

# Persecution as a battle for defining identity

## Reflections from Turkey

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### Abstract

In Turkey, there is a remarkable degree of prejudice against Christians. Opinion formers of the nationalistic and the Islamist ideologies use and deepen the existing prejudice to define Christian identity in a way that may lead to more violent forms of persecution and to a wrong self-image of the Christians themselves. Therefore, an important element of persecution in today's Turkey is a battle for defining Christian identity. As a response to wrong definitions, Christians have to focus on the real Christian identity. The First Letter of Peter speaks into a similar situation of suffering through prejudice and ostracism. The letter focuses on the assurance of real Christian identity and on a warning of Christians to provoke wrong definitions by inconvenient behavior.

**Keywords** Persecution<sup>1</sup>, identity, prejudice, Turkey, 1 Peter.

When 1 Peter 4:16 states that a follower of Jesus may suffer *ὡς Χριστιανός* (“as a Christian”) and feels a need to admonish: “... let him not be ashamed” (NAS, *μὴ αἰσχυνέσθω*), it is likely that here “Christian” as in Acts (11:26; 26:28) is “applied to Jesus’ followers in contexts of hostility”, as “no term of endearment but of slander” (Green 2007:159).<sup>2</sup>

In the Christianity of the second century the name Christian even more “has been negatively stereotyped to denote atheism, incest, and cannibalism” (Holloway 2009:55 about Justin’s Apologia II).

So one important facet marking persecution of Christians is the attempt to wrongly define the “name of Christians”, i.e. not only this title, but also the Christians’ identity. Using the example of today’s Turkey I will write about the sources (“who”), the target groups (“whom”) and the contents of such false definitions (“how”).

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<sup>2</sup> Bible quotes are taken from the New International Bible, 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society, unless otherwise indicated.

In today's Turkey, the most common attitudes towards Christians are prejudice and stereotypes. On the one hand, false definitions of Christian identity are nourished by existing prejudice. On the other hand, these definitions create and solidify these prejudices.

Recent research confirms that authors of the New Testament writings deal with the relation between persecution and Christian identity.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the First Letter of Peter, the author shows strong efforts to define Christian identity as a response to the false definitions by the adversaries. That response shows that some attacks were perceived as false definitions of Christian identity.

The First Letter of Peter is very relevant to our topic because "prejudice with all of its disturbing outcomes forms the immediate occasion of 1 Peter" (Holloway 2009:73). What the apostle Peter<sup>4</sup> has to deal with is not yet "formal persecution" (Green 2007:225). Peter's readers mainly have to cope with prejudice, slander and ostracism.

I will try to show that in Turkey as much as in the context of First Peter there is a battle about interpretive authority, i.e. for the right to define who and what Christians are.

## **1. Persecution and Christian identity in today's Turkey**

### **1.1 The special problem of identity with Turkey's Christians<sup>5</sup>**

Identity is a problematic issue in Turkey and especially amongst Turkey's Christians. When Western European ideas of national identity started to influence the Muslim dominated but multinational and multi-religious Ottoman Empire, attempts to create a multi-religious "Ottoman nation" failed (Lewis 1968:333). Muslim thinkers began to see nation and Islam together. Christians in the Empire who tended to be influenced by European thoughts even stronger began to look for an identity as "Christian nations". That led to rebellion and the fight for independence. Some of the Christian peoples gained their own national states (for instance Greece 1829, Serbia 1878, and Bulgaria 1908). While Christian nations left the Empire, Muslims forcefully displaced from these new countries streamed into the heartland of Anatolia changing its demographical and religious landscape (cf. Kreiser/Neumann 2009:315).

When Mustafa Kemal, later named Atatürk, founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923, he tried to build Turkey not on an Islamic but on a national Turkish identity. The legal status of those Christians remaining in the new state "on paper was higher than ever before" (Lewis 1986: 351), their real importance in the Republic was minor however. Many Muslims were blaming the Christians for the decline and final fall of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. about this topic for instance Campbell 2006, Hart 2008, Mbuvi 2004.

<sup>4</sup> I accept the apostle Peter as author of the First Letter of Peter. Not being able to go into detail of this much discussed question I refer to the scholarly display of all the arguments against a Petrine authorship and their refutation in Tran's dissertation (Tran 2006:10-28).

