

Perceptions of Christians in Turkey

A study of the climate of accusations against Christians in Turkish newspapers

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Abstract

Though Turkey has been a secular and democratic country for decades, the public perception of Christians has been affected by rejection and prejudice. In the years from 2001 to 2007, we saw a development from accusations by official institutions and media against Christians actively propagating their faith to acts of violence against Christians culminating in the murders of three Christians in Malatya/Turkey. The study covers five Turkish daily newspapers and their perception of Christians at the height of a media campaign in 2004/2005. It reveals that the different societal groups in Turkey differ strongly in their view of Christians and their activities. Each group, represented by one of the newspapers, tries to use the discussion for their own political agenda. However, none of the newspapers leaves the opportunity unused to instrumentalize words like “missionary” to arouse negative emotions.

Keywords Christian identity, Turkey, missionary activities, newspapers, prejudice.

The fact alone of being a Christian in Turkey may raise suspicion among Muslim Turks. “The PEW 2008 Global Attitudes Survey among people from 24 countries, including six 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).² That an ethnic Turk³ confesses to be a Christian seems to be

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² Cf. Haede 2012:89. “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 for which was the war in Iraq that was perceived by many people in Turkey as “Christian” nations invading a Muslim country.

³ I am aware of how problematic it is to speak of “ethnic Turks.” Encouraged by the official Kemalist ideology “Turk” was often used in daily life for every Muslim within Turkey. Today the awareness of the diversity of people groups in Turkey is growing.

impossible for many Turks. Because Turks with a Christian identity are so far away from what can be imagined by people in Turkey, converts to Christianity are easily slandered as traitors or even agents of foreign powers.

The media play an important role in forming and reflecting the opinions of people. Therefore, to examine daily newspapers on how they view Christians and Christianity can provide important insights about the kind of accusations with which Christians are confronted. It can also help to get an idea about how diverse these perceptions are and about the common perceptions in spite of this diversity.

1. Christian identity in Turkey

1.1 Christians in the Ottoman Empire

In the Ottoman Empire the organization of society according to “millets,” that is religiously defined people groups (cf. Hage 2007:50-52), provided a certain degree of freedom for Christians. However, this freedom was limited. As an example, the transition of Muslims to a Christian millet was unthinkable.

In the 19th century, European ideas of national identity began to influence the elites of the Ottoman Empire. However, as the attempts to create a multi-religious “Ottoman nation” failed (Lewis 1968:333) Muslim thinkers began to see nation and Islam together. The rebellion of “Christian nations” inspired by European nationalism and their fight for independence that finally led to independent states (for instance Greece 1829, Serbia 1878, and Bulgaria 1908) increased mistrust against Christians and consolidated the idea that only Muslims can be real Turks, faithful to their state (cf. Haede 2012:88).

However, the idea that the ethnic Turk has to be a Muslim was never an empirically proven truth. During the migration of Turkic people from East to West a few of them like the Gagaus Turks, still living in today’s Moldavia (cf. Grulich 1984:15-16; Aygil 2003:80-94), had accepted Christianity.⁴ Even inside the Ottoman Empire, the people group of the “Karamanlı” (cf. Aygil 2003:72-79; Anzerlioğlu 2003) consisted of Turkish speaking orthodox Christians. Some considered them Greek Christians having lost their language; but many think they were a Turkic people that accepted Christianity many centuries ago (cf. Aygil 2003:73-76). The Karamanlı had to leave Turkey as Christians when after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey the new state and Greece agreed about an exchange of people groups (Kreiser/Neumann 2009:406).

1.2 Christians in the Republic of Turkey

When Mustafa Kemal, later named Atatürk, founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923, he tried to build the new state not on an Islamic but on a national Turkish identity.

⁴ Cf. also Jenkins 2008:63-64 and Neill 1990:100-110 about early Turkish Christianity.

The legal status of Christians remaining in the new state “on paper was higher than ever before” (Lewis 1986:351), their real importance in the Republic however was minor. Many Muslims were blaming the Christians for the decline and final fall of the Ottoman Empire.

1.3 Turkish Protestant Christians

A very new development in Turkey is the emergence of small evangelical churches consisting mainly of Turk converts from Islam to Christianity as a result of evangelical missionary activities starting anew in the 1960s (cf. Wilson 1996:6-17). While the number of Christians in traditional churches was continually reduced due to the massacres against Christians during World War I, the exchange of population between Turkey and Greece and the mass emigration especially of Christians to the West, the number of Turkish Protestant Christians has slowly but steadily grown up to maybe 4 000 in today's Turkey.

As a Christian identity for ethnic Turks is almost unthinkable for many Turks and on the background of the Islamic view of apostasy as treason (cf. Schirmacher, Chr. 2000:36-49) this new Christian movement easily became the target of anti-Christian sentiments and verbal attacks. For this reason, the small Protestant missionary movement in Turkey is in the focus of the newspapers I analyzed and in the focus of my research.

2. The background of the media campaign against Christians in 2004/2005

2.1 The National Security Council's report about missionaries

In 2001 the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu), “at the time widely considered the most powerful institution in Turkey” (ESI 2011:7) determined in a report, later published in the daily newspaper *Sabah*,⁵ that missionary activities were a great danger for the country. That was the starting point for a growing media campaign against Christians involved in missionary activities.⁶

2.2 Anti-missionary campaign: religious or nationalistic background?

From today's perspective most commentators would claim that the media campaign against missionaries and the following acts of violence against Christians were not the product of religiously motivated bias, but were rather connected with an ultra-

⁵ Mehmet Çetingüleş, “Misyoner alarmı” (“Missionary Alarm”), *Sabah*, 7 December 2001, <http://tinyurl.com/missionaryalarm>

⁶ Turan 2009:593-627 offers a long list (probably almost exhaustive) of Turkish publications about Christian missionaries until 2009. There is a striking increase of publications of all degrees of quality after 2001.

nationalistic conspiracy against the governing “Justice and Development Party” (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP). This conspiracy against the religious and Europe oriented policy of the AKP was mainly supported by military circles and became known as “Ergenekon” (cf. ESI 2011:3-9).

