, “the trip is a test case for relations between Rome and Islam.” The press accentuates Benedict XVI’s particular dilemma of visiting a 99 percent Muslim country after his lecture in Regensburg. The press also emphasizes the challenge for the former Cardinal Ratzinger who was said to oppose Turkey’s joining the European Union.

But for the Catholic newspaper *La Croix*, the trip is risky mainly because of the images of angry fundamentalists demonstrators which were broadcast around the world. “These images can potentially fuel fear and hate in all who see them, be they Christian or Muslim” fears *La Croix*. Risky also because of Benedict XVI’s possible mistakes, “his words will be closely scrutinized . . . and the least slip-up will be exploited by those whose interest lies in the clash of civilizations.”

2. Broad coverage was given to the Pope's outreach towards Islam and Muslims

Is it necessary to repeat that the sovereign pontiff Benedict XVI plays the main role in this trip? This observation is not as anecdotal as it seems. I raise this point because since Benedict XVI is the main protagonist for the French media, other people remain in the background, even though they too are important participants in the trip, such as Prime Minister Erdogan, the Grand Mufti of Turkey, and the Grand Mufti of Istanbul. Their speeches do not get much coverage in the French press. The Pope's meetings with these Turkish officials are covered, but for the most part, only his comments are conveyed in the press.

Let's look at several examples of the Pope's outreach to Muslims.

The press emphasizes that the Pope has increased his efforts to help people get over his misinterpreted remarks on violence and Islam at Regensburg.

Liberation's headlines include "Benedict XVI: Enchantment Offensive in Turkey" and "Operation Charm." The press mentions the Pope's tact in handling this trip, where he appears more political and diplomatic than usual. "The stern theologian whose political blunders were embarrassing the Holy See has finally learned to play the role of perfect communicator as Pope," comments *Liberation* on the last day of the trip.

The press also wrote about Benedict XVI's gracious gestures. As *Liberation* describes, "Benedict XVI, not wearing shoes and facing Mecca, prayed beside the Grand Mufti of Istanbul, Mustapha Cakrici. This gesture is even more symbolically powerful than Jean Paul II's visit to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus to pray at Saint John the Baptist's tomb." *Liberation*, characterizing the visit to Hagia Sophia as "mistake-free." This left-wing, often anti-clerical publication is not, however, known for excessively praising the Pope...

In the middle of the visit, *La Croix* states, "The pope has proven to be a true pontiff. Recalling that "one of the traditional titles came from his historical role in the unity of the Churches," *La Croix* sees in the Pope an "artisan of reconciliation and not division" in a region "that he said has its own vocation as a bridge between East and West, between Asia and Europe, between cultures and religions, a region that needs encouragement in this mission by clearly refusing the rationale of a conflict between civilizations."

La Croix also asks Mustapha Chérif, a Muslim intellectual, to analyze the Pope's speeches. Speaking from Algiers, Chérif deems that the Pope has cleared up all ambiguity and that the Regensburg controversy is now behind us, as the pope recalled his deep trust and confidence in Islam and muslims and reiterate his attachment in the principles of dialogue of Vatican II.

3. The issues of religious freedom, Christian minorities, and secularism

The French press also focuses on the issue of religious freedom and the situation of Christian minorities in Turkey. The press deals particularly well with this dimension of the trip. The journalists don't seem to have forgotten that before being a visit to a Muslim country, before the problems and anger caused by the Regensburg lecture, Benedict XVI's trip had been

planned as a meeting with his Orthodox brothers, notably his counterpart the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I.

Some newspapers take advantage of this visit to discuss the presence of Orthodox Christians in the world, emphasizing that although Bartholomew I is the spiritual leader of only a few thousand faithful in Turkey, the Orthodox world has recognized the primacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople since the origins of Christianity. This proves Bartholomew I's importance for the two-hundred million faithful Orthodox Christians throughout the world.

Three publications provide portrayals of Bartholomew I for their readers. "Bartholomew I : A Patriarch Seeking Freedom" states *Le Figaro*, while *La Croix* says "the Successor of Saint Andrew," referring to the bond of Eastern Christians to early Christian Churches. The weekly news magazine *La Vie* (167 000 one hundred and sixty-seven thousand copies) publishes a three-page feature article entitled "Bartholomew I: Figure of Resistance in Turkey" during the first week of the trip.