<sup>5</sup> See for this chapter especially Lewis 1986:317-355.

## 1.2 The low esteem of Christians in Turkey

The PEW 2008 Global Attitudes Survey amongst people from 24 countries including 6 countries with a Muslim majority and two others with a strong proportion of Muslim population revealed that the number of people having a “somewhat unfavorable” or a “very unfavorable” opinion about Christians was higher in Turkey than in any other of the countries included in the survey (The Pew Global Attitudes Project 2008:51-52).<sup>6</sup> A variety of reasons may be found for this striking result just in the very country that was supposed to be closest to the West among the countries with Muslim majority.

One of these reasons Turkey has in common with other countries with Muslim majority, i.e. the negative view of the Christians by Islamic theology. Though there certainly have been times of relative harmony between Christians and Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim ruled countries, the Qur’an and the early Islamic traditions about Christians contain a way of looking at Christians and their faith that defines Christian identity very differently from how Christians defined themselves. According to this view, Christians cling to a faith that might be protected, but is outdated and certainly inferior to the “last revelation” in Islam. However, more than this: Because Christians resisted the message of Muhammad and his authority Islam sees them as liars and deceivers (Schirrmacher 2009:41)<sup>7</sup>.

The special position of the Ottoman Empire as “born on the frontier between Islam and Christendom” (Lewis 1986:42), the historical developments (outlined in 2.1) and a historically petrified negative image of Western “Christian nations” trying to rule and finally split the Ottoman Empire contribute to the remarkably bad opinion about Christians in Turkey.

A rather new development is the conversion of Muslims to Christianity in any substantial numbers and their forming of small Turkish Christian churches. To accept the reality of ethnic Turks with Muslim background becoming Christians is a great challenge for families<sup>8</sup> and for society.

## 1.3 Can we regard prejudice and ostracism as persecution?

When in April 2007 three Christians were brutally slaughtered in Malatya in East Turkey (cf. Haede 2012), the loud outcry of the Western public was also due to the fact that being killed for one’s faith is not the daily experience of Christians in contemporary Turkey. Persecution in Turkey consists primarily of prejudice, slander and ostracism. Can we

<sup>6</sup> “Very unfavorable” 62%, “somewhat unfavorable” 12%, “very favorable” 2%, “somewhat favorable” 8%. We have to add here that there was a remarkable worsening of opinion between similar surveys from 2004 to 2008 – maybe one reason of which was the war in Iraq that was perceived by many people in Turkey as “Christian” nations invading a Muslim country.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for the view of early Islam about Christians also Khoury 1998:219-225; Tamcke 2008:20-61.

<sup>8</sup> As one example of a Turkish Muslim becoming Christian cf. the life of Necati Aydin in Haede 2012.

count these “less serious types” (so Schirmacher 2008:87) of Christian sufferings as persecution in the full sense? Certainly, these verbal forms of causing sufferings belong to the continuum of persecution (cf. Cochran 2010:87 pointing rightly to Mat 5:11).

Especially in the cultural context of Turkey with its focus on shame and honor, being defined as liars, traitors or low class citizens should better not be called “less serious”<sup>9</sup>. Though being beaten, arrested or killed is a different quality of persecution, the attacks on an individual Christian’s or a Christian community’s identity is a very serious form of persecution.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. A battle for defining Christian identity in Turkey

The verbal assaults on Christians in Turkey are an attempt to define Christian identity, i.e. to tell the public who Christians are and what people have to expect from them. As mentioned in my introduction we have to ask who is trying to define, to whom he tries to address this definition and what the contents of it is.

### 2.1 Who is trying to define?

When we speak about trying to define Christian identity in Turkey, we must admit that in some way everybody who is talking about another person is defining the other’s identity. Talking about a battle for defining identity I am speaking about people influencing the public opinion in Turkey relevantly, for instance journalists, politicians, theologians, intellectuals, i.e. the opinion formers of Turkish society.

Defining the Christian’s identity may be but is not always a conscious act of “psychological warfare”. We will see in 3.2 that the intended addressees often are not the Christians themselves. Opinion formers however generally are aware of how effective their words can be, especially when it comes to defining a minority.

