

Christians still second-class citizens under Turkish secularism: Decades of experience of a Turkish Christian leader

Behnan Konutgan*

Abstract

As the Turkish government seeks entrance into the European Union, human rights, including religious freedom will be a key issue. The author, a Turkish Christian and Church leader for over 3 decades, after touching briefly on the past history of Christianity in Turkey, provides a first-hand glimpse into the present situation of believers in that Muslim country. He explores several arenas of persecution, discusses various causes and relates some of his first-hand experiences, evaluations and concerns about his home country.

Keywords Turkey - history of the church, Christian-Muslim relations, Islamic nationalism, religious freedom, discrimination against Christians.

The Turkish church and Islam, a historic contextualisation

When one speaks of the 'Holy Land' one usually thinks of Israel or Palestine, but we know that many of the events in the Bible took place in Anatolia, modern day Turkey. The events of Noah at Mt. Ararat and Abraham in Haran, and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are all located in Anatolia. Many of the most important New Testament events took place there. St. Paul was born in Tarsus, his three missionary journeys took place mainly in Anatolia and the seven churches of Revelation are all situated in Western Turkey. Christianity grew and spread in these lands and the first seven ecumenical councils were held in Anatolia. In many ways we can call Anatolia the 'forgotten' Holy Land.

* Behnan Konutgan (*1955), M.A.; M.Div., is currently studying for a Ph.D. degree through the Martin Bucer Seminary in Bonn, on the subject of Anatolian Church History, and on the church under an Islamic government. For 26 years he worked for the Turkish Bible Society, mostly as a Bible translator (The New Turkish Bible 2001). He also served for 28 years as volunteer pastor, and is a past president of the Turkish Evangelical Alliance. Presently he is the director of Tree of Life Ministries, which forms part of INNENWORKUSA, and is the president of the Martin Bucer Academy, Turkish Study Centre. E-mail: behnan.intr@gmail.com.

The Selchuk Turks first arrived in Anatolia in 1071. Upon arrival they came across many Christians whose civilisations stretched back to pre-Christian eras for thousands of years. In the east were Georgians and Armenians, in the south-east were Assyrian Nestorians and Jacobites, and Anatolia was part of the Byzantine Orthodox Empire. These Christians had built churches, monasteries and seminaries throughout the land and spread the Gospel everywhere they went. But with the coming of the Turks to Anatolia these people were soon forced to convert to Islam and assimilate Turkish culture.

In the 1300s, from amongst the Selchuk clans arose the powerful Ottoman Empire. The new leader of the Turks was Osman, a Turkmen from Bursa in Western Anatolia who soon built an empire that carried his name. In a way, his empire was a continuation of the Great Selchuk Empire and was established on former Byzantine land. The Ottomans prided themselves in their Turkishness. From their establishment in 1299 until their demise in 1922 the Ottomans were the keepers of the Islamic religion. The people were governed by the laws of the 'Sharia', the Koranic law. Non-Muslim people i.e. Jews and Christians were considered second-class citizens according to the law and were called 'dhimi' (Yılmaz 1996:28-38). They were expected to pay tribute and taxes to their Muslim overlords.

Christians were also called 'gavur' (infidel). This word describes someone who is an outsider who does not do good and is ungrateful. In the Koran and Arab poetry, 'gavur' refers to those who have "forgotten the goodness done to them" (Koran 26:19). That is why Christians who lived in Muslim lands were always despised, ostracised and hated.

In Muslim society the 'dhimi' (Christians) were not allowed to marry Muslims, and their word was never accepted against that of a Muslim. If a Muslim man murdered a 'dhimi' he would not be put to death (Bozkurt 1989:8). In Muslim society these 'dhimi' were considered evil and strange (Bozkurt 1989:42-50). The 'dhimi' were not allowed to wear the same clothes as Muslims, could not give the greeting of 'peace' to a Muslim without having been greeted first, and were not allowed to build houses that rose higher than Muslim houses (Ye'or 1996:153-157). Christians, because they were always looked upon as ungrateful and treacherous, were not trusted with weapons and were not allowed to ride horses (Ortaylı 1994).

One of the greatest milestones in the history of the Ottoman law was attained with the proclamation of 'Tanzimat', the reorganisation of the Ottoman empire, which entailed a better status for non-Muslims (Bozkurt 1988:279). One of the characteristics of the 'Tanzimat' era (1839-1876) was that for the first time the legal rules imposed by Islamic law for non-Muslims living in a Muslim land, were completely revised giving them the status of 'citizenship' (Bozkurt 1994:280-285). It should be noted, however, that concepts and principles of modern law were first introduced into Ottoman law during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) (Bozkurt 1994:280). With the reforms brought about by the 'Tanzimat' the Christian community was finally able to take a short breath, but the Muslim community saw these reforms as a betrayal to Islam. Many cities across the Empire held strong demonstrations against these reforms and the demonstrators proclaimed that the new laws were against the Koranic law. Thus, the laws had changed without changing the mind-set of the people.

