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CHAPTER 44

## Christians in Modern Turkey

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### Native Foreigners

Hratch Tchilingirian

Christians are less than 1 percent of the nearly eighty million people of Turkey and live as a precarious minority in a country that is 99.8 percent Muslim. Christians are perceived as the "other" or as "foreigners," even as they have lived there for nearly fifteen hundred years, long before the arrival of Islam and the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. Members of non-Muslim "minorities as individuals have been made to feel they are 'different' in the derogatory sense of the word," wrote Hrant Dink, editor of the Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos*, almost a decade before his assassination. "Because of this negative approach," he continued, "their basic weapon of defense has been to live timidly and, regretfully, in fear."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 2007, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer branded Christian and Jewish charitable trusts as "foreign foundations" and "very dangerous" as justification for his veto of an amendment to the law concerning minorities.<sup>2</sup> He was following decades-long convention. In 1935, the Turkish state had mandated, through the Law on Religious Foundations (No. 2762) that all Muslim and non-Muslim foundations (*vakfs*) should declare the properties they owned at the time. They complied and presented a comprehensive list to the government the following year. However, nearly four decades later, a ruling of the Court of Cassation in 1974 said, "No corporate body consisting of foreigners would be allowed to obtain immovable property." Christian and Jewish citizens of Turkey were put into the category of "foreigner." Thus, their foundations were entitled only to the properties they had before the enactment of the law.<sup>3</sup> The government supervises and controls the foundations of the minorities through the General Directorate of Foundations, under the Office of the President. There are some seventy-five Greek Orthodox, forty-two Armenian, and nineteen Jewish foundations that are entirely regulated by the directorate. Even as the rich history of Christian heritage and church communities in Turkey is

obliterated in the official narrative of the country's history, the government promotes historically significant Christian towns, sites, and places as touristic destinations.

Geographically, Turkey is intimately connected to the early centuries of Christianity. As recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Christianity spread from Palestine through places that are in present-day Turkey, such as Cappadocia/Anatolia (Acts 2:9); Tarsus in Cilicia/Adana region (Acts 9:30); Antioch/Antakya (Acts 11:26), where "the disciples were called Christians" for the first time; Iconium/Konya (Acts 13:51); Attalia/Antalya (Acts 14:25–26); Galatia/Ankara area (Acts 16:6); and many other towns and cities. It was to communities in what is now Turkey that Paul and Barnabas preached the Christian message. Paul's "Letter to the Galatians" was addressed to the community near today's Ankara and Konya; the letters to the "Ephesians," "Colossians," and "Philemon" were intended for the people living near today's Selçuk (Izmir) and Honaz (Denizli), respectively. Other books in the New Testament make references to places in what was then known as Asia Minor and to towns on the coast of the Aegean Sea, northwestern coast of Turkey, where, for instance, all "Seven Churches" in the apostle John's Book of Revelation are located.

Asia Minor in Roman times was a significant region for the development of Christian theology, formulations of dogmas, and literary production. Within the first few centuries, Christianity spread and became a well-established faith in this region. Significantly, the first four ecumenical councils that defined the Christian faith and dogma were all held here: Nicaea (Izmir) in 325; Constantinople (Istanbul) in 381; Ephesus (Efes) in 431; Chalcedon (Kadıköy) in 451. The teachings of these councils are accepted by all churches. Subsequent councils—held twice more in Constantinople in 553 and 680 and in Nicaea again in 787—defined other theological issues but are not accepted by all churches.

When the Seljuks brought Islam during the Byzantine period in the eleventh century, Christianity in Asia Minor was already divided along language and doctrinal lines, political and military rivalries, competing allegiances, and socioeconomic dissatisfactions. Many converted to Islam as a way of liberation from the influence of the church and high taxes. Islam gained a stronger foothold after the victory of the Seljuks at the Battle of Manzikert (today in Muş Province) in 1071, which gradually weakened the authority of the Byzantine Empire in Anatolia. With the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the thirteenth century and the eventual fall of the Byzantine Empire—marked by the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the armies led by Sultan Mehmet II—Christianity became a restricted religion. According to the Quran, Christians were to be tolerated as the "People of the Book," as were the Jews, a religious community based on a monotheistic scripture. Throughout most of the Ottoman period, Christians and Jews were treated as *dhimmi* ("protected persons"). They had freedom to practice their religion and had legal protection of their lives and properties in exchange for loyalty to the sultan and payment of special taxes, known as *jizya*. The Ottoman state's relations with the various Christian and non-Muslim subjects of the empire were regulated by the *millet* system, which organized them as distinct and internally autonomous civil religious entities. The system controlled and governed the non-Muslim communities through elected representatives and administrative organs of the communities under