This analysis seems to be true. However, it also needs to be mentioned that the report of the National Security Council was issued in 2001 – that is before the AKP came to power in the fall of 2002. The Turkish journalist Saymaz (2011:27-39) documents that before the crucial report and until the AKP came to power a number of motions in the Turkish parliament against missionary activities were started by members of the AKP (then opposition party) and by the more conservative Islamic Saadet Partisi (SP, “Felicity Party”). As we will see below, the daily newspaper Millî Gazete, that is considered the mouthpiece of the SP, was strongly involved in the media campaign.

Therefore, even if it seems to be true that the murders of Christians are the result of an ultra-nationalistic conspiracy, other groups of society contributed to the atmosphere of prejudice and fear that probably motivated the nationalists to choose Christians as a target to seek their own interests.

2.3 The climax of the media campaign in 2004/2005

In the fall of 2004 some factors came together to accelerate the media campaign against Christians actively propagating their faith in Turkey. In December 2004 Turkey and the European Union agreed to begin with talks about Turkey’s membership. The US-American siege and final conquest of the resisting city of Fallujah in Iraq in November 2004 was perceived as a cruel massacre and provoked a public outcry in Muslim countries. Finally, Raĥşan Ecevit, the wife of former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, declared in a written statement⁷ her fear that Turkey might lose her religious identity, because of the failure of the government to control missionary activities due to being considerate of the European Union.

Because Raĥşan Ecevit until then was rather known as a leftist and not very religious person, her remarks provoked many reactions in the media.

2.4 Were the murders of Christians a consequence of the media campaign?

In February 2006, the Italian Catholic priest Andrea Santoro was killed in his church in the Black Sea City of Trabzon by a young Turkish man. In January 2007, the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was shot dead in front of the building with the office of the Armenian newspaper AGOS. On April 18, 2007, three Christians were terribly slaugh-

⁷ Cf. Milliyet, 03.01.2005, 1+16: “Raĥşan Ecevit’ten misyoner tepkisi – Din elden gidiyor” (“Reaction to missionaries from Raĥşan Ecevit – Religion is gliding out of the hand”).

tered by five young Turkish men in the city of Malatya. The victims were the Turkish converts Necati Aydın and Uğur Yüksel and the German missionary Tilmann Geske.

It is not within the scope of my paper to research in depth how far the media campaign against missionaries triggered the murders against Christians. That exaggerated numbers about new churches that were published in newspapers at least partly motivated the murderers of Malatya is obvious.⁸

2.5 Developments in media coverage after the massacre of Malatya

A quantitative research on the question whether media coverage about Christians was more objective and more positive after the massacre of Malatya is not part of my study. It seems as if mainstream TV and newspapers were shocked by the results that the previous media campaign obviously had yielded. The number and intensity of direct attacks on Christian activities fell. This fact is probably also due to the arrest of ultranationalist activists starting in 2008 and the consequent court case against them under the name “Ergenekon.”

However, as news about a conference in Kocaeli/Turkey in 2012 proves, there are still voices trying to direct anger against Christians to enhance their own political agenda.⁹ In January 2013, just a few months after this conference, the Turkish police arrested a group of people who supposedly planned to assassinate the Turkish pastor of the Protestant Church in Izmit/Kocaeli, Emre Karaali.¹⁰

2.6 Why are missionaries targeted?

As we will see below the main target in criticizing Christians are missionaries (“misyoner”) or missionary activities (“misyonerlik”). There seem to be historical and religious reasons for this special focus. I don’t have the space here to discuss the validity of the accusations.¹¹ However, in Turkey Western missionaries during the last century of the Ottoman Empire are widely perceived as part of the Western efforts to split and destroy this Empire. Today’s missionaries are evaluated in the same manner. The newspaper Millî Gazete concisely summarized this mindset: “The missionaries destroyed the Ottoman state; they want to destroy the Republic

⁸ The local Malatya newspaper “Bakış Gazetesi” had warned on February 4, 2005, claiming that 48 house churches had been opened in the city of Malatya (cf. Saymaz 2011:138-139). In fact, by then there was one Christian fellowship in Malatya, meeting in two apartments. One of the murderers, Emre Günaydın, told the police after the murders that he felt, he had to do something, because he had heard about 50 churches in Malatya.

⁹ Cf. <http://tiny.cc/kocaeli> [02.06.2012] reporting about a conference speaker claiming that there are 54 000 Protestant house churches in Turkey (the real number of Protestant individuals maybe being 5 000).

¹⁰ Cf. <http://tinyurl.com/karaali> [11.03.2013].

¹¹ Just as a few works discussing the role of missionaries in the 19th century cf. DeWitt 2004, Pickert 2008, Umit 2008.

too.”¹² Not only newspapers and television channels focused on missionaries and their activities during the years 2001 to 2007. Many books written in Turkish covered the “missionary threat.” Poyraz 2004 (1st ed. 2001), Gündüz 2002, Kerimoğlu 2004 are only a few examples.

To target missionary activities also has religious reasons. Of course, Christian mission in Turkey intends to call Muslims to the Christian faith. Since apostasy from Islam is considered treason by traditional Islam (cf. above 1.3 and Schirrmacher, Chr. 2000:36-49), missionary activities are seen as especially provocative.

In addition, it seems that sometimes missionaries are targeted, because to target Christians as a whole in the present mainstream in Turkey being familiar with human rights issues is considered “politically incorrect.”

3. The choice of the time frame and the newspapers for this study

This present paper presents first findings for a more detailed and elaborate study that will be delivered to the University of South Africa as a dissertation for a DTh in Missiology.

3.1 The time frame

As described above (see 2.3) there was a climax of a media campaign at the end of 2004 and in the beginning of 2005. Some media used certain political developments to start this campaign, others felt obliged to react and present their opinions on Christian activities. Because of the public awareness of the debate, the main points that every group of society wanted to raise were voiced in this short period of time. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to me to limit my study to the months from November 2004 to January 2005.

