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Turkey

Hratch Tchilingirian and Ed Alden

Turkey's Christian history goes back to New Testament times. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the church in Antioch (modern-day Antakya) as the first missionaries to Asia Minor, now Turkey. Much of the Book of Acts is set in this region, where Paul made three missionary journeys to preach the Christian message, establish churches and strengthen the believers. His personal sacrifices were rewarded; once established, the churches in Asia Minor flourished. The Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation are all located in today's Turkey. It has been estimated that by the fourth century nearly half of Asia Minor had become Christian and it was established as one of the main centres of Christian faith. The Ecumenical Councils that defined the doctrines of the Christian faith were all held in what today is Turkey: Nicea (today Iznik), Constantinople (Istanbul), Ephesus (Efes) and Chalcedon (Kadıköy). However, the Christians of Asia Minor were sharply divided by language, loyalty and doctrine. Weakened by division, Christianity was unable to withstand the advance of Islam, which rapidly won the allegiance of a population whose faith was not deeply grounded and who resented heavy taxes and church control.

The Turkic tribes who came to the region embraced Islam around the year 1000. During the thirteenth century, new waves of Turkish tribes from central Asia entered Anatolia, with Osman, 'Sultan of the Gazis', setting up a rival state to the Byzantines, at Bursa. He and his successors, as initiators of the Ottoman Empire, pressed across the Dardanelles and into Europe. In 1453, Constantinople, chief city of the Byzantine Empire, fell to Mehmet II and his armies. Considered the beginning of the 'golden age' of the Ottoman Empire, it established a firm Muslim hold over what is now Turkey that continues to this day, with some 99% of Turkey's population professing Islam.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire had been greatly weakened, and large parts of Turkey were occupied by the Allies in the aftermath of the First World War. This provoked the Turkish War of Independence, in which forces led by Mustafa Kemal (later known by the honorific title Atatürk – 'father of the Turks') were ultimately successful in gaining control of the country and proclaiming the Republic.

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On 1 November 1922, the National Assembly in Ankara stripped the last Ottoman sultan of his power and proclaimed itself the sovereign authority. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in July 1923, recognised the new state as the successor to the Ottoman Empire. By then the vast majority of Turkey's Christian population, namely Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians, had become victims of state-planned genocide. The Assyrians call it *Sayfo*, the 'year of the sword'.

The Treaty of Lausanne stated that non-Muslim minorities should 'enjoy the same civil and political rights as Moslems' (Article 39). They were supposed to 'have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein' (Article 40). However, starting from the early days of the Turkish Republic, these basic rights enshrined in the Treaty were never fully granted to the Christian communities. Indeed, until today, the Greek and Armenian patriarchates do not have legal status in Turkey, which means they are unable to purchase or hold title to property or to press claims in court.

Starting in the 1920s, minority citizens were illegally profiled by state agencies, whereby a secret 'race code' was assigned to a person's ethnic identity – citizens with Greek origin were coded 1, Armenians 2, Jews 3, Syriacs 4 and other non-Muslims 5. In 1936, a government decree (*Beyanname*) put Christian and Jewish religious and community institutions under strict control of the state, freezing their wealth and philanthropic and cultural institutions. A major blow to Christians in Turkey was the 1942–4 'Wealth Tax' imposed by the state, which targeted non-Muslim minorities, especially the Armenians and the Jews. Its purpose was to reduce the influence of minorities in the economy, replacing the non-Muslim bourgeoisie with its Turkish Muslim counterpart. In 1955 tensions in Cyprus led to

Christianity in Turkey, 1970 and 2015

	1970		2015		Average annual growth rate (%), 1970–2015
Tradition	Population	%	Population	%	
Christians	290,000	0.8%	181,000	0.2%	–1.0%
Anglicans	2,000	0.0%	12,000	0.0%	4.1%
Independents	2,100	0.0%	19,700	0.0%	5.1%
Orthodox	226,000	0.7%	78,800	0.1%	–2.3%
Protestants	24,300	0.1%	15,000	0.0%	–1.1%
Catholics	26,500	0.1%	42,700	0.1%	1.1%
Evangelicals	5,100	0.0%	7,000	0.0%	0.7%
Pentecostals	490	0.0%	18,300	0.0%	8.4%
Total population	**34,772,000**	**100.0%**	**78,666,000**	**100.0%**	**1.8%**

Source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo (eds), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill), accessed March 2017.

orchestrated riots in Istanbul that targeted minorities, largely Greek but also Armenian businesses and homes. It caused an exodus of Greeks from Istanbul. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Christian community properties and assets were confiscated, repossessed or redistributed by state agencies without compensation.

