

The Miter and the Minaret.

Reflections of a Catholic Deacon in a Muslim country.

By Norman Kutschenreuter

Standing atop the highest mountain on the Asian side of Istanbul, beneath a forest of radio and communication towers, I look to the west, over the Bosphorus straits and view the western (European) half of the city. Two suspension bridges several miles apart span the narrow body of water that separates not only the continents of Europe and Asia, but the two halves of this ancient city as well.



Those two bridges stand as symbolic pillars, as beacons of sharing, which bridge the cultures of east and west. The bridges will never be able to pull the east and west land masses physically together any more than Christianity and Islam, (or Judaism and Islam; or Judaism and Christianity) will ever be brought together as one. Yet, admiring this marvelous sight I could not help but think of the symbolism of these magnificent structures. These bridges which serve as a means of connecting the two continents represented the dialogue that had been taking place within our group - bridging (not joining) different philosophical and religious ideologies. And this, after all, was the purpose of the group of eight Americans (of which I was one) and two Turkish graduate students from UTSA who had traveled to Turkey as guest of the Islamic organization, *The Institute for Interfaith Dialogue*, to span the religious, philosophical and cultural differences of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

During much of our trip we would appear to have been simply tourists, but the underlying current of eradicating ignorance through cultural, religious and philosophical understanding was always present and often brought out during our late night sharing and discussions when we, as a group, would reflect on what we had experienced earlier in the day.

Modern-day Islam in Turkey offers a remarkable contrast between stereotypical Islam and modern reality.

While Islam is void of a central religious unifying figure such as we are accustomed to in Catholicism, there have been, throughout history, religious and philosophical leaders of the religion. In our time one such leader in Turkey is Fethullah Gulen and those who adhere to his religious philosophy are participants in what is generally referred to as the *Gulen movement*.

The *Gulen movement* is not an organization as such, but a philosophical way of life referred to as “Hizmet” or “service”. Rooted in Islam, it’s goal is to improving all aspects of life through commitment to, among other things, education, healthcare and communication.

During our travels throughout Turkey, we were privileged to visit several educational institutions associated with the *Gulen movement*. These were private primary and secondary schools and a private university, each of which is under the control of it’s own board of trustees; each independent, yet held together by the philosophy of Fethullah Gulen.

One of the most impressive institutions was Fatih University in Istanbul, established in 1996, with four colleges and an enrollment of approximately 5000 students. The hilltop campus is home to the most modern computer and scientific equipment available. Class sizes will range from 90 or so at the freshman and sophomore levels to as few as 2 or 3 in graduate programs.



Sema Hospital, Istanbul

There are also a number of clinics and hospitals throughout Turkey associated with the *Gulen movement*. The Sema Hospital in Istanbul was opened in January 2006. This facility is not only a hospital, but offices a number of primary-care physicians as well as specialists. Contrary to what one might expect in a country that is more that 98 percent Muslim, about 40 percent of the physicians at Sema are women. At the time of our visit, only thirty or so beds of the two-hundred-bed facility

were in use. Dr. Hamdi Tutkun, chief of staff, explains that this is due in part to the numerous government regulations imposed on private hospitals. Government run or public hospitals are free from many of these regulations. Walking down the halls and “peeking in” the various clinics and labs, one could not help but be impressed by the state of the art medical equipment. It was obvious that no expense was spared in the effort to provide the most modern medical treatment possible.

Equally impressive was the Medid communications facility, a sight we had visited earlier in our trip. Medid is home to Samanyolu Television Station (or STV as it is commonly called), a radio station as well as a wildly circulated independent newspaper. STV targets family programming and the news is broadcast free of details depicting graphic violence. Like the schools, hospitals and clinics, the media center is independently owned and operated by a board of trustees, yet adheres to the philosophy associated with the *Gulen movement*.

One of my fellow travelers, Tracy Barnett, travel editor for the *Express-News*, expressed the philosophy of the *Gulen movement* well when she said that these Muslims “live their religion day by day, choosing their actions deliberately in such a way to maximize their benefit to the human condition”.

We Began.....

We were an unlikely group of travel companions when we met at the San Antonio airport early one sultry morning in mid-May. There was a Unitarian minister and his wife, a couple from the Jewish Federation of San Antonio, a professor of Communications from UTSA, the travel editor of the *San Antonio Express News*, our two Turkish UTSA doctoral-student-hosts and guides and yours truly. The first legs of our trip, from San Antonio to Denver and then on to Frankfurt where we met up with the tenth person of our group, a Presbyterian pastor from Bryan, were uneventful.

About fifteen minutes out of Frankfurt enroute to Istanbul, window-seat passengers on the port side of the plane witnessed static electricity dancing on the wing. Soon afterwards the rest of the passengers were startled by what sounded like a loud thud throughout the plane. A few minutes of wondering what had happened preceded the pilot’s announcement that the plane had been struck by lightning but that everything was okay and we would proceed. I looked at one of our Muslim companions seated next to me and asked “Do you think that was an omen?” “What’s that?” he replied. “A sign from God” I explained. He looked at me with an uneasy smile, but said nothing.