3.2 The newspapers

Daily newspapers are still important for making and reflecting opinion in Turkey. Typical for the national newspapers is a high number of columnists “who are commenting and analyzing political, social and economical events on a national and international level” (Çebi 1994:191).¹³ Because many of these columnists are guests or even moderators in TV shows and write books, their influence on public opinion can be remarkable.

With the choice of newspapers, I tried to cover the main ideological currents in Turkey of the years 2004/2005. Though the proportions and societal relevance of

¹² “Osmanlı devletini misyonerler yıkmıştı. Cumhuriyeti de yıkmak istiyorlar,” Milli Gazete, 06.01.05, 2, Mehmed Şevket Eygi: “Rahşan Ecevit bile feryat etti.” (“Even Rahşan Ecevit is crying for help”).

¹³ In the German original: “...die ... die politischen, sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Ereignisse auf nationaler und internationaler Ebene kommentieren und analysieren.”

these currents have changed remarkably since then, all of them are still existent in Turkish society.

I chose for my research the following five national daily Turkish newspapers:

Milliyet (“Nationality”) which has a circulation of 260 943¹⁴ was founded in 1950 and can be characterized as liberal democratic (cf. Çebi 1994:197-198). Indeed the newspaper’s ownership changed several times since its foundation and so changed the character of *Milliyet*. To put it close to “conservative mass papers” like the German Embassy (*Deutsche Botschaft* 2003:55, footnote 32) does seem not to be justified however, at least for the covered period.

Cumhuriyet (“Republic”) with a circulation of 53 960 is the oldest of the still existing Turkish daily newspapers and was founded in 1924 by Yunus Nadi, a co-worker of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Republic of Turkey and later named “Atatürk” (Çebi 1994: 196-197). Çebi was probably correct in 1994 when he characterized *Cumhuriyet* as “leftist liberal” (Çebi 1994:195). In 2003 the *Deutsche Botschaft* however named it “leftist national” (*Deutsche Botschaft* 2003:47). Especially since the AKP came to power in 2002 *Cumhuriyet* became more and more the mouthpiece of the “Kemalism,” the state ideology introduced by Turkey’s founder.

Yeni Şafak (“New Dawn”) had a circulation of 121 520 and was founded in 1994. *Yeni Şafak* is known for being close to the governing AKP and its Party Leader and Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Like this party, it stands for a moderate but still political Islamic worldview that tries to bring together traditional Islam and the modern world.

Millî Gazete (“National Newspaper” – circulation 16 887) was founded in 1973 and was viewed as “the mouthpiece of the Islamic-fundamentalist ‘Refah Partisi’ (RP) (‘Welfare Party’)” (Çebi 1994:197). When the party of the former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan split into the SP (“Saadet Partisi” – “Felicity Party”) and the AKP, the *Millî Gazete* continued to defend the positions of the more traditional fundamentalist SP.

Yeniçağ (“New Age”) with a circulation of 55 538 was founded only in 2002 with the motto “Dünya’yı Türkçe okuyun” (“Read the world in Turkish”). It represents an ultra-nationalistic worldview.

3.3 How do I evaluate the newspapers?

Because not all of the newspapers had Internet archives for the period of time I researched, I decided to browse the newspapers manually and photograph each available article that somehow deals with Christians and/or Christianity.

¹⁴ These and the following numbers are for sold copies of Turkish national newspapers in the week from 29.11.2004 to 05.12.2004 according to <http://www.medyatava.com/tiraj.asp> [02.06.2012].

For my dissertation, I will base my methodology on Philip Mayring's "qualitative contents analysis" ("qualitative Inhaltsanalyse") with a deductive application of categories (cf. Mayring 2010). This present study however is based on an initial detailed analysis of the texts. I am applying the following questions to the texts: (1) In which contexts are Christians/Christianity mentioned? (2) Is there a positive or negative approach to Christians/Christianity? (3) Which statements are given for the grounds of positive or negative characterization? (4) What are Christians accused of? (5) From which ideological background are the reasons for the accusations given?

4. Perception of Christians in the newspapers

I will start with the one newspaper that was leading in the campaign against missionaries.

4.1 Yeniçağ – the ultra-nationalists

4.1.1 Any closeness to Christianity is suspicious

It is striking how any closeness to Christianity seems to be negative for Yeniçağ. To cast a damning light on the then most important political enemy, the AKP, it seems to be enough to indicate this party's ties with Christianity: They want to lead Turkey to the EU, though the EU's national anthem speaks about God, the Father.¹⁵ The AKP is reported to have applied for membership in the "European People's Party", an organization that also includes Christian Democrat Parties.¹⁶ On December 27, 2004, p 11 Yeniçağ headlines "Hristiyanların kurtarıcısı Tayyip" ("Tayyip, the savior of the Christians"), because a Protestant pastor is quoted saying that the Prime Minister brought improvements for the Christians. On January 3, 2005, a short news (p. 9) reports about one newspaper ("Vakit") blaming another one (Hürriyet) of being "Christian," because the latter had regarded Father Christmas and New Year celebrations as something innocent. It is difficult to find any positive comment about Christians or Christianity in Yeniçağ.

4.1.2 Nationalistic arguments against Christians

From its nationalistic background, Yeniçağ reacts particularly strongly when the national interests of Turkey seem to be at risk. So numerous articles deal with the claim of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul to be "ecumenical,"¹⁷ which by many nationalists is suspected to be a step to build a small Vatican in Turkey.

¹⁵ Cf. Yeniçağ (in the following YC), 01.11.04, 1.11

¹⁶ Cf. YC, 04.11.04, 10. Headline: "AKP 'Hristiyan' oluyor" ("The AKP becomes Christian").

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. YC, 27.11.04, 9 "Papazın AIHM tehdidi" ("The Priest's threat with ECtHR"), 02.12.04, 9 Hasan Demir: "ABD ve 'Ekümenik' Bartholomeos" ("The USA and ecumenical Bartholomeos"), 27.12.04, 9 -

4.1.3 Religious arguments against Christians

Ultra-nationalism and Islamism cannot be kept completely separate in Turkey. In nationalistic circles the theory of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis was discussed broadly in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Kurt 2010). According to this ideology, Turks once found and now have their identity in Islam. If a significant number of Turks would convert to Christianity “one of the main branches ensuring Turkish unity would be broken.”¹⁸ This thought leads to seeing a Turkish convert from Islam to Christianity as traitor.

