‘The guilt of the West’ from Le Figaro (20 December 2004)

Caption: On 20 December 2004, commenting on the outcome of the Brussels European Council held on 16 and 17 December, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro emphasises the diplomatic skill demonstrated by the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in the debates which preceded the decision taken by the Twenty-Five to open negotiations for accession to the European Union with Turkey.

Source: Le Figaro. 20.12.2004. Paris. "La culpabilité de l'Occident", auteur:Slama, Alain-Gérard , p. 10.

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_guilt_of_the_west_from_le_figaro_20_december_2004-en-b49a495e-17c1-402f-824b-6b9c1f76cf4d.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016

The guilt of the West

BY ALAIN-GÉRARD SLAMA

The group photo taken in Brussels on 17 December showing the signatories to the agreement on opening negotiations between Turkey and the European Union gave one an extremely uneasy feeling. Only the Turkish Prime Minister's face bore a look of triumph. After risking his all in a diplomatic campaign of Bismarckian vigour, and after putting his foot down over Cyprus, Mr Erdogan was going back to his country with everything he had wagered in his pocket. The others had their eyes turned vacantly away from the lens, as if they were not sure enough of the future to feel proud that they were there.

Of course Brussels isn't Munich, and Mr Erdogan isn't Hitler! We are not being threatened by an Empire. Turkey, a divided, poor country, is not about to reconquer Europe, unwelcome though this news may be to the crowds who welcomed their leader back with placards bearing that slogan. But by proclaiming that it was honouring commitments made in 1963, though these went no further than a customs union, the integration 'process' consolidated on 17 December had placed itself in a position that was irreversible. A Europe already demoralised by the economic crisis, and bowed down under the burden of peoples living on aid, is likely to see the consensus that is essential for a society based on trust break down over this venture. Faced with a mass of people whose mindset is still several centuries behind the times, it could very well slide back once again into a period of regression and intolerance, pulling down with it the nations in Central Europe which look to it for their salvation.

Although hackneyed, the comparison with the Munich conference is not out of place. However overdramatic it may be, it does at least remind us that the elected representatives of the developed democracies, viscerally allergic to conflict, are fighting an unevenly matched battle against leaders who on the surface claim to have the same values as they do but behind the scenes are not afraid of violence.

What makes this vulnerability even greater is that each side has addressed the problem of EU enlargement with a different ulterior motive. This multiplicity of motivations has made the task much easier for the Turkish applicant, who was able to tell each of his interlocutors from north, south, east and west what they wanted to hear. Talking to the north, he painted in glowing colours the secular inheritance bequeathed by Ataturk and the key role his country plays in controlling immigration flows; to the west, he cited its privileged ties to NATO, its good relations with Israel and the immense market potential of its economy; to the east, he offered the hope of a cultural diversity which would make it easier for countries heavily impregnated with religion or possessing a predominantly agricultural economy, such as Poland, to bear the constraints of enlargement; to the south, he emphasised its strategic position as a buffer between the Mediterranean, Iran and the Arab countries, although its frontier problems, internally with Greece and externally with Iran, Iraq and Armenia, are a long way from any solution.

In each country, partisans of sovereignty and federalism also heard the words they wanted to hear. To the federalists, Mr Erdogan explained that the more decisions were taken by majority vote as opposed to unanimous vote, the less Turkey would be able to block the common policies by imposing a veto. To the supporters of an intergovernmental Europe, not to say a simple customs union, as is the case with Britain, he suggested that enlargement would push the prospect of a federal organisation further into the distance while boosting the economic potential of the Union.

Lastly, to force anyone who was still hesitating over to his side, like a virtuoso he ran up and down the scales of the West's bad conscience, first brandishing the threat of the disappointment which failure to keep the promises made in 1963 would cause in the Muslim world; then exploiting the memory of Nazism to accuse Europe of being the mother of all genocides and of having no standing to preach to Turkey when it had done nothing, or so little, to stop the massacres of Armenians at the beginning of the First World War; then reawakening feelings of guilt regarding the colonial era — as though Turkey were not itself the heir to a colonial empire — in order to condemn Islamophobia among Europeans, especially the French, and to brandish the spectre of the clash of civilisations predicted by Samuel Huntington.

Quite a performance, in fact, and the wonder is to see how completely the discussions which led up to 17 December went along the lines Ankara wanted. Split over the destiny of the kind of Europe they want to build, and abashed by the lessons in secularism and open-mindedness which the leader of an Islamist party ventured to give them, the opponents of EU enlargement to Turkey put themselves, by their own efforts, onto the defensive. The clearest thinkers among them vied with one another to put forward glaring arguments concerning the border issues, Turkey's economic backwardness, the position of women, the human rights violations. There were very few who dared to mention the cause of this backwardness: the belief of most of the Turkish people in an archaic form of Islam which resents having to separate what is God's from what is Caesar's and, as such, is a training-ground for servitude and intolerance.

This kind of Islamism is the obverse of the secularism imposed by Kemalism. Far from practising separation on the French pattern, as has been repeatedly pointed out, Ataturk's revolution imposed the law of Caesar on God and helped to turn Sunni Islam into a State religion, at the expense of the other branches. While creating the conditions for a spectacular leap forward by the government elites, the identification of the nation with one branch of Islam has abetted the masses in their rejection of the modern world. It has cleared the ground for Islamism, which is taking revenge on Caesar by imposing God's law on him.

As long as this perception of secularism goes on being the philosophy of the Turkish State, these mindsets are unlikely to disappear. They are not likely to evaporate in favour of a rapprochement with Europe. On the contrary, each day that passes shows how far Europe is going in re-examining its beliefs in the face of a demanding, manipulative form of Islam. In politics as well as in the economy, bad money chases out good. We have just had proof of it as this year ends, with the mere mention of the name of Christmas being challenged in Britain and, in a secondary school in Lagny-sur-Marne, a poor fir tree sparking off a battle of religions.