### 2.2 Whom is the definition directed to?

I am presently working on a research project about the perception of Christians in five Turkish daily newspapers from different ideological backgrounds<sup>11</sup>. Columnists of daily newspapers are very effective opinion formers in Turkey. However, mainly

<sup>9</sup> What Campbell 1998:333 remarks about First Peter, has relevance for today’s Turkey too: „Peter’s concern is predominantly with honor, the primary cultural value of the ancient Mediterranean world.”

<sup>10</sup> I want to render here a longer quote by Johnson 2002:483-484, about 1 Peter, because he aptly describes the pain that social ostracism can cause: “*Suffering is no less real, however, just because it does not lead to death. Since scorn and contempt are slow-working acids that corrode individual and community identity, social alienation should not be viewed as a trivial form of suffering. Persecution may bring death, but the martyr has the advantage of dying with meaning. Societal scorn, however, threatens meaning and identity*”

<sup>11</sup> These newspapers are *Yeniçağ* (extreme nationalist), *Milli Gazete* (Islamic fundamentalist), *Yeni Şafak* (moderate islamist), *Milliyet* (liberal democratic), *Cumhuriyet* (Atatürk type of secularism).

they are writing for people with a similar worldview. The preference for certain newspapers in Turkey is generally connected closely to one's worldview. Politicians or theologians might want to win people with different ideologies for their ideas. Still they too are mostly addressing their own clientele.

Therefore, when opinion formers try to define, what and how Christians are, they first try to teach or to warn people with their own worldview. They feel the need to tell them their "truth" about Christians, because they fear that their clientele might be affected or even attracted by Christians if they are exposed to the Christians' self-definition.

As my research covers a time period that was characterized by a vivid debate about Christian missionary activities<sup>12</sup>, I found that each of the newspapers, even though in very different grades of intensity, used the debate about Christian missionaries for its own political agenda. The extreme nationalists tried to prove that the Islamic government is not defending the sovereignty of the country, the moderate Islamists used the confusion about missionaries to claim that it was a mistake by the secularists to hinder Qur'an courses etc.

Having said this, still the publicly pronounced opinion about Christians deeply affects the Christians themselves. They may be confronted daily with the opinion of the majority that is influenced by the propaganda of the opinion formers. Even if Christians are not directly addressed, they get messages like "You have to be ashamed", "You have wrong motives", "You do not really belong to this country. You are even dangerous for this country."

### **2.3 How is the Christian identity defined?**

I want to make it very clear that there are opinion makers, especially in the liberal-democratic segment of society, who condemn agitation against Christians or other minorities. There are others (though getting less in number) who admire Western success and credit it partly to the influence of Christianity. Because I write about defining identity as part of persecution, I will however focus here on negatively defining of Christian identity without denying that these other voices exist too.

#### **2.3.1 Against Christians or against missionaries?**

The focus of the debate about Christianity in Turkey from about 2002 to 2007 was on missionaries and missionary activities. Extreme criticism against missionaries was sometimes (not always) softened by the remark that the criticism is not di-

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<sup>12</sup> November 2004 to January 2005.

rected against all the Christians, and even not all missionaries, but only those using unethical methods.

The accusation of unethical methods has to be answered by serious Christians. I maintain however that the attempt to define the missionaries' identity negatively is an assault against all Christians. On the one hand, in today's Turkey it is not politically correct to speak very negatively about Christians in general. A Turkish proverb says, "My daughter, I tell it to you. My daughter-in-law, understand it!"<sup>13</sup> Therefore, criticism directed to the missionaries seems very often intended to be criticism and warning to every Christian.

On the other hand, Christians who cease to be active in evangelizing take away an indispensable element of their faith. The special role of Christians as *dhimmi* in early Islam (cf. Bosworth 1982) and then in the Ottoman system of religiously separated *millet* (religiously defined communities) forced the Christians to abstain from mission amongst Muslims. That created a "minority psyche" ("Minderheitenpsyche", cf. Tamcke 2008:41-48) that pushed active mission out of the horizon of most Christians under Muslim rule.