The religious arguments against Christianity in *Yeniçağ* however are not very deep theologically. On November 7, p. 15 (“Hazreti İsa diyor ki!” – “The venerated Jesus says”) during the Ramadan, the month of fasting, the newspaper can quote long passages about the Islamic Jesus without any reference to the challenges to this by Christian theology. Hulki Cevizoğlu criticizes the tendency of Muslims to wait for Jesus (“Hz. İsa’yı Bekleyen Müslümanlar!” – Muslims waiting for Jesus! 28.12.04, p. 11) though the idea of Jesus’ return is widely accepted in Islamic tradition (cf. Khoury 1998:93).

4.1.4 Political arguments against Christians

The Christian threat is seen as part of a worldwide conspiracy including Israel against Muslims and especially against Turkey.¹⁹ The US soldiers’ fight in Iraq, the opening of a church in Turkey or missionary activities, are summarized with headlines such as in the following column: “Haçlı Hortlaması” (“The Ghost of the Crusades rises”).²⁰ Amongst these political arguments the most outstanding topic is criticism against missionary activities (“misyonerlik”).

4.1.5 Warning against missionary activities

Yeniçağ warned against missionaries and their activities intensely even before the topic came on the agenda in other newspapers. The fact that “Christianity is a missionary religion”²¹ seems to be a reason to warn. To support this warning *Yeniçağ* accuses missionaries of using unethical means like bribing people with money and

Hasan Demir : “Patrik-AKP el ele/Türkiye felâkete!” (“The patriarch and the AKP hand in hand/Turkey towards a disaster”).

¹⁸ “Türk birliğinin [sic!] sağlayan ana kollardan biri kınılmış olacaktır.” Art. Ahmet Gürsoy, *Dini yabancılaşma ve misyonerler* (“Religious alienation and missionaries”), YC, 11.01.2005, 12.

¹⁹ Cf. YC, 03.12.04, 9, Hasan Demir: “Evet, Bartholomeos ihanet eder!” (“Yes, Bartholomeos is betraying”).

²⁰ YC, 10.11.04, 9.

²¹ A quote of the former Chairman of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz, in YC, 04.11.04, 8 “Misyonerlik tehlikesiyle karşı karşıyayız” (“We are confronted with the danger of mission work”).

other attractions. To prove the seriousness of the threat, numbers are used that look very exact but are often greatly exaggerated.²² Yeniçağ is not reluctant to use public emotions to show missionaries in a bad light. One columnist maintains that American soldiers in Iraq force the population to become Christians, killing those who resist.²³

As Raĥşan Evecit started the climax of the media campaign on January 03, 2005, Yeniçağ seemed to be prepared. From January 4 to 15, 2005, Yeniçağ published a whole-page series of articles on 12 consecutive days against missionaries.²⁴ It is not possible here to list the multitude of accusations against missionaries in this series and in other articles during that time. They range from quoting true information about missionary activities to connecting everything with it, like foreigners buying land in Turkey²⁵. The accusations against Christian missionaries culminate in sentences like, "It draws attention that every missionary involved in Christian propaganda is at the same time a spy"²⁶ or even: "Each missionary activity is an act of terror."²⁷

4.2 Millî Gazete – the Islamists

The Islamist Millî Gazete conforms to the principal opposition to Christian propaganda that we saw in Yeniçağ. Differing from Yeniçağ, it tries to give well-grounded religious reasons for its opposition.

4.2.1 Warning against dialogue with Christians

Before the special anti-missionary campaign started in the beginning of January 2005, the Millî Gazete was more focused on warning against a dialogue with Christians. The Muslim-Christian dialogue was perceived as a trap for Muslims. The Vatican, the Evangelicals²⁸ and the Zionists allegedly used it as just one means for a

²² Cf. YC, 06.11.04, 13, "Misyonerlik çalıřmaları üzerine" ("About missionary activities") speaking of 55 000 missionaries in Turkey.

²³ Cf. YC, 10.11.04, p.9, Hasan Demir: "Haçlı Hortlaması" ("Rise of the Crusader").

²⁴ YC, 4-15.01.2005, always 8, Yüksel Mutlu: "Dünden günümüze belgeleriyle ... Misyonerler" ("From yesterday until today documented: missionaries").

²⁵ Cf. YC, 06.01.05, 8: "Değişik kaynaklardan edinilen bilgilere göre yabancıların eline geçen toprakların 100.000 kilometre kareyi bulduđu ileri sürülüyor." ("According to the knowledge from various sources it is maintained that the land that fell into the hands of foreigners sums up to 100 000 square kilometers").

²⁶ YC, 06.01.05, 8: "Hıristiyanlık propagandası yapan misyonerlerin aynı zamanda birer casus olduklarına dikkat çekiyor."

²⁷ "Her misyoner faaliyeti bir terör eylemidir." Hasan Demir in: YC, 11.01.05, 9.

²⁸ Interestingly in many Turkish newspapers the word "Evanjelist" or "Evangelist" has become common for "evangelical."

“new crusade.”²⁹ As one reason for the denial of dialogue, Millî Gazete claimed bad intentions on the part of the Christians. The Islamist newspaper saw the bad intentions not only in some hidden political agenda, but also in a principal theological fact: While the Muslims accept Jesus as a prophet, the Christians do not accept Muhammad as a prophet of God.³⁰

The question of a dialogue with Christians mainly seems to be an inner-Islamic discussion. Therefore, a columnist tries to prove that talks about Muhammad with representatives of other beliefs have nothing in common with today’s understanding of dialogue.³¹ He maintains: If Muslims accept Christianity as a rightful religion and Christians as going to paradise, these Muslims cannot be considered as believers.³²

Warning against Muslims adopting Christmas traditions the newspaper confers to the Qur’an³³ admonishing not to make friends with Christians.³⁴ In addition, dialogue is not considered necessary, for “What kind of dialogue should we have with other religions whose validity was totally cancelled by Allah?”³⁵

4.2.2 Accusations against missionaries

Millî Gazete, just as the newspaper *Yeniçağ*, was warning against missionaries from the very beginning of the period studied here.³⁶ As the negotiations with the European Union were coming closer, the newspaper complained about the freedom that needed to be given to missionaries as a price to be paid to Europe.³⁷

When Raḥşan Ecevit raised her voice, Millî Gazete considered this fact not as a proof for Ecevit’s true faith, but as a sign how bad the situation really is: “When it gets to be unendurable, even people we didn’t expect to, do rebel.”³⁸

²⁹ Cf. Millî Gazete (in the following MG), 06.11.04, 2, Mehmed Şevket Eygi: “Papazlı Hahamlı İftar-Diyalog Ziyafeti” (“Meal for breaking the fast with Priests and Rabbis”).