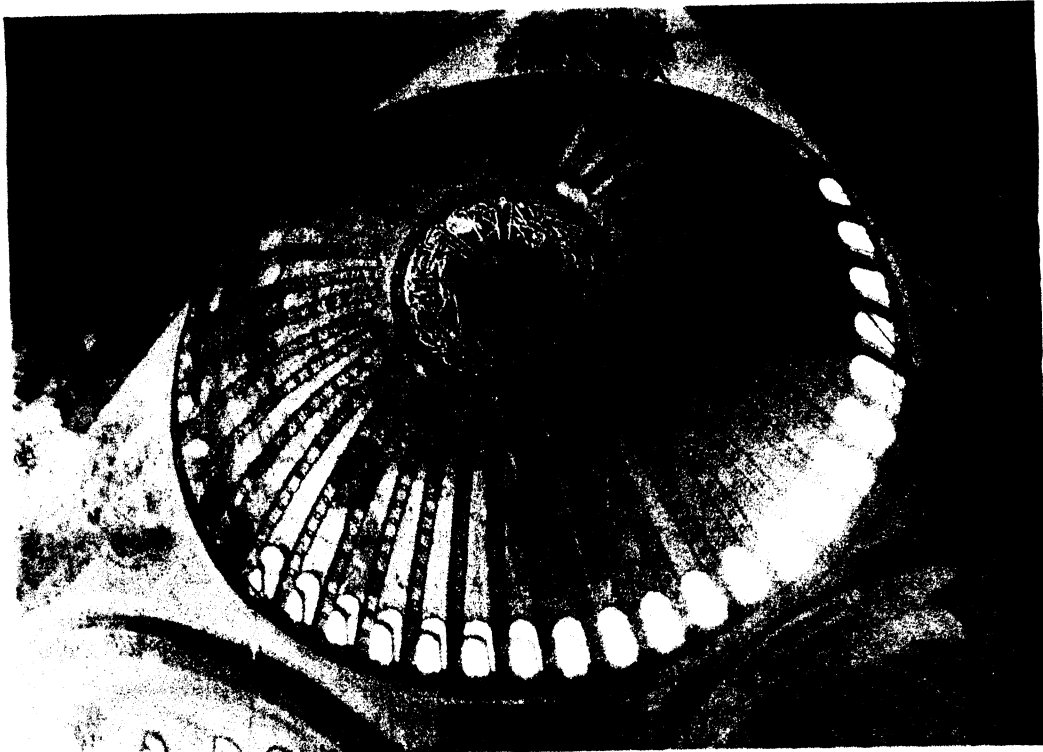
the leadership of a religious ethnarch. Despite centuries of asymmetric relationship, Christian communities had established a *modus vivendi* with their Muslim rulers. They built thousands of churches, monasteries, religious schools, and community institutions; many of them are still standing, and many others are in ruins scattered throughout Turkey today.

Turkey in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century was internally weakened because of political, economic, and social crises, such as military defeats, state insolvency, failed economic modernization, and ethnic nationalist demands in the provinces. These internal upheavals were exacerbated by foreign rivalries and meddling. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Christian population of Turkey—namely, the Greeks, Armenians, and Assyrians—paid a high price. They became the target and victims of a state-planned genocide during World War I that claimed the lives of the vast majority of the Christian population. When the Turkish Republic was established in 1923—after the Turkish War of Independence against the occupying Allies, led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk)—more than 1.5 million Christians had been killed or deported. In 1914, Turkey had a population of 13 million; 19 percent, or more than 2.7 million, were Christians. By 1927, Christians were only 2.5 percent of the population. The Ottoman Empire formally ended in November 1922. Under pressure from European powers, Turkey agreed to guarantee the rights of the remnants of the Christian population in a treaty.