Harsh criticism against missionary activities sometimes seems to be an attempt to incite Christians who are less involved in evangelizing against those who are active in mission. Behind this stands the old principle of *divide et impera*.

### 2.3.2 Religious definitions

Defining Christians religiously in Turkey means to define them according an Islamic understanding. Of course, Islam in Turkey is not a homogeneous entity. Therefore, definitions of Christian identity differ. But even in 2007 a book that is published by the official publishing house of the governmental *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Presidency of Religious Affairs) can write about the Christians with a very traditional Islamic view: "The people of the book [Christians in Qur'an terminology] have, beside a lot of other bad characteristics, made things like 'unbelief, denial and lie' so to say their profession" (Kessler 2007:118).<sup>14</sup> "Unbelief, denial and lie" refer to the Christian's response to the Islamic prophet's claims.<sup>15</sup>

To perceive Christians as liars obviously stems from the presupposition that only untruthful people can reject the prophet and his religion (cf. 2.2). Moreover, they are blamed to have distorted their own holy book. To assume that Christians are not honest, that missionaries hide their true intentions, that cheating is a method of

<sup>13</sup> 'Kızım sana söylüyorum, gelinim sen anla!'

<sup>14</sup> Ehl-i kitap pekçok kötü özelliklerinin yanı sıra ,İmansızlık, inkâr ve yalan' gibi şeyleri âdetâ bir meslek haline getirmişlerdi.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Houry 1998:219-224 about the questions, which Christians are perceived as "good" in Qur'an and which as "bad".

mission is widespread in Turkey – not only amongst Islamist but also (though with different connotations) amongst extreme nationalists.

Historical experiences with Western “Christian” countries (cf. 2.1) have contributed to this perception and definition of Christian identity in Turkey. However, fundamentalist Muslims openly use the Qur’an and the early Islamic tradition for their definition of Christians, and many other people in Turkey seem to be affected by this perception<sup>16</sup>.

### 2.3.3 Nationalistic definitions

In nationalistic circles the theory of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis was discussed a lot especially in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Kurt 2010). According to this ideology, Turks once found and now have their identity in Islam. Therefore extreme nationalists can define a Turkish Muslim converting to Christianity only as traitor, as someone giving up his or her Turkish identity. This mindset is so common even among people being not very intimate with their own Muslim religion that many Turkish converts are confronted with being accused as traitors by their own families (cf. Haede 2012).

According to this mindset, any attempt of foreign or local “missionaries” to win Turks for their faith must be seen as an assault on the country’s unity and security.<sup>17</sup>

Very close to the nationalistic definitions of Christians’ identity are political definitions:

### 2.3.4 Political definitions

Missionaries are defined as spies for other countries<sup>18</sup>; they are dangerous for the unity of the Republic of Turkey. They are suspected to have a political and not a religious agenda.<sup>19</sup>

This way of thinking at times can lead to statements like “Every missionary activity is an act of terror”.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> When Mehmet Şevket Eygi, ultraislamistic columnist of the *Millî Gazete*, characterizes the “bad Christians” as “Misyonerler, Haçlılar, Teslisçiler” (missionaries, crusaders, Trinitarians. *Millî Gazete*, January 6, 2005, p. 2) that demonstrates how fundamental theological differences and historical experiences are working together.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the whole-page series of articles on 12 consecutive days against missionaries in the Turkish daily newspaper *Yeniçağ*: Yüksel Mutlu. ‘Dünden günümüze belgeleriyle ... Misyonerler’ (“From yesterday until today documented: missionaries”) from January 4-15, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *Yeniçağ*, January 6, 2005, p. 2: “It draws attention that each missionary engaging in Christian propaganda is at the same time a spy.” “Hıristiyanlık propagandası yapan misyonerlerin aynı zamanda birer casus olduklarına dikkat çekiyor.”

<sup>19</sup> Cf. for instance *Yeniçağ*, January 6, 2005, p. 8: ‘Burada amaç Türkiye’yi parçalayarak bölgeye hakim olmaktır.’ (“The intention here is to fragment Turkey in order to rule the region.”)