A few minutes later the pilot came back on the intercom and announced that we would be returning to Frankfurt for a routine inspection the plane. Then the stewardess came on with the familiar “the captain has turned on the fasten your seat belts sign ...please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts ... and make sure they are tight around you waist.” (That last comment made me feel really good!)

After the trip, a commercial airline pilot friend of mine explained that getting struck by lightning was not that uncommon – but if the computers on the plane were affected, the only way to reset them was to shut everything down (a maneuver not recommended in flight) then restart the engines which would reboot the electronic systems – much like rebooting your PC at home. He went on to say that a careful inspection of the aircraft was usually done, and the entrance and exit points of the strike, small holes about the size of a pencil tip, would be noted, but were too small to interfere with the flight of the plane.

After debarking at Frankfurt, the plane was refueled, systems rebooted and we were allowed back on board to continue our flight to Istanbul.

Due to the lightning strike we arrived at Istanbul some ninety minutes later than scheduled. We were greeted at the airport by a group of men from the *Gulen movement*, and each of us was presented with a single long-stem red rose – a time honored Turkish tradition of greeting friends at the end of their journey. It was late, and without hesitation we were taken to our hotel for a long-awaited night’s sleep.

The Blue Mosque

Rising early the next morning, after enjoying a Turkish breakfast, we began what would be a truly enlightening cultural experience. Joined by the eleventh and last member of our touring group – a Turkish pharmacist and our group’s *official* video photographer, we boarded a mini bus and were hustled off to one of Istanbul’s most historic areas.

Our bus stopped, quite literally, between two impressive historic structures. On one side of the street stood **Hagia Sophia** (literally *Holy Wisdom*), a church originally built in the fourth century by the emperor Constantine and later turned in a mosque in the 15th century when the Ottoman’s gained control of the city, and finally into a museum in the first half of the 20th century under the present Turkish government. On the other side of the street, beyond a garden-like lawn, stands the more modern (a relative term in a country with history going back more than 11,000 years) **Blue Mosque**.

Since we had arrived earlier than the opening time for the Hagai Sophia Museum, and the Blue Mosque had been open since the early morning call to prayer (Muslims pray five times a day, the first call to prayer being before dawn), we decided to visit the Blue Mosque first.

The construction of the Blue Mosque was ordered by Sultan Ahmet I in the beginning of the 17th century. Architect Mehmed Aga began construction in 1609 and the whole complex was completed in 1616.



THE BLUE MOSQUE WITH SIX MINARETS

Aga wanted his structure to be grander than the Hagia Sophia, but when he was unable to design a dome larger than the one “across the street” he achieved the splendor of his structure with numerous perfectly proportioned domes and semi-domes as well as six towering minarets. According to local folklore the sultan wanted to have a minaret made of gold, which is “*altin*” in Turkish. The architect understood him to say “*alti*” which means “six”. Prior to that time, no mosque had been built with six minarets.

As we approached the mosque, we were enlightened as to the cultural importance of such an edifice, which is more than a place of prayer. Attached to a mosque will be an education center, including a library. Prior to the advent of the modern school system throughout the country, which is similar to that of the U.S., these education centers played a major role in the education of young and old alike. There is also a kitchen for feeding the less fortunate, and in earlier times, travelers. An open courtyard provides an area where a weary traveler might rest, along with fountains for washing the feet, hands, arms, face and neck before entering the mosque for prayer.



Modern technology has caught up with Islam. In earlier days the Imam would have been required to climb the minarets and call Muslims to prayer. Today, speakers midway up the minaret allow the Imam to perform this religious task from somewhere inside the mosque.

Before entering the mosque we removed our shoes (in Islamic tradition, one removes one's footwear before entering a Mosque or a house – leaving the dust and dirt of the streets on the outside and bring the cleanliness of both body and soul inside). Upon entering the Blue Mosque one is immediately struck by both the magnitude and the beauty of the building. The Mosque receives its name from the band of blue ceramic tiles which adorn the midsection of the walls of the interior. Chandelier-type fixtures of unimaginable proportion hang from the ceilings, partially obscuring the delicate mosaic symmetry on the ceilings above. Where once candles had burned for illumination, light bulbs now glow. We were told how the air flow inside the mosque was designed to carry the soot from the candles up and away from the ornate mosaics to an alcove high above the floor where it was collected and later turned into ink. There are no statues or imagery inside a mosque which might distract a person in prayer. All art and decoration consists of writings from the Koran and symmetrical mosaics.

One observes a small, ornate marble niche in the front wall – called the *mihrap*. The *mihrap* faces the city of Mecca, the direction all Moslems face when praying.. It is immediately in front of the *mihrap* that the Imam (*prayer leader*) will stand, kneel or prostrate himself as he leads others in prayer. To one side is an elevated platform where, in earlier days, the Sultan and his family would pray. The only other notable furnishing was the *minber*, a small platform at the top of a long, straight series of narrow steps, from which the Imam might explain the words of the Koran or deliver his sermon.