Modern Turkey: Implications for Christianity

Notwithstanding the advance of Islam, until the early twentieth century Turkey had a considerable Christian population, being a significant centre of both the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox traditions. Although Turkey has never accepted the validity of applying the term 'genocide' to the large-scale massacres of Armenian Christians that took place in 1915, the killings were on a scale that reduced the Armenian presence in Turkey to a small fraction of what it had been before the First World War. The genocide left the Armenians who survived traumatised and fearful. Their sense of vulnerability has been further compounded by the discrimination they have experienced since.

Atatürk, the founder and protector of the Turkish Republic, was determined to lead Turkey into modernity and fruitful relations with the Western world. He reshaped Turkish society by banning the veil and fez, requiring Turkish to be written in Latin script (devised by an Armenian Christian, Agop Dilâçar [Martayan], at Atatürk's request) and introducing a Swiss code of law. He insisted that Turkey must become a secular state and sought to distance the organs of the state from the country's Islamic heritage. The greatly reduced Christian population might have expected to enjoy equal rights in the secular state being created by Mustafa Kemal. In practice, they faced increased harassment, for example being hit more heavily than other communities by the tax regime. Periodically, they were also subject to violent attack, such as the attacks in 1955 on Christians in Istanbul. Despite its secular credentials, it became clear that the state would remain fundamentally Turkish and Muslim, with at best a precarious existence for those with other ethnic or religious identities. After the death of Kemal in 1938, the state allowed itself to be increasingly influenced by the Islamic faith of the great majority of its population, to the point where there is a conflation of Turkish and Muslim identity.

This trend is currently being consolidated under the government of Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Nonetheless, after decades of legal restrictions and discrimination, the emergence of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) as a leading political force in the early 2000s brought some much-needed relief to the Christian communities in Turkey. Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan has enthusiastically said that 'the Erdoğan government has an open ear' for the

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Christians. Unlike other parties, the Justice and Development Party was able to garner support and voters from the widest segments of society. Within a short time, the party shifted from its original dogmatic Islamist politics to conservative democracy. Since the 2000s, the government has restored the legal ownership of dozens of properties that had belonged to Christian communities, which were confiscated by the state over the decades. The Erdoğan government has been more respectful towards Christian religious heads and churches. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether full return of properties and complete restoration of minority rights will be fully implemented. Such concerns include, for instance, the reopening of church seminaries where future clergy could be trained, the legal status and independence of community schools, and freedom for church and community organisations to hold elections.

Greek Orthodox

The Greek Orthodox presence was dramatically diminished through the events that brought modern Turkey into being. Turkey and Greece had been at war, and under the terms of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne 1.5 million Greeks living in Anatolia and Thrace were to be exchanged for the 500,000 Turks leaving Greek territory. This measure removed from Turkey the large majority of its Greek Orthodox population. Though Istanbul remains the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch, the number of Greek Orthodox in Turkey today is very small. This is in contrast to the significant role and majestic history of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire, when Constantinople was one of the most important patriarchal sees in all of Christianity. Today, even as the Ecumenical Patriarch is viewed as 'first among equals' among the Orthodox autocephalous churches and is considered the leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians around the world, the Turkish government does not recognise his 'Ecumenical' title. The Turkish state considers him the spiritual leader of the Greeks living in Turkey and refers to him as the local 'Orthodox Patriarch of Fener'. Fener is the neighbourhood in which the patriarchate's headquarters are located.

