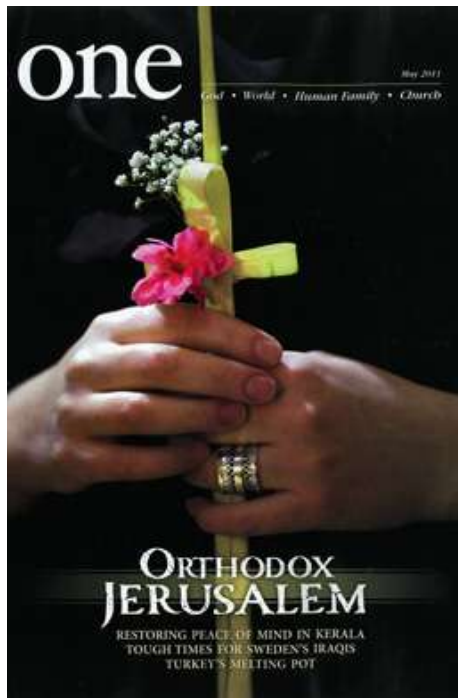


Turkey's Melting Pot

The lively cultures & faiths of Hatay

by Sean Sprague



In the cultural center of the modern Turkish city of Antakya — known in the ancient world as Antioch — the halls are alive with the sound of music.

A recent concert begins with a solemn Greek Orthodox chant sung in Arabic. That is followed by a

Sunni Muslim prayer, then a spirited rendition of the traditional Jewish Hava Nagila, some Armenian chant and finally an Alawi song — all performed by members of a 48-person local choir in white silk robes, accompanied by a dozen musicians playing Turkish, Arabic and Western instruments.



The choir's performance brings the audience to its feet for a standing ovation. But the concert offers more than just music: It is a living example of how so many different faiths and cultures in this corner of Turkey manage to dwell side by side — literally in harmony. The choir's brochure puts it proudly: "We are the children of the same God, speaking different languages, believing different religions — our differences are our richness."

That richness helps define the southern Turkish province of Hatay — a place that has survived a troubled history to emerge as a remarkable blend of peoples and traditions.

Hatay is a small finger of fertile land in the center of southern Turkey, beside the Mediterranean Sea, jutting

into Syria, close to the city of Aleppo. The Orontes River Valley runs through the middle; its banks and surrounding hills are known for wheat, corn, apricots, peaches and citrus fruit.

In Hatay, Arabic is spoken as widely as Turkish. Its population, though largely Sunni Muslim Turks, includes notable minorities: Alawi Arabs, Orthodox Arabs, Armenians, Syriac Christians, Latin Catholics, Protestants and Jews.

But there has been a steady exodus of Christian and Jewish minorities, as people have left the region in search of a better life.



“Young people, especially the Christians and Jews, have been leaving Hatay for decades,” says 50-year-old Mizel Kacanci, an Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christian who himself left Hatay 20 years ago to work in Germany. “All my five brothers and sisters left Antioch,” he explains, “but I came back to look after my parents, who are in their 80’s now. And today the economy here is much better than

before.”

Mr. Kacanci’s parents, Jan and Janet, live among constant reminders of their faith — both in their community and in their home. Their modest house is filled with icons of Jesus and the saints. And on Sundays they walk to the nearby Orthodox church.

Antioch’s religious diversity attracts a wide array of believers — including a thriving and growing community of Korean Protestants.

Pastor Seongho Chan is a cherubic-faced evangelist who has been in Antioch since 2007. He runs a church in what used to be an Ottoman bank.

“Denomination doesn’t really matter in Turkey,” he explains. “About 20 people come on Sunday for Communion while another ten come out of interest. They want to taste God’s love.”

Hatay’s capital and largest city, with some 100,000 inhabitants, Antioch has been a major center of Christianity since the very beginning. Here, before settling in Rome, is where St. Peter lived between the years 42 and 48 and is said to have used a rock church, perhaps the oldest in the world, a mile from the city center at the foot of Mount Staurin.

During the Roman and Byzantine eras, Antioch served as the capital of the province of Syria and had over half a million people, the third largest city in the eastern Mediterranean after Constantinople and Alexandria. But after a terrible earthquake in 562, which claimed 200,000 lives, the city declined. It was invaded by the Arabs in the seventh century, then taken by the Crusaders in 1098, remaining largely Christian again for the next 170 years until Sultan Baibars I conquered and largely destroyed it in 1268.