<sup>20</sup> Hasan Demir in *Yeniçağ*, January 11, 2005, p. 9: ‘Her misyoner faaliyet bir terör eylemidir.’

### 2.3.5 Historical definitions

Historically Christians, and especially Christians from the West, are perceived as an extension of the crusades and of colonialism. Whereas the fundamentalist Islamists of *Millî Gazete* rather focus on “the danger of Christians’ assaults”, the moderate Islamists of *Yeni Şafak* see the West’s attempts to influence Muslims as a defense against the real superiority of Islam.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas Christians cannot and should not deny mistakes and guilt of the past, the attempt to define them and their missionary activities with these historical paradigms alone is slander and therefore a form of persecution.

### 2.3.6 Definitions of inferiority

Because for many Turkish opinion formers it is so unthinkable religiously and nationalistically that ethnic Muslim Turks turn to Christianity, another type of definition is constructed by showing the inferiority of those who took this step.

Turks who become Christians either have no idea about real Islam, they are bribed with Dollars, bought by promises of marriage and studying abroad, they are people who were not reliable anyway<sup>22</sup> or they might have had Christian ancestors.<sup>23</sup>

It goes without saying that claims like this are hard to bear for Turkish converts to Christianity.

### 2.3.7 The need for Christians to react to these definitions

Why should Christians in Turkey react to attempts of others to define their identity wrongly? I see mainly two reasons for a balanced and well-founded response to this facet of persecution.

On the one hand, Christians need to protect their own perception of Christian identity. The new Christians might develop a “minority psyche” with all their negative aspects as well (cf. 3.3.1). They might lose their courage to contribute posi-

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Yusuf Kaplan in *Yeni Şafak*, November 24, 2004, p. 10: ‘Bugün Batılıların yapmak istediği iki şey var: Türkiye’nin İslâm medeniyeti iddialarına sahip çıkmasını önlemek ve dünyanın, özellikle Batı dünyasının kitleler halinde Müslümanlaşma ihtimalini ortadan kaldırmaktır.’ “There are two things which the Westerners want to do today: to prevent Turkey from insisting on claiming the Islamic civilization, and to remove the possibility that in the world and especially in the Western world people in masses become Muslims.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Aydın 1996:15: “...those are types who don't know Islam, became distant to national and spiritual values, who are scared, without self-confidence and anxious.” - ‘...İslâmı’ı bilmeyen, millî ve manevî değerlerinden uzaklaşan, korkak, güven duygusundan yoksun, endişeli tiplerdir.’

<sup>23</sup> How hard even this “accusation” in Turkey can be, is proved by an almost funny story. In 2008, a member of parliament of the opposition party CHP spoke about his information that the Turkish president Abdullah Gül had Armenian ancestors. The result was that the President opened a symbolic court case against this claim. Cf. The article “Gül’den Antman’a 1 YTL’lik tazminat davası” in *Yeni Şafak*, December 22, 2008. Accessed on March 15, 2012 at: <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Politika/?t=22.12.2008&i=157772>.



tively to society and perceive themselves as inferiors. Alternatively, Christians might develop a sectarian attitude, trying to live in their own social ghetto and secretly feeling superior to “the others”.

The second reason for an active battle against wrong definitions is the fact that in Christian history<sup>24</sup> and in the Turkish reality prejudice and ostracism is very likely eventually to turn into such acts of persecution that attack not only the spirit<sup>25</sup> but also the body of Christians<sup>26</sup>.

As a response to wrongly defining their identity as a part of persecution, Christians have to define and make aware how they see their identity.

### **3. A Christian answer according to First Peter: Assurance of Christian identity**

Not only is the First Letter of Peter addressed to Christians living in Roman provinces that are all within the geography of today's Turkey. What is more important: The letter seems to be a good blueprint for Christians in Turkey to define their own identity. First Peter is characterized by a “in the NT unusual concentration of statements about suffering” (Feldmeier 1992:110). In fact, the reason for Peter's writing this letter is to equip the Christians with good theology that will help them to cope with their suffering as Christians (cf. Feldmeier 1992:105 and footnote 2). This suffering however does not yet consist in a systematic persecution by the state. Christians are rather slandered, blamed and ostracized by society.