## THE LAUSANNE TREATY

The Treaty of Peace with Turkey, signed in Lausanne on July 24, 1923, between Turkey and the Entente Powers (Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, and the “Serbo-Croat-Slovene” State), recognized the new republic as the successor to the Ottoman Empire. The treaty is significant for Christians as it provides the international legal basis for their protection and rights in Turkey. A whole section (Articles 37–44) is dedicated to the “Protection of Minorities,” where it states, “Turkish nationals belonging to non-Moslem minorities will enjoy the same civil and political rights as Moslems” (Article 39). It goes on to say that Turkish citizens, regardless of religion, “shall be equal before the law.” More important for the ethnic minorities, “no restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings.”

Over the decades, an area of serious injustice by the state is related to the confiscation of properties belonging to Christian communities and the ban on acquisition of new facilities or properties, even though the treaty provides guarantees for such rights. Non-Muslim minorities were 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). They not only have the right to own such properties, but the state is also supposed to “grant full protection to the churches, synagogues, cemeteries, and other religious establishments” of the minorities (Article 42).



**FIGURE 44.1.** Interior dome of the Hagia Sophia.

Source: Duane Alexander Miller (2013)

Property expropriations by the state are among the most contentious issues. Any property purchased after 1936 was considered illegal and was confiscated or put on indefinite hold. This, in effect, put Christian and Jewish religious institutions under the strict control of the state—by freezing the sources of their income from the properties or depriving them of their use for charitable and cultural purposes. For instance, in 1936 the Greek community owned some eight thousand properties, but in 2018 the Greek patriarchate and its affiliate institutions had been left with fewer than five hundred properties. In 2006, a new Law on Foundations was passed by parliament to correct the injustice; however, it did not fully solve the problem. In 2011, instead of passing a parliamentary law, then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a decree that allowed a select number of seized properties to be returned to some of the existing 167 non-Muslim foundations. This was a welcome step for minorities; however, the legal fate of thousands more churches and properties belonging to Christians have remained unclear, in legal dispute, or stuck in long court cases.

Over the decades, the Turkish state has ignored or denied virtually all of the rights and protections enshrined in the Lausanne Treaty, even as these “provisions constitute obligations of international concern and shall be placed under the guarantee of the League of Nations” (Article 44). One case in point of this breach is the Turkish government’s suspension of elections of trustees of minority foundations in January 2013. Ever since, Christian communities have been prevented from electing bodies that administer their community foundations, because the Directorate of Foundations has yet to issue the

promised new regulations. In effect, this denies them the right to manage their charitable institutions. Another case is the issue of clergy education and training. Both the Armenian and the Greek seminaries, the only two such schools in the country, were closed in 1970 and 1971, respectively, ostensibly because of the closure of all private institutions of higher education, and they remain closed. In contrast, more than four thousand Imam Hatip schools for Muslims are active in Turkey today, originally set up to educate young men to be imams and preachers. Nearly a century since the establishment of the republic, the Turkish state does not recognize the Greek and Armenian patriarchates—nor the chief rabbinate—as “legal personalities”; they do not have legal status as religious institutions. As a result, institutionally they are deprived of the right to own or register property in their name, press claims in court, or engage in any legal process.

## CHRISTIANS IN THE REPUBLICAN PERIOD

The close monitoring of non-Muslim communities goes back to the early years of the establishment of the Turkish Republic, when an “unofficial security organization” was established by the state to monitor them. Since 1923, the Turkish state has been illegally profiling its citizens by using secret “race codes” assigned based on a person’s ethnic identity. These codes were used to disadvantage Christian citizens, for instance, when serving their mandatory military service or applying to public service positions and for admittance to minority schools. In 2016, the government verbally said that these codes would no longer be used; however, there have not been any formal decisions or legal procedures put in place to guarantee that the state will no longer profile the country’s Christian citizens.