These portrayals highlight:

- the Patriarch's problems with Turkish secularism : legal status, properties partially confiscated by the Turkish government ;
- the fact that his repeated request that Ankara officially recognize his international status continues to be denied;
- his commitment to environmental protection;
- his moderate positions in the Orthodox world, especially when compared to the Patriarch of Russia Alexis I (the First).

Others note that Bartholomew I is respected by Turkish politicians and intellectuals.

From a broader perspective, the French media speaks of Orthodox Christians as a minority that has experienced setbacks since the foundation of modern Turkey. "The Last Christians in Turkey Waiting for the Pope," declares an article in *Le Figaro* that traces the history of a minority forced to flee Turkey since the beginning of the century. Many journalists go to the Orthodox seminary on Heybeliada Island, one of the largest Orthodox schools of theology, that was closed by the Turkish authorities in 1971, thereby preventing the Orthodox from training their clergy.

The journalists also highlight the extreme minority situation of Christians in Turkey, as well as their hope that Turkey will be able to join the European Union, and that their own situation will consequently improve.

Finally, the newspapers report on the more strictly religious and ecumenical aspects of the trip. They mention the fraternal relations between Benedict XVI and Bartholomew I as a sign of the diminishing tension in Catholic – Orthodox dialogue since the election of the new Pope. "Rome and Constantinople are Ready for Fraternal Dialogue" is *La Croix*'s headline on the last day of the trip, along with a picture of the Pope and the Patriarch shaking hands.

There are also reports on the Pope's visit to the House of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus, a more strictly religious leg of the journey. This visit is the occasion to highlight just how small the Christian minority is and the noble simplicity of their religious practice (the Pope celebrated Mass on a small, plain altar). On the one hand, this simplicity has often been seen as a symptom of the precariousness of the Turkish Christians' situation. On the other, no journalist

mentions that this celebration demonstrates the actual freedom of religious practice that exists in this largely Muslim country. Maybe this point is overlooked by the French journalists because they are so used to religious freedom !

4. Handling the Issue of Europe

First of all, the journalists do not confuse registers on this issue. The journalists deal with Turkey's possible admission to the European Union (also in the news during the Pope's visit because Brussels had recommended suspending negotiations), in separate articles. The Pope's remarks on Turkey's membership are not mixed up with his other statements.

What can accurately be said about this matter? The press picks up on Benedict XVI's apparent "change of course" on the issue. A change of course that they describe reasonably well given the confusion due to the misunderstanding (?) between Prime Minister Erdogan and Benedict XVI during their encounter at the Ankara Airport. After their meeting, the Prime Minister states to the press, "I asked for his support on our way towards joining the European Union. He said, "We want Turkey to be part of Europe." The Vatican Press Office later specifies, "The Holy See has neither the power nor the specific task of intervening on the precise point of Turkey's entry in the European Union. It is not its responsibility... However, it regards positively and encourages the path of dialogue and rapprochement to Europe in virtue of common values and principles." Dialogue? Rapprochement? Integration? Confusion lingers over the French press and several terms are used for awhile.

"The Pope Opens the Doors of Europe for Turkey," declares the front-page headline of *Le Figaro* that extrapolates on the effects of the Pope's statement (as if the Pope alone could open the doors of Europe for Turkey...) *Le Monde*'s headline is more precise, "The Pope Offers Conditional Support to Ankara," while *La Croix* states, "To A Turkey with European Dreams, Pope Proposes Dialogue."

It is clear – the Pope wants to encourage Turkey's rapprochement with Europe and the French press does not miss the occasion to highlight it. The press also points out the condition the Pope establishes: observance of religious freedom in Turkey.

Given all of this, what can we deduce about the image of Turkey during and at the end of the trip?

1. The Image of the Turkish Authorities and Prime Minister Erdogan

The press draws attention to the confusion the trip causes at the head of the Turkish government. They point out that the Prime Minister had hesitated, deciding to "snub the Pope" (*Le Figaro* in November) and go to the NATO summit instead of welcoming Benedict XVI. They also point out the Prime Minister's last-minute about-face, accepting at the last possible moment to greet the Pope at the airport. The French press commends this greeting, but also sees it as very political. In the end, Erdogan decides to play the "Pope card" so as not to further complicate the already difficult negotiations with the European Union. In a tense situation with the EU, "it's good to have the Pope on your side," states the left-wing newspaper *Liberation*. "Ergodan's Ambiguous Dance with Benedict XVI," a title from the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* sums up fairly well the journalists' impression of the enigmatic Prime Minister who wants to keep his guard up with the Regensburg Pope so as not

to offend his conservative electorate. After the inaugural meeting at the airport and throughout the trip, the press reports on the Prime Minister's gesture of goodwill.