In 1856, once again to please Europe, the Ottomans passed new laws (Islahat) that granted new freedom for non-Muslims. With the edict of 'Islahat' issued in 1856 equality between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects was declared and the institution of 'dhimi' which had been practiced for centuries, was abolished. Non-Muslims would no longer be exempt from military service and they would be accorded the rights to enter public service and to bear witness against Muslims (Bozkurt 1994:285).

Despite all these reforms, the Islamic law of 'Sheriat' continued to exist. A handful of men, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk a former Ottoman army officer, abolished the Ottoman Empire and declared a republic in 1923. Their aim was to create a modern state under the banner of 'Turkishness'. They proclaimed laws based on democracy and secularism, but these were never truly put into practice. During the era of the republic (1923-today), Christians were still considered second-class citizens, had no right to build churches, nor educate their clergy in seminaries. Even though the laws didn't forbid this and were supposed to secure constitutionally guaranteed freedom, Christian activities, evangelism, and even public worship were hindered by an unchanged Muslim society.

From its beginnings, the Republic of Turkey has represented a secular democratic experiment in a Muslim country. However, Turkish-style secularism is not the same as its Western counterpart. Secularism in Turkey does not mean a complete separation of religion and state: the state openly controls religion (Allman 1999).

Discrimination against Christians in modern day Turkey

Islamic nationalism

Nationalism has always been strong in Turkey. Nationalist discourse seems to define a Turk as a Sunni Muslim Turkish nationalist. Nationalists see themselves as called to defend Turkey against ‘threats’ from ‘others’ who are frequently Turks, yet who do not fit the nationalist stereotype. To be a Turk, means to be a Muslim. Other religions are not accepted and tolerated.

As Christians we do not have any problem with Turkish law nor with the state. After all in Romans 13:1-3 we are required to submit to the governing authorities. And we should do this with a glad heart. It is easy to issue a new law, and abolish another, but it takes many long years to change the mentality of the people.¹ The Koran teaches that a Muslim should “kill the infidel whenever you come upon them” (Sura 2:191).

I was working as a teacher in Kayseri, one of the largest cities in Turkey, in a secular state high school. The head of education of the

¹ For expressions of this mentality cf. Pikkert: “... to give us an idea of Muslim critiques of Christian teaching and some of the common negative attitudes to Christian teachings we turn to the Turkish writer and personal friend, İsa Karataş’ *Gerçekleri Saptıranlar* (1997) (Truth Twisters) and Ağacı Yaşken *Eğdiler* (2000) (Bent Saplings). The first book traces Turkish Muslim perceptions, opinions, and teachings about Christianity in the often polemical press, as well as those of such popular Muslim writers as Edip Yüksel, Abulrahman Dilipak, Fethullah Gülen, and Ali Bulaç. Their works indicate a sense of fear, of being under threat. More important is Karataş’ second book. It looks at the often-fanciful teachings about Christianity in official textbooks published by Turkey’s Ministry of Education for use in Turkish grade- and high schools in the modern period. As such, it reflects the opinions, attitudes and prejudices with which virtually every Turkish citizen approaches Christianity” (Pikkert 2006:36).

district visited the high school. He was speaking to all the teachers. In almost every sentence he would say: “praise God, we are Turkish and Muslim.” I was upset and raised my hand, and said: “I’m a Turkish citizen, but I’m not a Muslim.” He was angry, stopped the meeting and left. The next day I was forced to resign.

A report submitted by the Turkish Alliance of Protestant Churches to the parliament’s Human Rights Commission on the state of religious minorities in Turkey alleges that non-Muslim groups in Turkey have been made targets for attacks. Part of the report reads as follows:

Despite the fact that freedom of belief is protected by the Constitution, the last decade has witnessed the development of campaigns aimed at denouncing, slandering and provoking non-Muslim groups. ... Disinformation regarding non-Muslim groups has helped make these groups a target ... the Protestant community in Turkey faces threats both to their lives and to their belongings.²

The report further detailed specific incidents of violence, discrimination and human rights violations against non-Muslim groups in 2007.