Since the birth of the Turkish Republic, Christians have been victimized or discriminated against by the state. The restrictions in the 1920s and 1930s shaped public perceptions of non-Muslims in Turkish society. For instance, the government-supported “Citizen, speak Turkish!” (*Vatandaş Türkçe konuş!*) campaign, as part of the process of “Turkification” of society, not only pressured non-Turks to speak Turkish in public but also, in certain places, fined them for speaking another language. Later, in the background of World War II, in 1941–1942 the Turkish government decreed the conscription of non-Muslims—known as “the twenty classes”—including disabled and blind people. Some twelve thousand non-Muslims were conscripted and sent to hard labor under dreadful conditions to build roads and airports. Many of them died because of mistreatment. In 1942–1944, the government enacted a one-off, unreasonably high “Wealth (or Capital) Tax” (*Varlık Vergisi*) on fixed assets, ostensibly to raise funds in case Turkey entered World War II. The tax levy ruined the Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, who lost all their wealth, properties, and assets, as they could not pay the astronomical amounts assessed by the government. Taxpayers were divided based on religion into four groups: Muslims, Christians and Jews, converts to Islam (*donme*), and foreigners. The Armenians were required to pay a 232 percent wealth tax; Jews paid 179 percent and Greeks 156 percent, but Muslims paid only 4.94 percent. The main intention of this state policy was to transfer the economic wealth of the non-Muslim middle class to their Turkish counterparts and eliminate the dominant role of minorities in various

economic sectors. More devastation came in the 1950s. This time, in the background of tensions in Cyprus, the Greek and Armenian Christians in Istanbul and Izmir became the main target of riots, pogroms, and plunder that took place on September 6–7, 1955. The “Events of September” (6–7 Eylül Olayları), as they are known, were instigated by the state’s National Security Service. As a result, the wave of exodus of Greeks and Christians further weakened their respective communities. In the 1960s, thousands of Greeks were deported to Greece, and a large number of Christians left for fear of their lives. In 1964, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü unilaterally annulled the 1930 Greek-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and vigorously enforced an obscure law barring Greek Christians from thirty jobs and professions, such as medical doctors, architects, shoemakers, and tailors. Many of the institutions of the Greek community were closed, such as schools, orphanages, and printing presses. Thousands of Greeks were ordered to give up their jobs, and some fifty thousand Greeks were given a week to leave the country. In the 1970s–1990s, the state repossessed further properties and assets belonging to Christian communities and heavily interfered in their religious and community administrative elections and internal affairs.

In the early 2000s, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) emerged as a leading political force, prominently led by President Erdoğan, Christian communities felt a breath of fresh air. It raised hopes for better days ahead. Within a short time, AKP was able to move from the dogmatic inflexibility of Islamist politics to European Union (EU)–oriented conservative democracy. The reforms mandated for prospects of membership in the EU helped the AKP government bring about a critical change in the relationship between the civilian government and the military, which until then had the upper hand in Turkish politics. After decades of torturous relationship with all levels of government, the Christian communities cautiously embraced AKP with a renewed hope for better treatment of their communities. Indeed, the AKP government initially provided relative relief from the ill treatment they had received over the decades. Under previous regimes, Christians and Jews had been terrorized and subdued through constant court cases, administrative restrictions and penalties, and psychological pressures. Even as under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923–1938), the founder of the Turkish Republic, Turkey had established strong secular credentials, the country remained essentially Turkish and Muslim, with virtually no room for other ethnic or religious identities.

While at the beginning of the AKP decade in the 2000s, the party leadership was hailed for their pro-EU and reformist policies, gradually many of the early policies and political “openness” were reversed. The transparency and public scrutiny that was a hallmark of the early years of AKP turned into arbitrary decision making and a self-serving style of governance, especially since December 2013, when the public became aware of corruption, wide-reaching graft, and bribery at the highest levels of government and AKP affiliates. The epitome of consolidation of power in the hands of the party in a single leader, President Erdoğan, was the constitutional change in Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system of governance. For Christian communities, more concerning is the increasing nationalist and racist discourse of top government officials and AKP politicians. If in the past it was the secular-nationalist Kemalist state that engaged in negative social labeling of Christians, in recent years it is the AKP, as it is shaped singlehandedly by President Erdoğan.

## CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN TURKEY TODAY

While there are no official statistics, according to estimates and self-reported figures, fewer than 120,000 Christians remain in contemporary Turkey. The Armenians and the Greeks are formally recognized as non-Muslim minorities (*Azınlıklar*), along with the Jews. Other Christian communities include the Syriac Orthodox and the Chaldeans, Catholics, Protestants, and small communities of Bulgarian, Georgian, Ukrainian, and Russian Orthodox churches.