³⁰ Cf. MG, 08.11.04, 13, M. Hamdi Güner: “Misyonerler yüzsüz” (“Shameless missionaries”).

³¹ Cf. MG, 18.12.04, 15, Ebubekir Sifil: “Diyalog Argümanları” (“Arguments about dialogue”). MG, 25.12.04, 14, Ebubekir Sifil: “Diyalog Argümanları (4)”.

³² Cf. MG, 09.11.04., 2, Mehmed Şevket Eygi: “Diyalogçuların Uyarıyoruz.” (“We are warning those involved in dialogue”).

³³ Cf. Qur’an Sura 5:51 (according to Paret 2011).

³⁴ Cf. MG, 28.12.04, 15, Mehmet Talu: “Müminleri bırakıp da kafirleri dost edinmeyin.” (“Don’t leave the believers and make friends with unbelievers”).

³⁵ “Allah’ın (c.c.) hükümlerini tamamen kaldırdığı diğer dinlerle bizim ne diyalogumuz olabilir ki?,” MG, 10.12.2004, 17, Nedim Odabaş: “Dinler Bahçesi.” (“Garden of religions”).

³⁶ Cf. MG, 04.11.04, 3, article “Misyonerliğe karşı eğitim şart” (“Education is a condition against missionaries”).

³⁷ Cf. MG, 05.11.04., 3, Mehmed Şevket Eygi: “Azgın ve Saldırgan Evanjelistlerle İşbirliği Yapan Müslümanlar.” The headline shows that the real enemies are the moderate Muslims: “Muslims working together with ferocious and aggressive Evangelicals.”

³⁸ “Ama bıçak kemiğe dayanınca demek ki hiç beklenmeyen kişiler bile isyan ediyormuş.,” MG, 04.01.05, 3, Zeki Ceyhan: “Raḥşan Ecevit ve AKP`liler” (“Raḥsan Ecevit and the AKP members”).

Some articles in *Millî Gazete* try to make a distinction between “aggressive missionaries” (“saldırgan misyonerler”) and others: “Missionaries who work in an aggressive, militant, fanatic way, do propaganda and have motivations outside of religion, are aggressive missionaries.”³⁹ The Islamist newspaper doesn’t really describe the “non-aggressive missionary.” In one case, this group is defined as missionaries who are active exclusively in social work.⁴⁰ Unlike other newspapers, which will be studied below, there is however not even a formal declaration that mission work with good motivation should be endured or even made possible in a democracy. The freedom for Christian missionaries to propagate their faith is openly denied with the argument that there is no real freedom in Turkey for Muslims to do this.⁴¹

The accusations in detail conform mostly to those in *Yeniçağ*. Missionaries are accused of using dishonest methods to cheat primarily young people with economical or psychological problems.⁴² Behind the missionary activities a political agenda of the USA to divide Turkey is suspected.⁴³ Missionaries are allegedly not laboring for a religious purpose, but for Israel and for re-Christianizing Anatolia.⁴⁴

4.3 Yeni Şafak – the moderate Islamists

Different from the newspapers dealt with until this point, in *Yeni Şafak* we find at least rudimentary forms of a positive evaluation of Christians. Criticism is stronger when directed to “the West” than to “Christianity”.

4.3.1 Positive evaluation of Christians and Christianity

Though writing mainly from an Islamic perspective *Yeni Şafak*, different from *Yeniçağ* and *Millî Gazete*, shows some positive evaluations of Christianity: The early religious education in the USA is seen as an example for Turkey,⁴⁵ a columnist sees the conservative moral values of evangelical Christians as close to those of Islam⁴⁶ – even though he utters astonishment about the great distance in other political questions.

³⁹ “Saldırgan, militan, fanatik şekilde çalışan, propaganda yapan, din-dışı amaçları olan misyonerler agresif misyonerdir.” MG, 07.01.05, 5, Mahmut Toptaş: “Din elden gitmiyor!” (“The religion is not gliding out of the hand!”).

⁴⁰ MG, 19.01.05, 2, Mehmed Şevket Eygi: “Diyabet’e Açık Mektup (‘An open letter to the Presidency of Religious Affairs’).”

⁴¹ Cf. MG, 07.01.05, 5, Mahmut Toptaş: „Din elden gitmiyor!“ (“Religion is not gliding out of the hand!”).

⁴² Cf. MG, 05.01.05, 4, “Ankara Bürosu: Gençler ‚misyoner‘ kısıncında”: “Young people in the claws of missionaries.”

⁴³ Cf. MG, 06.01.05, 5 “Ümmetin hakkını da korumalıyız,” quoting an article of Rahşan Ecevit in the newspaper *Zaman* from 05.01.05.

⁴⁴ Cf. MG, 07.01.05, 5, Mahmut Toptaş: “Din elden gitmiyor!“

⁴⁵ YS (im Folgenden YS), 08.11.04, 4, “Amerika’da din eğitimi” (“Religious education in America”).