2. The Image of the Turkish Population

From indifference to anger, the Turkish people's sentiments generally appear as either neutral or negative. All of the journalists speak of the Turkish people's aloofness, but show that they are more annoyed by the traffic problems caused by the security measures than by the Pope's visit itself. Nevertheless, there is a general impression of hostility as these excerpts indicate.

On Day 1 of the visit, a title in *Le Figaro* reads, "Icy Welcome for Benedict XVI in Ankara"

In *La Croix*

On Day 1, a title reads "Turkey: Between Rejecting the Pope and Political Interest"

On Day 2, another title says "Ankara Extends a Lukewarm Welcome"

On the last day, from an article, "the Pope's appeals left unheard in the streets of Fatih" and adds "very distant, but not indifferent to the Pope's visit, the Turkish people remain sceptical."

In *Le Monde*, a title reads "Turkish Opinion Split Between Indifference, Worry and Anger." The article notes that it is difficult to find a group in favour of the Pope's visit" and adds that "even the Orthodox have not gotten over the Regensburg speech that had caused trouble for the Christian minorities of Muslim countries."

In these accounts, the Turks seem to be following the trip from afar and either don't have an opinion about it, or are hostile towards it. They don't seem to expect much from the Pope's visit. "For me as a Muslim, he doesn't represent anything," says an inhabitant of Ankara.

The press does notice that Benedict XVI's image improves by the end of the trip. "Benedict Charms the Turks, But Remains Unconvincing," says the headline in *Le Monde*. In the same article, an inhabitant of Istanbul is quoted, "This Pope who annoyed us is in fact a friend of Turkey." The title of another article in *Le Monde* repeated the comment of an Istanbul merchant, "He's Not that Bad After All." "Benedict XVI rectified his image as an anti-Muslim, anti-Turk Pope," concludes *Le Monde*'s correspondent in Turkey.

The French journalists reiterate the positive reactions to the trip published in the Turkish press, which, for example, had revealed that the Pope hid his cross when visiting Ataturk's mausoleum. The French press also notes that many Turkish newspapers published a picture of the Pope holding a small Turkish flag in Ephesus on their front pages. The Turkish press observes that towards the end of the visit, important politicians were vying to be seen with the Pope, especially those from Prime Minister Ergodan's AKP party. This demonstrates that the mood has changed, at least in political and media spheres.

I'll close by raising an issue that has not been settled from my point of view. I'm not a specialist on Turkey, but I have noticed that journalists perceive Turkey as a "Muslim" country. Is this really the case? In other words, are all Turkish people Muslim, and are their responses to the Pope's trip directly related to their Muslim faith? Does secularization have no impact whatsoever in Turkey? Aren't there any Turkish citizens who aren't biased by religious convictions? These questions are quite important because Turkish apathy to the Pope's trip was read, implicitly and explicitly, as that of Muslim citizens indifferent to the

visit of the chief leader of another religion other than their own. If Turks really are “conditioned” by their Muslim faith and culture to this extent, then this version of the situation is accurate. But, if the relation between Turkish identity and Muslim identity is not so intense, then that raises fundamental questions about how this trip was portrayed and how the Turks were depicted. From this perspective, it is unfortunate that the French press did not investigate the religious sociology of Turkey. Although a few comments from people in the streets are interesting, they are not enough to answer this question.

The Issue of Radical Islam

The articles published just before and on the first day of the trip are mostly about those who were opposed to the Pope’s visit and had staged demonstrations the Sunday before. The press highlighted the fears of the extremists: “the Pope wants to take over Istanbul;” the refusal of conversion; the extremists demonstrating holding signs with a two-headed snake representing Bartholomew I and Benedict XVI.

The reports show that hostility is mostly felt by the inhabitants of neighborhoods affected by Islamic extremism, but they do not always specify the actual political pull of the radical Islamic movements. This raises the question of how journalists deal with extremist movements.

Le Figaro observes that twenty thousand Islamic fundamentalists demonstrated against the Pope the Sunday before his arrival, “fewer than the one million who had been expected.”