#### **3.1 Creating identity or assurance of identity?**

The fact that Peter, but also other authors of the New Testament, in a context of Christian suffering react by defining Christian identity is accepted widely in contemporary research<sup>27</sup>. Even authors making identity not their main topic but looking for the “controlling metaphor” (Mbuvi 2004:42) in First Peter, are indirectly dealing with Christian identity too, when they assign a certain metaphor to Peter's describing the Christians, be it “Christians as strangers” (Feldmeier 1992), the identifica-

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the quote of G.E.M. de Ste Croix in Holloway 2009:72-73 speaking about “the atmosphere of hostility, liable to turn at any moment into active persecution.”

<sup>25</sup> I must mention here that prejudice and ostracism never can stay a mere verbal type of persecution. For converts being not accepted anymore in the own family may be pushed into serious economical problems. Small businessmen might lose customers. In certain situations it can be more difficult to find a job for a confessing Christian.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the role of the media campaign in preparing the ground for the murderers of Andrea Santoro and the martyrs of Malatya (Haede 2012:92-96, chapter “Sowing and reaping of evil”).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. for instance Campbell 2006; Dunning 2005; Graser 2012:155-162; Hart 2008; Holloway 2009; Mbuvi 2004.

tion with the Old Testament Exile narrative (Mbuvi 2004) or with the eschatological people of the Messiah (Dubis 2002).

More controversial is the question whether the authors of the New Testament in the face of suffering *assure* the Christians of the identity, which they already have in Christ, or if they contribute to *creating* a new identity. Hart tries to show in his research of First Thessalonians that Paul and other early Christians instrumentalized a narrative of persecution to form a Christian identity (Hart 2008). Dunning (Dunning 2005:iv) wants to show that the same reality of persecution was used by First Peter and other early Christian writings to help in forming various identities.

Without being able to go into detail, I would agree that the experience of suffering of Christians in Asia Minor might have urged Peter to have a fresh look at what the identity of the Christians was. The new situation needed interpretation. However, Peter's theology is deeply interwoven with other writings of the NT (cf. Green 2007:226-238), and Peter makes ample use of the OT in interpreting who the Christians are. Therefore, I conclude that Peter, led by God's Spirit, applied the truth of God's word and the message of Jesus to the situation of persecuted believers. At least Peter's intention was not to create or even formulate a new identity, but by interpreting the Old Testament and the Gospel to assure the Christians of the identity that they already had in Christ and according to the testimony of Scripture.

### 3.2 Correcting wrong definitions of identity

So how does Peter correct wrong definitions of the Christians' identity?

The adversaries "think it strange" (ξενίζονται, 4:4), what the Christians are doing, "they accuse" them "of doing wrong" (ὡς κακοποιῶν, 2:12; KJV "speak against you as evildoers"), they talk with insult (λοιδορία, 3:9) and slander (3:16). Christians are reproached (εἰ ὀνειδίζεσθε, 4:14).

Peter reminds them instead of their identity as chosen by God (1:2 ἐκλεκτὸν; 2:4; 2:9). They are not a "strange" and unimportant part of society, but they play such an important role in God's plan that even the prophets of old had to serve them (1:12). The apostle reminds them that they are "obedient children" (1:14), "living stones" (2:4) built into the new temple, "a royal priesthood" (2:9)<sup>28</sup>.

Not only does Peter put the right facts against the wrong allegations, but while suffering in the Christians' context is supposed to be a valid reason to feel shame, Peter "turns this interpretation on its head" (Green 2007:226). Sufferings "because of the name of Christ" (4:14) are not a reason to be ashamed, but to be proud of

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Graser 2012:155-163, chapter "Rekonstruktion des Selbstkonzepts" (reconstruction of the self-concept).

(4:16). To be insulted is rather a proof that “the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (4:14).<sup>29</sup>

Not only do the believers seem to be strange for their neighbors (ξενίζονται, 4:4), they have in fact to be “strangers in the world” (1:1, here παρεπιδήμοι), because God called them for this (1:1).