⁴⁶ YS, 09.11.04, 5, Kurşat Bumin: “Gerçekten de ‚garip bir durum‘ ve ‚zor bir konu“

When in December 2004 the Prime Minister Erdoğan opened an Armenian Museum⁴⁷ and a few days later a “Garden of Religions” (“Dinler Bahçesi”) in the town of Bellek, close to Antalya,⁴⁸ Yeni Şafak writers count Christians as belonging to the mosaic of religions in Turkey and quote Prime Minister Erdoğan thanking the Armenians for their contribution to Turkish society. The focus of some of this positive evaluation however is not so much to praise Christianity but to show the tolerance of Muslims or (as in the case of Christian education) pursuing their own political agenda, which is more religious education for Muslim children.

4.3.2 Criticism against the West rather than against Christians

Yeni Şafak’s criticism focuses on the West or the Western civilization. By criticizing the West and especially the USA, the writers of the newspaper point to Bush’s religious rhetoric and claim: “America quasi starts ‘wars of religion’ again.”⁴⁹ Though the theological fundamentals of Christianity are hardly ever made a topic, Yeni Şafak nevertheless can see a “white, Protestant, Christian ... Christian/Jew coalition”⁵⁰ as today’s enemy of Islam.

4.3.3 Self-confidence and “turning the table”

While Yeniçağ saw the political and religious efforts of “Western countries” as an attempt to minimize the strength of Turkey, and Millî Gazete saw these as an assault on Islam, Yeni Şafak seems to exhibit more self-confidence. Yeni Şafak interprets the strategy of the West as “to prevent Turkey from claiming the Islamic civilization and to remove the possibility of masses especially from the Western world from becoming Muslims.”⁵¹ Therefore, what is perceived as the fight of the West against the Muslims, is interpreted as driven by fear in a civilization not being sure of itself anymore.

4.3.4 Missionaries – wrong but no real danger

The activities of missionaries in Turkey were not the focus of Yeni Şafak until Rağsan Ecevit accelerated the discussion. Even then, the newspaper at least partly

⁴⁷ YS, 06.12.04, 1, “Bir İnsanlık Müzesi” (“A museum of mankind”).

⁴⁸ YS, 10.12.04, 1.13, “Medeniyet Dersi” (“Lesson in civilization”).

⁴⁹ YS, 17.11.04, 12, Mehmet Ocaktan “Huntington ve Amerikan saldırgan Evangelist Ruhü” (“Huntington and the aggressive spirit of American Evangelicals”).

⁵⁰ “Beyaz, Protestan ve Hristiyan ... Hristiyan/Yahudi koalisyonu,” YS, 30.11.04, 11, İbrahim Karagül: “BOP – din inşası ve yeni kitap” (“The Greater Middle East Project – construction of religion and a new book”).

⁵¹ “Türkiye’nin İslâm medeniyeti iddialanna sahip çıkmasını önlemek ve dünyanın, özellikle Batı dünyasının kitleler halinde Müslümanlaşma ihtimalini ortadan kaldırmaktır.” YS, 24.11.04, 10, Yusuf Kaplan “Avrupa’nın Bizansı, Türkiye’nin İslâmı ve Batı’nın korkusu” (“Europe’s Byzans, Turkey’s Islam and the fear of the West”). Cf. for this the following article too: YS, 13.12.04, 10, Yusuf Kaplan: “Batı’nın korkusu: Medeniyet iddiası ve İslâm’ın üçüncü hamlesi” (“The Fear of the West: Claim for Civilization and the Third Onset of Islam”).

tried to defend a pluralistic view of religious freedom. The columnist Fehmi Kuru claims that in an atmosphere of religious freedom Muslims don't have to fear missionaries. However, he presupposes that this freedom does not exist for Muslims in Turkey.⁵² Ali Bayramoğlu, another columnist, can go even further towards tolerance claiming: "To relate to other identities will not be a cause for losing its faith to any society or any individual. On the contrary, getting into contact with those others strengthens this identity and faith."⁵³

Going further into the missionary debate however, *Yeni Şafak* seems to have the desire to prove its Islamic identity. It quotes the minister Mehmet Aydın defending religious freedom in general but accusing missionaries of using material means and material promises like sending students abroad. Some articles present completely exaggerated figures about the missionary success⁵⁴ or accuses all missionaries of having a political agenda going as far as to claim: "The real goal of the missionaries is not to spread religion, but to take away land of this country."⁵⁵

Generally, *Yeni Şafak* sees the real danger not in the missionaries, but in the fact that Muslims are not as active as Christian missionaries are.⁵⁶ However, it seems to be clear to the authors that Western powers use missionaries for very bad purposes. That a person like Raşan Ecevit has to warn of missionaries allegedly shows how bad the situation in Turkey is.⁵⁷ The principle of reciprocity seems not to be a leading motive for *Yeni Şafak*. The newspaper can report about missionary success as if it were a criminal offense,⁵⁸ and a few days later express its satisfaction with the spread of Islam in Europe.⁵⁹

4.4 Milliyet – the liberal democrats

Milliyet shows some effort to defend religious freedom for Christians. The newspaper cannot be said to be part of the anti-missionary campaign; however, it repeats the often-heard accusations against missionaries at least as news.

⁵² Cf. *YS*, 04.01.05, 12, Fehmi Kuru: "Canhıraş bir feryat" ("A fearful cry for help").

⁵³ "Başka bir kimlikle ilişki kurma, hiç bir topluma, hiç bir ferde kimliğini, inancını kaybettirmez. Tersine, diğerleriyle temas haline geçirek bir kimlik ve inancı pekiştirir.," *YS*, 04.01.05, 4, Ali Bayramoğlu: "Raşan Ecevit'in kabusu ..." ("The nightmare of Raşan Ecevit ...").

⁵⁴ "In Ankara: 230 illegal missionary churches," "Ankara: 230 korsan misyoner kilisesi" – article with this headline in *YS*, 08.01.05, 14.

⁵⁵ "Misyonerlerin asıl hedefi din yaymak değil, bu ülkeden toprak koparma..." *YS*, 17.01.05, 9, Dr. Vehbi Karakaş, "Öğretim Görevlisi: Misyonerler cirit atıyor" ("Associate Professor: The missionaries do as they please").

⁵⁶ Cf. the same article.

⁵⁷ Cf. *YS*, 11.01.05, 10, Akif Emre: "Türkiye'de her 'misyoner' eşit olabilir mi?" ("Can each missionary in Turkey be equal?").