Nothing remains of the Byzantine period except the mosaics in the museum and the cave church of St. Peter (with a facade added in the 11th century).

But the city's Christian heritage endures. It is the titular seat of two Orthodox and three Catholic patriarchs.

To walk through Antioch today is to walk through a city that is both historically rich and religiously diverse.

With the great medieval bazaar on one side, with its tiny shops selling nuts, dried fruits, lingerie and cell phones, the old town forms what priests enthusiastically call an "ecumenical triangle." Within short walking distance are the synagogue to the north, the Latin Catholic church to the west, the Orthodox cathedral to the east, and a scattering of ancient mosques in all directions.

By far the most impressive church is the Orthodox cathedral. With a high dome supported by sturdy limestone columns, it is discreetly hidden behind a narrow gateway so that you almost come upon it by chance. About 100 Arabic-speaking members of the Antiochene Orthodox community attend the evening Divine Liturgy on Ascension Thursday. Father Dimitri Dogum leads his small congregation in its ancient and haunting chant.

Father Dogum says about 10,000 Christians live in Hatay province, with some 1,200 Christians, about 250 families, in the city of Antioch. In a conversation, he sounds a familiar refrain. "Numbers are slowly declining, as people move to where the jobs are, cities like Izmir or Istanbul, or emigrate abroad."



Five minutes away, through a warren of alleyways, stands the Latin Catholic church. Its pastor, Father Domenico Bertogli, a Capuchin from Italy, has lived in Turkey for 42 years, and in

Antioch for the last two decades.

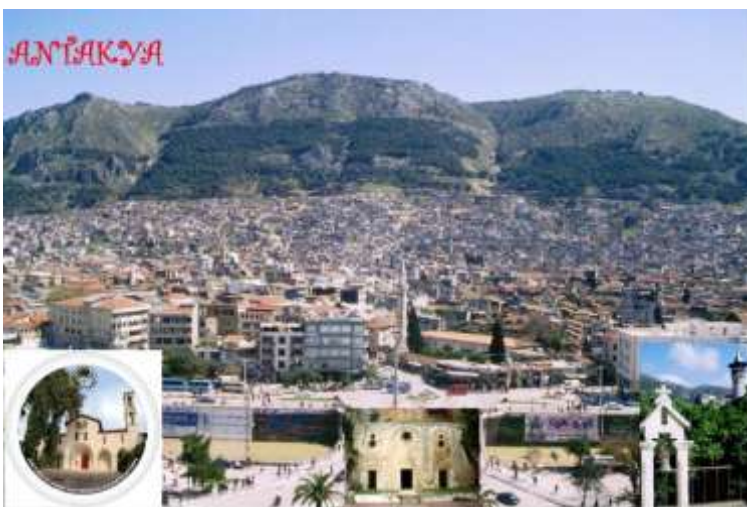
Father Bertogli explains why so many different kinds of Christians live together peaceably. “Antioch is the place where we were first called Christians,” he says, “and it should not matter whether we call ourselves Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. Many of the young people tell me this. What matters is that we are Christians!”

Father Bertogli’s Catholic flock is much smaller than the Orthodox, but they celebrate Easter on the same day. With the fluidity enjoyed by Christians in Antioch, people also celebrate in each other’s churches — depending on their taste or, more important, their language. For example, many young people of Antioch do not understand Arabic; rather than attend the Arabic-language Divine Liturgy at the Orthodox church, they participate in the Catholic Mass, which is celebrated in Turkish.



While Hatay is home to Jewish, Christian and Muslim faithful, it also welcomes another sort of spiritual seeker: pilgrims and tourists. Tourism is booming, especially in Antioch. A growing number of visitors crowd its streets and winding alleyways, peering into churches and mosques and wandering through the numerous museums. These days, modern Turks — educated, prosperous, well-read and connected to the rest of the world through the internet and satellite television — see the minority religious and ethnic communities of their great country as

curiosities. As a result, the province that was once invaded by Christian Crusaders and Muslim warriors now faces new invaders, wearing fanny packs and armed with digital cameras.



Father Dogum and Father Bertogli are used to parties of strangers traipsing through their churches and courtyards. They know these visitors are a sign of the times — perhaps, a sign of hope for Hatay’s future. Even though Christians are a dwindling minority in this cradle of Christianity, the visitors may help to ensure the province’s storied past will not be forgotten.