### 3.3 Identity through putting Christian existence into the narrative of the Scriptures

Peter’s main “instrument” in defining Christian identity is to put the believer’s existence into the Old Testament narrative (cf. 4.1 about the “controlling metaphor”). 1 Peter 2:9, in applying Leviticus 19:6 and Isaiah 43:21 to the New Testament church (cf. 2:10), includes the Christians into the history of Israel.<sup>30</sup>

Motives of the Old Testament Exodus narrative (cp. 1:13 with Ex 12:11; 1:19 with Ex 12:5; 1:16 with Lev 19:2) and the narrative of exile (cf. especially the mentioning of the Christians being strangers or living amongst pagans: 1:1; 2:11-12) define the Christian identity as part of the old and great plans of God.

I wouldn’t go as far as Lai to see “the Isaianic New Exodus” as “the underlying theme of the whole epistle” (Lai 2009:152). For the Christian believers’ identity however it is meaningful that they are seen as “an exilic community undergoing restoration” (Lai 2009:152) and so as the continuation of the people of God living in the exile among adversaries.

Peter’s use of the Old Testament narrative in interpreting the situation of the followers of Jesus proves again that for the apostle the Christian identity is given and has not to be creatively formed anew. At the same time, it shows that probably the apostles and the Christian community by the need to respond to persecution proceeded to a deeper understanding of the position of the believers in the Old Testament context.

### 3.4 Identity through identity with Christ

The strongest point that Peter makes in explaining Christians who they are in suffering is his argument that suffering is an indispensable element of the calling to follow Christ, because Christ Himself suffered (2:20-25). Ripken confirms how important this identification is for suffering Christians: “One of the greatest gifts that can be given to believers in the midst of persecution is for the believing community

<sup>29</sup> Cf. also Green 2007:226: “...suffering is a sign of the genuineness of one’s faith, an affirmation of one’s identity before God”.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Green 2007:269: “Peter is in identity-formation mode as he inscribes the community of Christians, mostly Gentiles, into the history of Israel, giving them strong roots in antiquity.”

to assure them that what they are experiencing is for Christ's sake and for no other reason" (Ripken 2004:34).

Dubis (Dubis 2002:150-157) rightfully interprets τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήματα ("the sufferings of Christ") in 4:13 as the messianic sufferings in which the Messiah himself and his followers have to take part.

### 3.5 Avoiding false interpretations of Christian identity

Peter never excludes the possibility that the Christians might be accused rightly of being "evildoers" (4:15)<sup>31</sup>. So definitions of the Christians by outsiders maybe a challenge to even more refrain from anything that might provide reasons to others to blame them rightfully (cf. 2:1; 2:12). There is suffering for doing wrong, and Christians should avoid this (cf. 2:14,20; 3:17; 4:15).

Not to give outsiders any valid reason to wrongly define Christian identity is probably the special reason for Peter to mention in this context submission to rulers (2:13-17), to masters (2:18-20) and to husbands (3:1-6). The apostle's referring to the rulers being sent by God (2:14) or to Sara in her submission to Abraham (3:6) renders it very unlikely that Peter teaches submission only as a tactical means to impress people. His main intention to mention it here however really seems to be "to silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (2:15).

## 4. Conclusion

The type of persecution Christians are presently experiencing in Turkey consists mainly of being confronted with prejudice, slander and ostracism. My goal has been to expose the graveness of these facets of persecution which are to be taken very seriously because they attempt to define the identity of the Christians. Though the motivation of the definers may be very diverse, as a result the wrong definitions not only influence the non-Christian majority in Turkey but also the self-image that Christians have.

The thesis that part of persecution is a battle for defining identity is confirmed by the fact that New Testament authors in response to persecution show great efforts to correctly define this identity. While First Peter puts Christian identity into the framework of Old Testament narratives and by doing so shows the high and important position Christians have in God's plan, he warns them at the same time to restrain from doing evil in order not to provide reasons for wrong definitions of what a Christian is.

It seems that seeing persecution and especially verbal persecution as an assault on Christian identity and working on convenient strategies to teach Christians about their real identity will be a great help for Christians in Turkey and in similar situa-

<sup>31</sup> KJV translates *κακοποιός* like this; NIV probably renders exacter with "criminal".

tions. Further research is necessary to examine this aspect of persecution and apply an appropriate response.

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