⁵⁸ Cf. *YS*, 08.01.05, 14, Evin Göktaş, Ankara: "230 korsan misyoner kilisesi" ("230 illegal missionary churches opened").

⁵⁹ Cf. *YS*, 10.01.05, 9, "Avrupa İslam'a yöneliyor" ("Europa is turning towards Islam").

4.4.1 Defending religious freedom for Christians

Milliyet tries to defend religious freedom or at least give room for differing opinions. Vandalism against an old Christian church in Van/Turkey is strongly condemned.⁶⁰ Complaints of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch about limitations of religious freedom are reported without comment.⁶¹ The columnist Taha Akyol argues that the ecumenical title for the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Istanbul, which is generally denied by Turkish authorities, could even have positive effects on the image of Turkey.⁶² A report about Christmas traditions in different Western countries⁶³ could be interpreted as a certain degree of accepting Christian identity. During the discussion about missionaries triggered by Raĥsan Ecevit's remarks the columnist Mehmet Y. Yılmaz expressed a clear commitment to secularism: "Even if tomorrow all Turks believed in the books that were distributed and became Christian that can't be a problem for the secular state."⁶⁴

4.4.2 Criticism against Christianity and missionaries in more indirect form

Milliyet prefers to utter criticism against Christians in a more indirect way. The then chair of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, Ali Bardakoĝlu, is reported to see the attitude of Europe to sexual morals as the main problem in Turkey's approaching the EU.⁶⁵ An AKP member of parliament is quoted claiming that a church in Samsun took 64 young people to Italy and gave them work.⁶⁶ The worst headline about missionaries ("Missionary disaster" – "misyoner afeti") is about supposed unethical missionary activities in the Tsunami relief work in Indonesia.⁶⁷

Milliyet tries to defend liberal democratic values concerning religious freedom. However, Milliyet at times tends to join into the campaign against missionaries though with a bit more distance.

⁶⁰ Cf. Milliyet (im Folgenden MI), 08.11.04, 1: "Devlet 'iřgal' altında – Taliban'dan ne farkı var!" ("The state is 'occupied' – what is different from the Taliban?") and 17: řukran Pakkan, Van: "Kiliseyi hedef tahtası yaptılar" ("They made the church a target").

⁶¹ Cf. MI, 03.12.04, 24, Yorgo Kırbaki, Atina: "Bartholomeos, Türkiye'yi Atina'ya řikâyet etti" ("Bartholomeos complained about Turkey to Athens").

⁶² Cf. MI, 04.12.04, 19, Taha Akyol: "Patrikhane meselesi" ("The problem of the patriarchate").

⁶³ Cf. MI, 25.12.04, 23 ("Cumartesi"), "Dünya Noel'i nasıl kutluyor?" ("How does the world celebrate Christmas?").

⁶⁴ "Daĝıtılan kitaplara inanıp yarın bütün Türkler Hıristiyan olsalar bile, bu laik devletin bir sorunu olmaz." Cf. MI, 04.01.05, 2, Mehmet Y. Yılmaz: "Raĥsan Hanım bir yerde hata yapar" ("Mrs. Raĥsan is wrong in something").

⁶⁵ Cf. MI, 02.12.04, 19, "Sorum cinsel ahlakta" ("The problem is with sexual morality").

⁶⁶ Cf. MI, 05.11.04, 18, Saliha Çolak: "Ankara: Bedava Kuran için 4 trilyon" ("Ankara: 4 trillions for fee Qur'ans"). Cf. also MI, 13.01.05, 3, Hasan Pulur: "Avrupalı olmanın bir bedeli vardır!" ("There is a price for being European") with some hints on people becoming Christians for material reasons.

⁶⁷ Cf. MI, 14.01.05, 3.

4.5 Cumhuriyet – the secular nationalists

4.5.1 Critical against religion's influence in politics

Cumhuriyet's focus in the inner-Turkish discussion is protecting laicism against the influence of religion on politics. When evaluating Christians, this focus is maintained. Cumhuriyet shows displeasure over the influence of conservative Christians on the US presidential election.⁶⁸ The same article sees Europe as the last island of laicism. When Turkey's candidacy for the EU fills the headlines, another columnist even complains that Europe is not secular enough for Turkey.⁶⁹ When Cumhuriyet warns against missionaries, the motivation is rather anti-imperialistic.⁷⁰

4.5.2 Sympathy and disappointment with the West

In a few articles, sympathy for what is real Christianity seems to be articulated. An article on Christmas about "The desire of Jesus"⁷¹ points out that Jesus came from the Middle East and how far a country like the USA is from his standard of peacefulness.

The secular newspaper seems to express a deep disappointment about the Western civilization that was shown by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as the goal to strive for.⁷²

4.5.3 Commitment to religious freedom

At the climax of the anti-missionary campaign of other media, Cumhuriyet columnist Oral Çalışlar writes a series of columns with a deep commitment to religious freedom and against the fear of Christian missionaries. "To say that there is the danger of Turkey being Christianized is not realistic."⁷³ Çalışlar shows that looking at numbers Christians in the West have more reason to be concerned about the progress of Islam. In Turkey, there is a lot of propaganda for Islam. "Can't the Christians, make propaganda for their own religion as well? Can't they for instance sell or distribute the New Testament?"⁷⁴

Cumhuriyet not only plays a moderating role in the discussion about Christian missionaries, but we also find a few articles defending the rights of the old churches in Turkey. Ali Sirmen, another columnist, criticizes nationalists who warn strongly against the old orthodox tradition of Greeks getting a cross out of the waters of the

⁶⁸ Cf. Cumhuriyet (im Folgenden CU), 18.11.04, 6, Orhan Bursalı: "Din Savaşları" ("Wars of religion").

⁶⁹ Cf. CU, 17.12.04, 2, Bahir M. Erüreten: "Bir Hıristiyan Kulübü ..." ("A Christian Club").

⁷⁰ Cf. CU, 02.01.05, 1.8, Mustafa Balbay: "Ben 2004 ..." ("Me in 2004 ...").