The role of the media

Disinformation about Christianity is wide-spread in Turkey in both national and local media. Time and time again, whether written or televised, well-known Islamic seminarians and politicians tell lies about Christianity, the Bible and Christian activities. This is what Pastor Zekai Tanyar, the former chairman of the Inter-church Legal Committee has written in a report about the media:

The media attacks continue with the aim to slander Christians and churches in the eyes of the public, to give the public the impression that any such religious activity is bad and illegal and, in a number of cases, incite people to take action against the churches and Christians. The latter has been the ugliest and has sadly resulted in a number of cases where church premises have been attacked, some individuals have faced verbal and physical attacks, derisory visits to their homes or neighbours

² Today's Zaman 19 January 2008. Turkey's Protestant churches complain they are being targeted. Available online: <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=132018>. Accessed: 1 November 2008. The original three-page report is entitled: Human Rights Violations Faced by the Protestant Community in Turkey During 2007.

by officials or those pretending to be, loss of jobs ... (Jubilee Campaign 2008:25-29).

The lawyer of the Turkish Kurtuluş (Salvation) Protestant churches, Orhan Kemal Cengiz, told Bianet³, a respected news agency, soon after the Malatya murders that although “missionary activity’ is not a crime in Turkey, the politicians and the media have by constant repetition and reiteration invented such a crime. Individuals then decided to punish this crime.”

This slander causes us more pain than physical persecution. The Bible tells us in 2 Tim 3:12 that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” We go through this process daily.

Harassment of the church

In the Republic of Turkey it is almost impossible to build a church. Since this is a problem, Christians in various cities rent places for worship. Local authorities make it their business to cause problems and take steps to have even these meeting places closed down. The neighbours of the rented places are uncomfortable and often harass the church and sometimes even do damage to the buildings. Church windows are broken and some churches have even been attacked with ‘Molotov cocktails’. In Istanbul one landlord was threatened by extreme nationalists and told to expel the Christians from his property, which he did. In the Black Sea town of Samsun, the pastor of a Protestant church has been constantly harassed by the community and local media. Once there was an attempt to kidnap his seven-year-old son. Another time they broke all the windows of the church and defaced its church sign. In another incident, one night two men arrived at the pastor’s home at midnight, claimed they were policemen and ordered him to accompany them to a deserted area. There they told him that they would hurt his family if he didn’t revert to Islam.

In another incident the Pastor in Samsun, Turkey, had been falsely charged with three serious crimes: insulting the prophet of Islam, Mohammed, insulting the police, and performing a marriage ceremony in the church (Compass Direct 2006). The pastor denied all three charges. Most Christians come across these kinds of problems daily.

³ www.bianet.org.

For decades now, ever since the establishment of the Republic, a hostile attitude of Turkish government towards non-Muslim communities has led to tight control over the boards which run the 'community foundations',⁴ a de facto ban on any maintenance or repair of the properties and to the taking away of much of the property under various pretexts. The building of the Halki Seminary, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy's world-renowned theological college until it was forced to close by the government in 1971, also remains in the hands of a community foundation (Oehring 2008).

Anti-Christian bias in educational institutions

Christian children and their parents suffer constantly. If they are openly known to be Christians, they are rejected by their peers and often treated differently by their teachers. I have had personal experience with such problems. When the United States bombed Iraq, the following day my children were accused by their classmates of murdering their Muslim brothers. Although the children are not required to attend religion lessons at school, our children were forced to stay in the class. One day, during the lesson when the subject of the lesson was heaven and hell, the teacher asked the class where my son would go after death. The class responded by suggesting that he would go to hell. Situations like these affect our children negatively. One day a pastor in Ankara appeared on a television program to defend Christianity. The next day the children at school threatened his two daughters and frightened them. Hundreds of these kinds of incidents take place all over Turkey each year. These Muslim children, like their parents, are intolerant of anyone who is different from them.

A young teacher said in the class that there was no Christmas, that it was a lie. She said Christians were wrong. My son was sitting in the class looking at the teacher. He came home unhappy and told us what the teacher had told the students. Many teachers who teach in secular state schools are of the same mind. Without bothering to read the New Testament they speak as if they know everything about Christianity. There is a thick and high wall of prejudice against Christianity here in Turkey. Any child who goes to school is taught lies about Christianity and Christians. In the schools in Turkey the students are being taught that Christians believe in three Gods, that

⁴ Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox foundation property.

Jesus was not crucified and that the Bible has been changed by the priests.