From 1924 the Turkish government constantly made life difficult for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, including attempts to promote the emergence of a Turkish Orthodox Church. Systematic efforts to encourage outward migration of Greeks, especially from the 1940s to the 1970s, were largely successful, and only a few thousand Greeks, generally of older age, remain in Turkey today. Most live in Istanbul, with some also on the Aegean islands of Gokceada and Bozcaada. The Greek community has been subject to constant harassment and their leaders and properties have been targets for acts of violence, including desecration, assassination and bomb attacks (including against the patriarchate's headquarters).

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Armenian Orthodox

The Treaty of Lausanne provided for state recognition of the rights of the Greek, Armenian and Jewish communities as non-Muslim minorities but not for the institutional churches as such. Notwithstanding the catastrophic losses suffered during the First World War, the Armenian Orthodox remain by far the largest Christian tradition in Turkey, with around 70,000 adherents today, mainly living in Istanbul. Their ethnic and religious identities are inextricably intertwined. They form a strong community, running schools, newspapers and charitable activities. The Armenian Patriarchate operates under constant pressure as it lacks a clear legal status and has to engage in many disputes over confiscated properties and restrictions on church elections.

Their profile and numbers expose them to systematic discrimination. This has taken different forms at different times, including appropriation of their property; removal of cultural memory through destruction and renaming; social humiliation; and physical violence. The Armenians tend to be portrayed very negatively in official publications and in educational materials in Turkey. Despite being for centuries an integral part of Turkish society, Armenians are constantly made to feel like second-class citizens. The state apparatus is continuously mobilised to restrict and constrain the Armenian community.

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As it comes to terms with living under such constant pressure, the Armenian community is pulled in opposite directions – between 'isolation' and 'integration'. The Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate and other leading institutions tend to favour isolation as the best strategy to secure the future of the Armenian community. They set great store by the preservation of the Armenian language, literature and religion as well as the maintenance of ethnic identity, resisting the growing trend towards mixed marriages. A contrasting vision of integration into mainstream Turkish society has been advocated by progressive Armenian intellectuals such as Hrant Dink, the writer and editor who was assassinated in 2007. They argue on the basis of democratic norms and equal citizenship rights. It appears that the growing trend in the Armenian community favours ending the isolation and moving further towards integration, openness and full participation in society, while seeking to preserve their Armenian identity.

One consequence of the genocide is the reality of Islamised Armenians in Turkey. Particularly women and children who survived were taken into Muslim families as wives, workers or slaves or were kidnapped and raised as Muslims. An estimated 2 million Turks and Kurds today have some Armenian ancestry. It has been estimated that one family in four in the eastern provinces of Diyarbakir, Hakkari, Bitlis and Van had a great-grandmother who was Armenian. In recent years a considerable number of

Islamised Armenians had sought baptism in the Armenian Church as a way of recovering the original religious and cultural identity of their ancestors. Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II estimated that between 80 and 120 have been baptised each year, while others recover their Christian identity by joining other churches. However, with the growing Islamisation of social and political discourse and public space in Turkey, such Armenians seem to have gone back into hiding.

Churches and schools, the institutional core of the Armenian community, operate amidst manifold administrative obstacles and financial challenges as well as occasionally being directly targeted by hostile forces. Restoration of churches has been a major concern of the Armenians but their efforts have been beset by many difficulties, notably legal obstacles. The reconstruction of churches in cities such as Diyarbakir, Kayseri and Antakya where there were large Armenian communities prior to the genocide represents an effort to restore the last remnants of the once rich Armenian Christian presence in these historic places.

Assyrians and Syriac Orthodox

There are an estimated 10,000–15,000 Syriac Orthodox in Turkey today, with deep historical religious roots in the south-east of the country, especially in the Tur Abdin region, which is dotted with churches and a dozen monasteries, such as Mor Gabriel, Mor Yacoub, Mor Malke and Zafaran. Throughout history these centres of religious learning have played a role in the theological, spiritual and cultural life of Syriac Christianity. Like other Christian communities, after years of subjection to what an archbishop called 'oppression and horror', more than half the Syriac population in Turkey lost their lives in the genocide during the First World War.