⁷¹ "İsa'nın özlemi," Prof. Dr. Mahir Aydın in: CU, 24.12.04, 2.

⁷² Cf. CU, 18.11.04, 6, Orhan Bursalı: "Din Savaşları" ("Wars of religion").

⁷³ "Türkiye'nin Hıristiyanlaşması tehlikesinin olduğunu söylemek gerçekçi değil." CU, 04.01.05, 4, Oral Çalışlar: "Din Elden Gidiyor" ("The religion is gliding out of the hand").

⁷⁴ "Hıristiyanlar da kendi dinlerinin propagandasını yapamazlar mı? Örneğin İncil satın dağıtamazlar mı?" CU, 09.01.05, 4, Oral Çalışlar: "Müslümanlık Propagandası Hıristiyanlık Propagandası" ("Muslim propaganda and Christian propaganda").

Golden Horn.⁷⁵ The newspaper tries to take the strong nationalistic emotions out of the discussion about the ecumenical status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch.⁷⁶

4.5.4 Not free from using prejudice against Christians

It probably reflects the deep sentiments against Christians in the population that even a newspaper like *Cumhuriyet* at times does not escape from using prejudice against Christians and missionaries for its own purposes. Hikmet Çetinkaya⁷⁷ like Çalışlar criticizes the disproportionate discussion about missionaries, but then he himself slides into a conspiracy theory of the US trying to push “moderate Islam” in Turkey.

Cumhuriyet joins the missionary discussion⁷⁸ and criticizes missionary activities, though rather by presenting news instead of commentaries⁷⁹ and by writing from a rather historical and anti-imperialistic perspective.⁸⁰ Early in the debate about the European Union *Cumhuriyet* used anti-Christian prejudice in a caricature: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Secretary Abdullah Gül were signing the European Constitution in Rome. Behind them, we see the statue of a pope. The *Cumhuriyet* caricaturist Turhan Selçuk lets Erdoğan say: “Gül, do you realize that the pope above us is blessing us?”⁸¹

4.6 Summary of the evaluation of newspapers

4.6.1 Differences in the perception of Christians

The study of five newspapers with different ideological backgrounds reveals remarkable differences in the perception of Christians among the different groups of society in Turkey. The Islamists (*Millî Gazete*) have deep theological reasons to see Christians and especially Christians propagating their faith as a danger. They strongly warn against even having dialogue with Christians. The ultra-nationalists (*Yeniçağ*) perceive Christians and missionary activities as a danger for the unity and strength of the nation. On the background of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, they cannot imagine Turks not being Muslims and still being faithful to their country.

The moderate but still political Islamists of *Yeni Şafak* are wary of attacking Christianity per se. They rather concentrate on trying to show the political agenda behind religious

⁷⁵ Cf. CU, 18.01.05, 4, Ali Sirmen (Dünyada Bugün): “Suyundan Haç Çıkıp Gâvur Olan İstanbul” (“The Istanbul that becomes an unbeliever by getting a cross out of the water”).

⁷⁶ Cf. CU, 12.12.04, 5 (Pazar eki), Selçuk Erez: “Ekümenik nedir?” (“What is ecumenical?”).

⁷⁷ Cf. CU, 11.01.05, 5, Hikmet Çetinkaya: “Din Elden Gidiyor mu?” (“Is the religion gliding out of the hand?”).

⁷⁸ Cf. CU, 10.12.04, 9, Demirtaş Ceyhun 2: “Edebiyatımı Geri İstiyorum” (“I want to have my literature back”).

⁷⁹ Cf. CU, 30.12.04, 6, Ebru Toktar: “Misyonerlik çalışması artabilir” (“Mission work may increase”).

⁸⁰ Cf. CU, 02.01.05, 1.8, Mustafa Balbay: “Ben 2004 ...” (“Me in 2004 ...”).

⁸¹ “Gül, farkında mısın, tepemizdeki papa bizi kutsuyor.” CU, 01.11.04, 3.

activities. They see Islam as being on the rise and the Christians fighting a defensive fight against the superior Islamic worldview. The liberal democrats as represented by *Milliyet* try to defend a Western understanding of a pluralistic democracy even for Christians. The secular nationalists of *Cumhuriyet* don't care so much about the true or the wrong religion. Whenever religion is used for political means, they criticize it.

4.6.2 Using the discussion about Christians for own political agenda

Very often the real adversary of the different ideological groups are not the Christians but the political enemy in their own country. When *Yeniçağ* or *Millî Gazete* write about missionaries, their main intention is to blame the government for not doing enough to hinder the Christians and to strengthen the national or the Islamic identity.

Yeni Şafak, in face of the missionary activities, claims that the political system still does not provide enough freedom to teach Muslims and let them spread their faith. When *Cumhuriyet* attacks George Bush and the Evangelicals in the US, they try to prove to their inner-Turkish opponents how dangerous it is to mix religion and politics. Finally, *Milliyet* in its reaction to the discussion about missionaries tries to prove its commitment to democracy.

4.6.3 Distrust and prejudice against Christians across the different ideologies

In spite of the great variety of the approach to questions about Christians, it has to be mentioned that though in different intensity each of the newspapers at times draws on the existing prejudice against Christians and especially against any effort to convert Turks to Christianity. Especially “missionary” (“misyoner”) or “missionary activities” (“misyonerlik”) at some point are used as emotive expressions by each of the newspapers.

5. Conclusion

There is no systematic persecution against Christians in Turkey in the sense that presently there is no officially state led planned and open repression of Christians. The analysis of five Turkish newspapers however shows that discussion about Christians and their activities can be an instrument for the political agenda of different societal groups in Turkey. It is no comfort for the Christians that in some cases they are not the real target of the discussions. For as the results of the media campaign in 2004 and 2005 show, the victims of such campaigns are mostly Christians.

The climate of prejudice in the Turkish society against Christians and especially against activities of Christians to spread their faith is further revealed by the fact that even societal groups who fight against a political Islam can at times use words like “missionary” to produce certain emotions.

It would require further research to find out why the activities of a tiny minority like the Protestant missionaries can be such a fiercely discussed topic in Turkish newspapers.

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