Evangelistic activities a 'threat' to Turkish unity

Even though evangelising is not formally prohibited, evangelical Christians in Turkey have been imprisoned because they partake in Christian activities and evangelise in the streets. Eight American citizens were arrested in March 1998 for having distributed copies of the New Testament in the streets of Eskişehir.⁵

Missionary activities are also on the agenda of the National Security Council, which is chaired by the President of the Republic and also comprises the Chief of the General Staff, the commanders of all branches of the Turkish Armed Forces and several government ministers. In a February 2005 evaluation of current and future challenges to Turkish security, the National Security Council drew attention to “a need [to institute] social activities that will prevent the spreading of organizations and ideologies that will have an impact on Turkey’s unity”. It was suggested that “abusive missionary activities should not be permitted” (Ceylan 2007).

I have had personal experiences in this regard. Starting from the 1970s, various correspondence courses have been offered by Christians to answer any questions people may have about Christianity. These activities were not illegal. From time to time I would take my share in answering the letters received. One day, when I was mailing 14 letters, a man approached me and identified himself as a policeman. He took me to a small room in the post office, and opened one of the letters. When he saw words like ‘Jesus’ and ‘Bible’ he called the policeman in charge of terror prevention. He said that he had caught a terrorist and asked them to come and arrest me. I spent the next three weeks four stories under ground in a dark room. It was a military prison. Every night three to four guards would come and beat me. Because Turkey was under martial law at that time, I was taken to a military court. When I was brought before the public prosecutor he asked me if I was trying to overthrow the government and set-up a Christian state. The Lord gave me the wisdom to explain the whole Gospel in short, emphasising that the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus

⁵ Today's Zaman, 19 January 2008. Available online. <http://www.todayszaman.com>.

was building was not of this world, and as a Christian it was my duty to obey and be faithful to the laws of my country. When I finished, the public prosecutor looked at me and said: “Friend, what you are doing is not against the law, and I have no ground to punish you. But please be careful, because our policemen are ignorant, and they will wear you out” (Cf. U.S. Department of State 2007).

In the early 1990s two young Christians who had converted from Islam were celebrating their wedding in a small Protestant Church in Ankara. Suddenly the police broke up the celebration and took everyone present into custody for three days. They were later released without charges.⁶

From 2006-2007, the Turkish church and foreign Christians working in Turkey went through very difficult years.⁷ It began with the murder of Father Andreas Santoro, a Catholic priest serving in Trabzon on the Black Sea.⁸ Not much later, an Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, was shot down in front of his office in downtown Istanbul.⁹ Lastly in April of 2007 three young Christians were brutally murdered at a Christian publishing house in Malatya by five young local Muslim men.¹⁰ What could cause such young men to defy the law and humanity by committing such a crime? What could encourage

⁶ The author was an eyewitness to this event.

⁷ Pikkert (2006:225) describes the build-up to this period as follows: “During the winter of 2004-05 maligning Christianity and Christian missions was raised to a feverish pitch in Turkey. One newspaper, *Üsküdar Gazetesi*, not only published a series of ‘exposes’ maligning Christianity, it also distributed free of charge over 500,000 copies of a particularly savage book, *Dikkat Misyoner Geliyor* (2004) (Beware, the Missionary is Coming) from a roving bus with the book’s title emblazoned on the side. Although the Turkish Ministry of Education books don’t mention Christian missions, the popular press regularly depicts modern missionaries as nothing but harbingers of Western cultural and political hegemony, agents of secularization serving Western political interests. Missions is “frequently characterized in Muslim discourse in precisely the same terms as colonialism: as oppressive, exploitative, unscrupulous as to methodology, ruthless, arrogant, immoral, and destructive of indigenous cultures” (Zebiri 2000:30).

⁸ Milliyet Gazetesi 05 February 2006; Available online: www.milliyet.com.tr/2006/02/06/son [Accessed 1 November 2008]; Jubilee Campaign 2008.

⁹ Milliyet Gazetesi 19 January 2007; Available online: www.arama.hurriyet.com.tr [Accessed 1 November 2008].

¹⁰ Hurriyet Gazetesi 19 April 2007; Available online: www.radikal.com.tr/index [Accessed 1 November 2008].

them to stand up in front of the world and proclaim that they had done it for the sake of God and country? There must be something in their beliefs that convinced them that these Christians were dangerous to Turkey. How different these men are from the wives of the victims who openly declared to the media that they forgave those who had killed their husbands!¹¹

One day two Turkish Christians who were working for a Christian organisation received a call from Silivri, a town 60 kilometres from Istanbul. The man who called asked these two Christians to meet with him and to tell him about Christ and Christianity. When the two Christians arrived at the appointed place, they saw two youths under the age of 18. The two Christians, knowing that it is forbidden to preach the Christian Gospel to minors, told the boys that they would not talk with them about Christianity. While talking with the boys a gendarme came, and arrested the two Christians. They were accused of spreading Christianity by illegal methods. The two Turkish Christians went on trial for allegedly insulting Turkishness and Islam.¹²

Bible distribution viewed as propaganda

In the biography of Lyman MacCallum, former American Bible Society director in Istanbul, Padwick, referring to the early era of the Republic, said about the Bible colporteurs that they, “meet [sic] with police interference, for, though the sale of the Bible is not illegal in the Turkish Republic, there may still be some among the less educated officials who regard this as a dangerous form of propaganda” (Padwick 1958:35).