In 1924 Patriarch Ignatius Elias III Shakir (1917–32) was exiled and the official patriarchal see of the Syriac Orthodox Church was moved from the Zafaran monastery in Mardin to Homs in 1932 and then to Damascus in 1959. An eyewitness, Archbishop Gabriel Aydin, says, 'one day the governor of Mardin came to the Monastery to deliver a telegram from Atatürk [which read] "the clerical leader in the black cassock should leave Turkey immediately and should never ever return".' Despite his state-ordered exile, in 1931 the Turkish government issued a decree depriving Patriarch Elias of his Turkish citizenship. In 1937 another decree by the Turkish government banned the import of publications authored by Elias's successor, Patriarch Aphrem Barsoum, who was an advocate for the rights of the Syriac community. These measures were consistent with Atatürk's policy of secularisation. He had declared that the 'Orthodox and Armenian churches and Jewish synagogues which are based in Turkey should have been abolished together with the Caliphate'.

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The Turkish state does not officially recognise the Syriac Orthodox Church or the Assyrian Christians, either as a non-Muslim minority or as a legal entity. The Syrian Orthodox community in Turkey is declining as a result of the military operations in the south-east and consequent outward migration. Like other Christian communities, the Syriac Orthodox also face perennial legal and administrative hurdles imposed by the state and society. One critical example is the case of the fourth-century monastery of Mor Gabriel. In 2008 the villagers in the vicinity of Mor Gabriel submitted a legal complaint to the courts that the monastery was occupying land illegally, including areas within the walls of the monastic complex. Turkish courts decided against the Syriac community and ordered the transfer of about 28 hectares of land owned by the monastery to the Turkish Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs. Successive appeals have not reversed the decision. In 2017 the Turkish government seized more than 50 Syriac Orthodox properties in Mardin province, including monasteries, churches and cemeteries.

Catholics

There is a small but significant presence of the Catholic Church in Turkey. It is fragmented according to ethnic and ritual identity, including Armenian Catholic (Armenian rite), Roman Catholic (Roman rite), Greek-Byzantine Catholic (Greek rite), Syrian and Chaldean Catholic Churches. The largest expression of Catholicism is the community observing the Roman rite, found mainly in Istanbul, Trabzon and Adana districts. Its origins go back to the 1930s when Catholics of Italian and French origin moved to Turkey from the Levant. By the 1950s many of them had returned to Europe, but the Roman Catholic Church had by then attracted Assyrians, Maronites, Greeks and Armenians who lacked opportunity to worship with their own communities. Today around 20,000 people belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Fluctuating in numbers but never more than a few thousand strong is the Chaldean Church, drawing its adherents from among the Assyrians, including refugees from Iraq, and Christian Arabs from Syria and found mainly in Diyarbakir, Mersin and Istanbul. The Armenian Catholic community has greatly declined in numbers. Having been more than 100,000 strong before the genocide, it is now reduced to a few thousand. The Greek-Byzantine Catholic community is even weaker, with only a few dozen adherents today.

All the Catholic Churches have had to operate in a hostile environment, under constant suspicion from the authorities and facing direct persecution at times, with both the infrastructure and personnel of the church being targeted. In April 2005, an attempt was made to burn the St Paul Cultural Centre in Antalya. In February 2006, Fr Andrea Santoro was killed in

Trabzon, soon followed by the stabbing of Fr Pierre Brunissen in Samsun and Fr Adriano Francini in Izmir. In 2010, the Bishop of Iskenderun Luigi Padovese was repeatedly stabbed and then decapitated by his driver. The lack of religious tolerance and the attendant culture of violence in Turkey have taken a heavy toll on the leadership of the Catholic Churches.

Protestant Churches

The beginnings of Protestantism in Turkey can be traced back to the nineteenth-century work of the Anglican Church Missionary Society, the Basel Mission and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The latter was particularly influential among the Armenian community, leading to the emergence of the Armenian Evangelical Church. This flourishing movement came abruptly to an end with the genocide of 1915. The Armenian Evangelical Church had some 60,000 members before the genocide but has no more than a few hundred today. Other historic Protestant churches are also very small, including the Seventh-day Adventists, who have been present in Turkey since 1958.