Le Monde specifies that this radical Islamic movement only got 5% of the vote in the legislative elections. But on the front page of that same edition, *Le Figaro* publishes the picture of a demonstrator. This raises the question of how visible minorities are portrayed in the press.

The reports from the streets of Ankara and Istanbul try to give a balanced view of the Turkish people’s responses by pointing out how opinions vary in different neighborhoods. As *Le Monde* and *Liberation* point out, “The hostile demonstrations outside the Beyazid mosque only drew a few dozen participants.”

The comments gathered by *La Croix* demonstrate that even Turks who are very hostile towards the Pope can change their minds about him. *La Croix* is the only newspaper that shows just how complex the Turkish people’s reactions are, including the most hostile ones. For example, an inhabitant of Istanbul who states, “the government has rolled out the red carpet for the Pope, but the people don’t want him here because he insulted our Prophet,” can later say, “the Pope’s support of European integration is important, he’s going to help us. He also said the right things about Islam.” Another example – an inhabitant of Istanbul, hostile towards the Pope declares, “Every Christian should go pray in a mosque, and every Muslim should go pray in a church. That the Pope does it is proof of respect.” (*La Croix*, last day of visit)

On the whole, the population seems “satisfied that the Pope does not identify Islam with violence or terrorism.”

Conclusion

We have looked at what the French news media said about the event. On the whole, the French press projects the image of a possibly dangerous trip that started with hostility, but then managed to encourage signs of respect and dialogue.

We must note, however, that this presentation is far from being exhaustive. What did the free newspapers distributed in the subway say? What about television and websites?

Furthermore, readers are generally loyal to one daily newspaper. What will each readership retain from the trip?

What I have said here applies to all of the different newspapers. In conclusion, I will summarize what each paper focuses on.

The French conservative who reads *Le Figaro* will have had a vision of the trip that brings out the minorities' problems and the power of the radical Islamic movements. They also will have read about Benedict XVI's support for the rapprochement of Turkey and his encouragement of dialogue with Islam.

The leftist French reader of *Liberation* will have been more informed about the situation of the Christian minorities thanks to a two-page feature article and about the issue of secularism in Turkey.

The French Catholic, also a citizen with liberal or conservative views who can read one of the other two papers I just mentioned, will have had complete coverage of the trip with emphasis on dialogue with the Orthodox and with Islam. The editorial line stresses all of the factors contributing to dialogue without overlooking the obstacles.

Le Parisien, the Paris region's daily working-class newspaper will have been the only one to take advantage of the occasion to talk about Turkish society with a report from Galatasaray High School, where several students regret that "Europe doesn't want us" and an article about the situation of women in Turkey.

But all readers will have had the impression of a risky trip that in the end went very well, improving relations that had been harmed by the Pope's remarks in Regensburg.

I do need to mention that coverage in the weekly news magazines was very limited. Doing this in the conclusion doesn't mean minimizing the deficiency of these magazines printed in several hundred thousand copies every week. On the contrary. This choice can be explained by the fact that these publications did not consider this trip particularly newsworthy, and therefore, I didn't have enough material to work with. *Le Point* published a short factual article on the trip entitled, "Benedict XVI in Muslim Country." The same goes for *L'Express* with an article entitled, "The Pope in Islam's Territory."

Le Nouvel Observateur published a feature article, but it was more on the relations between Islam and Christianity than the Pope's trip to Turkey. It starts with the provocative title, "Benedict XVI in Turkey: The Shadow of the Crusades." More than surprising! There is also an interview about Christian minorities and an article entitled, "Between the Bible and the Koran: Putting a Stop to the Bloodshed" on the issue of the relation to Christianity and Islam to violence. In brief, we are a long way from the Pope's visit to Turkey! These articles are

commentaries on the challenges of Islamo-Christian dialogue rather than on unfolding current events.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do research on all of these magazines, but during the Regensburg controversy, *Le Point* published as the title on the cover, "The Doctrinaires: The New Religious War" in the middle of the page against a background of stormy skies. Shouldn't these people (do they really deserve to be called journalists?), who broadcast and fuelled the Regensburg controversy so well, have put the Pope praying next to the Grand Mufti of Istanbul on the cover as well?

The weekly press missed an occasion to publicize a peaceful meeting between religious leaders. In one way or another, either by over-emphasizing issues of violence or playing down the initiatives for dialogue and peace, it seems that the weekly press was more interesting by the link between religions and violence than by the work of religions for peace.