Between the years 1981-2007, during my 26 years of work at the Turkish Bible Society, I encountered the same kinds of problems with the mentality of the people and the police. One day in 1984, while working at the Bible Society shop, located on the busiest street in Istanbul, a middle-aged man came in and asked me questions about the Bible. When I answered him, I could see that he didn't listen. Then I offered him a New Testament. He said he had no money. I offered it to him free of charge. He accepted a copy and left. On the same day this man returned with two policemen. I was accused of practising

¹¹ ATV 19 April 2007 aksam haberler; Milliyet 19 April 2007.

¹² This trial at the court in Silivri is still continuing.

illegal Christian propaganda and was put into jail for two weeks. When the case came before the judge, he reviewed my papers and became angry with the police because they had had no legal grounds to arrest me. I was set free with no charges against me. This sort of confrontation happens often, because the local police still believe that evangelism and Christian activities are against the law.

I was denied a passport between 1985-1990, and was considered 'unfit' to represent my country. When I secretly investigated my file through insiders, I was not surprised to see that the grounds for refusal were based on my Christian activities. When I learned this, I filed a case against the Ministry of the Interior. Since Christian evangelism and distributing Bibles is not illegal, the attorney for the Ministry of the Interior refused to give grounds for their refusal to issue me with a passport and the case was thrown out of court. Two months later I was able to get my passport.

Christian response

These events and the way that we are so misunderstood fill our hearts with pain. Despite all these negative situations we feel and still have great hope that our merciful God will bless the Turkish people, and give us, the Turkish Christians, more grace to love and bless them.

References

- Allman, Avis Asiye 1999. Religious freedom in Turkey. Available online: www.minaret.org/allman.htm [Accessed: 1 November 2008].
- Argit, Betül Ipsirli 2005. Clothing habits, regulations and non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. *Journal of Academic Studies* Vol. 6 Issue 24:79-96.
- Bozkurt, Gülnihal 1988. Dhimis in Ottoman legal system. *Hukuk Fakültesi Review* [Law Faculty Review, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, İzmir].
- Bozkurt, Gülnihal 1989. *Alman-İngiliz Belgelerinin ve Siyasi Gelişmelerin Işığında Gayrimüslim Osmanlı Vatandaşlarının Hukuki Durumu (1839-1914)*. Ankara. – [Legal status of the non-Muslim Ottoman citizens in the light of German - British documents and political developments].
- Bozkurt, Gülnihal 1989. *The legal status of non-Muslim Ottoman citizens*. Ankara: Türk Tarık Kurumu Basımevi.

- Bozkurt, Gülnihal 1994. Tanzimat and law. *The 150th symposium of the Tanzimat era*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu:279-286.
- Ceylan, Güzide 2007. Turkey: What causes intolerance and violence? F18News, 29 November 2007. Available online: http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053. [Accessed: 1 November 2008].
- Compass Direct 2006. Converts in Turkey charged under speech law. 2006. *Compass Direct News*, 31 October 2006.
- Jubilee Campaign 2008. Religious freedom in Turkey, report 2008. Jubilee Campaign. Andijk, The Netherlands. Available online: <http://tinyurl.com/Turk08> [Accessed: 1 November 2008].
- Oehring, Otmar 2008. Turkey: What difference does the latest Foundations Law make? F18News on: 13 March 2008. Available online: http://forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1100 [Accessed on 1 November 2008].
- Ortaylı, İlber 1994. Tanzimat Döneminde Tanassur ve Din Değiştirme" [Changing religion in the Tanzimat Era]. *The 150th symposium of the Tanzimat era*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu:481-487.
- Padwick, Constance E 1958. *Call to Istanbul*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Pikkert, Pieter. 2006. Protestant missionaries to the Middle East: ambassadors of Christ or culture? D.Th. thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria. (also available at: <http://oasis.unisa.ac.za>).
- U.S. Department of State 2007. International Religious Freedom Report, 2007. Turkey. Available online: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90204.htm>.
- Ye'or, Bat 1996. *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam*. Madison, N.J : Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Yılmaz, Hüseyin 1996. *Non-Muslims in the light of the Koran*. İstanbul: Kayihan Yayınları.