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Minorities and Religions in Europe. 
Case Study: The Assyro-Chaldeans of Turkey

“An authentic human liberty can survive, in the civil and political field, only on the basis of freedom of religion valid for all.”

Waldensian text.

I. Introduction

In Europe, just as in other areas of the world, minorities, including religious minorities, exist within states.¹ The process of state formation has inevitably meant that minority people and communities have been left inhabiting the margins of national territories, often poorly assimilated but equally often wishing to preserve their distinctive heritage. When one examines social realities, it becomes clear that, despite policies aimed at integration, most European states have living within their territories groups of people characterized by their own distinct identities and beliefs. Over time, in light of the weakening of national cohesions, the instability of states and influxes of immigrants, minority problems have, if anything, increased in intensity and in quantity. In this regard, Europe is currently undergoing a period of radical change. While the old European continent was the site of the birth, development and triumph of the modern nation state, today this idea is in crisis, with the decline of statist-nationalist sentiment and the development, at the same time, of modern European ideas of communalism, provincialism and regionalism. At the institutional level, this has resulted in the transfer of political power from the state to new supranational and intranational entities – that is to say, from a centralized institutional structure to one characterized by regional structures, on the one hand, and local collectivities, on the other.

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As such, within the 20 regions that comprise Italy, five have been endowed with special status, including normative powers and legislative capacity in a large number of domains. The Spanish state recognizes four languages and 17 autonomous communities, which have been given very significant competences, such as the increasing autonomy being given to the Basque country in Galicia and Catalonia. In Switzerland, the sovereignty of the cantons that comprise the state is affirmed in the constitution. As for Germany, it is constituted by 16 Länder, each of which enjoys important powers covering diverse fields. In addition, this country recognizes the existence within its territory of peoples such as the Danish and the Sorbs, as well as ethnic groups like the Frisians. Austria is composed of nine autonomous Bundesländer and recognizes, among others, Slovene, Croatian and Hungarian minorities. Finland recognizes two official constitutional languages – Finnish and Swedish. The parliament of the Netherlands is bicameral and each of the 12 provinces constituting the country are run by provincial councils, which enjoy certain competences. Portugal’s island provinces (Madeira and the Azores) benefit from an autonomy status due to their particularities. Scotland and Wales have devolved within the United Kingdom. Greenland and the Faroe Islands constitute autonomous regions within Denmark and have their own parliaments. What is more, they have a seat at the Nordic Council. Within this diverse range of autonomies, a number are expressed in terms of religion.

What issues of judicial and legal status affect religious minorities in Europe and what practices affect this field? Do exchange frameworks exist between national and local authorities and these minorities? Is there an institutional management of cultural and religious identities and, if so, how does it manifest itself in practical terms? These questions are important and will be addressed below in the context of an assessment of the situation of Assyro-Chaldeans in Turkey, an ethnic and religious minority living in an officially secular country that is a candidate for accession to the EU.

II. The European Historical Context and the Role of Religion

Despite notions of secularism, religion permeates our societies and our ways of life. The process of secularization has slowed down, buried under the weight of accumulated frustrations. Moreover, the privatization of religious sentiment, theorized by Western thinkers, remains unfulfilled. Indeed, reality illustrates a fundamental interpenetration between religion and social and political life. In many places, religion interlinks with other national, cultural, linguistic, historic, symbolic and economic factors to provide a legitimating reference, the scope of which is widening and gaining ground.

Thus, we must ask, is religion truly a private matter? Were not John Locke and Ernest Renan mistaken? Experience invalidates the thesis that religion belongs strictly within the personal sphere. On the contrary, religions play a fundamental role in the life of societies and for a great number of people. The privatization of religion has failed to

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