It was not until 1961 that Protestant missionary work resumed in Turkey, with the arrival of workers from the American-based mission agency Operation Mobilization. Their work in literature distribution and church planting resulted in some Turks adopting the Christian faith, including Kenan Araz, who became a key figure in church leadership and relations with Muslims. This small movement was frequently subjected to police harassment and deportations but proved to be resilient. It was strengthened by the return to Turkey of individuals who had become Christians while living in Europe and who brought leadership qualities. A major achievement was the translation of the Bible into modern Turkish, with the New Testament being completed in 1987 and the entire Bible in 2001.

The risk of a violent reaction to Protestant missionary work was always present and was underlined when David Goodman, an Operation Mobilization worker, was shot and killed on his doorstep in 1979. Nonetheless, the Protestant movement has been growing – from a few dozen in the 1960s to an estimated 6,000 today, organised under the Association of Turkish Protestant Churches, commonly known as TEK. In terms of securing freedom of worship, a significant event was the visit in 1989 of Sir Fred Catherwood, Vice President of the European Parliament, at a time when Turkey was seeking closer relations with the European Union. He asked the Turkish government to allow Protestants to worship, in the same way that Catholics and Orthodox Christians were allowed. As a result, the government gave verbal assurance that fellowships needed only to inform the local *Vali*, or governor, of the meetings to avoid them being illegal. There are now fellowships meeting in 32 cities across Turkey.

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Whereas initially most members came from an Orthodox background, today the majority are from a Muslim background. The vulnerability of such groups was underlined on 18 April 2007, when Necati Aydin, Ugur Yüksel and Tilmann Geske were brutally murdered in Malatya. They were working with a Christian publishing house and serving as leaders in the local Protestant church. Five young men, pretending an interest in Christianity, came to meet them. They then tied them up, videoed them with their cell phones and, with the police on their way, murdered all three. The case, including the public expression of forgiveness for the murderers by widows of two of the victims, attracted media attention. While there was an initial decline in participation at fellowship meetings throughout Turkey, the case appeared to prompt fresh interest in the Protestant movement, leading to a slight increase in attendance. Though still a marginal presence, the Protestant movement is growing in maturity and grappling with the question of what it means to be both Turkish and Christian in a context where the Islamic identity of the nation is being accentuated.

Although churches and believers experience more freedom today overall, the Protestant churches still have little in the way of official rights. There is no easy route for them to establish themselves officially as churches, to own property or to receive donations legally. Churches have engaged the government in dialogue about these issues through the work of TEK, but progress has been limited. The twenty-first century has seen bridges being built between many Protestant Church leaders and officials in the leadership of the Orthodox Churches. This cooperation has resulted in the development of resources that serve both. Significant areas of cooperation have been the SAT-7 Turk television station, which hosts programmes for both communities, and a growing openness to the use by Protestant congregations of vacant historical church buildings.

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Conclusion

Despite the legacy of Atatürk and the secular state he created, it is clear that Islamic identity runs deep in Turkey and that 'Christophobia' is prevalent. Christianity is widely viewed as a dangerous alien ideology and as a threat to the unity and identity of the Turkish people. When Christianity is considered in public discourse it is often with reference to the Crusades or to Turkish–Greek conflict, thus framing Christianity in terms of enmity towards Turkey. Turkish perceptions are often cast in terms of perennial antagonism between Islam and Christianity. The press fans such hostility by consistently portraying Armenians as a sinister threat and exaggerating the extent of Protestant evangelism in order to arouse fear of a supposed danger to Turkish identity. The Turkish phrase *misyonerlik faaliyetleri*, used both in official reports and in nationalistic press coverage, can be translated

simply as 'propagating activity', but it carries shades of propaganda, treachery and intrigue. Such language cultivates a sense that Christians are enemies, with malign intentions towards the people of Turkey. The resultant atmosphere is one in which it becomes possible to plan and carry out such assassinations as those of Hrant Dink, Bishop Luigi Padovese, and Necati Aydin, Ugur Yüksel and Tilmann Geske. Their violent deaths represent a grisly reminder of the vulnerability of the Christian community in a hostile environment. The difficulties facing Christian churches in Turkey cannot be underestimated. Nonetheless, both in historic Christian communities and in new movements there are resilience and vigour, born of the experience of keeping the faith in face of adversity.

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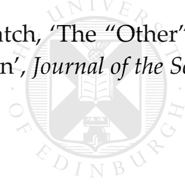

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