Church buildings, schools, and charitable institutions run by Christian communities invariably operate under manifold legal and state administrative obstacles and financial challenges. Indeed, Christian institutions that are even older than the Turkish Republic are virtually unprotected under the law. Contrary to the Lausanne Treaty, for instance, the Turkish government insists that candidates for the office of patriarch or members of the clergy must be Turkish citizens, and their elections are subject to the regulations and decrees of the governor of Istanbul. Restoration of churches that are in dire need of repair, even for small work, is not allowed without government consent and formal permissions. Most of the time, permissions are not granted or requests are dragged on for years through a bureaucratic maze and administrative delays.

### THE ARMENIAN ORTHODOX

The overwhelming majority of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire were victims of a state-sponsored genocide during World War I. Even as three hundred thousand remained in Turkey after the war, today (2019) there are an estimated fifty thousand left, making them by far the largest Christian community in Turkey, mainly living in Istanbul. Stretching over more than fifteen hundred years, the history of the Armenian people and the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church are intimately intertwined. Over the centuries, a deep and rich culture—including the Armenian language, religious literature, art, and architecture—has been created, developed, and preserved through the church.

The Armenian patriarchate in Turkey was established in 1461 by a decree of Sultan Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, who installed Bishop Hovakim of Bursa as the first Armenian patriarch of the historic city. Armenians have lived in Constantinople throughout the Roman and Byzantine eras. A number of Byzantine emperors were of Armenian descent or partially Armenian. Also, scribes and students from historic Armenia came to study in Constantinople. A sizeable Armenian community gradually took root outside the city walls, in the district of Galata, especially during the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople. In the twelfth century, the community had its own bishop.

In the nineteenth century, the Armenian patriarchate became the most powerful Hierarchical See in the Armenian Church, as the patriarch was made the head of the Armenian “nation” (*millet*) under a National Constitution, ratified by the sultan in 1863. Following the genocide and its catastrophic consequences, the provisions of the constitution became defunct to a large extent in the 1930s. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the patriarchate had more than forty-five dioceses made up of hundreds of

churches and monasteries extending from Kars to the United States. Today, it oversees only the Armenian Church communities in Turkey with some forty functioning churches in all. In the twenty-first century, the community is governed by certain provisions of the Civic Code of the country and the regulations set out at will by the Turkish state.

## THE GREEK ORTHODOX

The Greek patriarchate dates back to the early fourth century. In world Orthodoxy, it is the preeminent ecclesiastical see—viewed as “first among equals”—among the historically important Christian centers: Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Moscow. Outside Turkey, the Greek and Armenian religious heads are known through their historical titles as “Patriarch of Constantinople.” However, in Turkey, the reference to the ancient capital of Byzantium is taboo and considered a politically charged term. The patriarchs’ historical titles are not acknowledged or recognized by the Turkish state.

In accordance with the 1923 Convention on the Exchange of Greek-Turkish Populations, some 1.3 million Greeks became forced refugees and left Turkey in exchange for nearly 400,000 Muslims from Greece who settled in Turkey. This drastically reduced the number of Greeks in Turkey. Since 2018, the Greek Orthodox community numbers a few thousand, mostly living in Istanbul and some on the Aegean islands. There are seventy-four churches under the care of the patriarchate, but not all of them are active.

The diminished presence of the Greek patriarchate is in sharp contrast to its significance and influence in the Byzantine Empire, when Constantinople was one of the most powerful capitals of the time. The still-standing majestic Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul—built in the sixth century, turned into a mosque in 1453, and made a museum in 1935—is a reminder of the power of Byzantine Christianity. To the dismay of many Christians, in recent years there has been a growing movement by the Islamists in Turkey, with the support of President Erdoğan, to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque again.

## THE ASSYRIANS AND SYRIAC ORTHODOX

The Assyrians are among the most ancient peoples of Mesopotamia and still use Aramaic, a dialect of the language spoken in Jesus’s time. “Assyrian” is the ethnonym of Christian communities spread in northern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, who share a rich history, language, and cultural heritage: the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Ancient Church of the East, and the Assyrian Protestant churches. As a result of the conflicts in the Middle East in the last few decades, there are more Assyrians in the diaspora today than in their native lands. Numbering around fifteen thousand, the Syriac Orthodox Church is the largest among Assyrian Christianity, with deep historical roots in Turkey’s southeast, especially in the Tur Abdin region. The region has numerous churches and monasteries, such as Mor Gabriel, Mor Yacoub, Mor Malke, and Mor Hananyo (Zafaran), which have contributed enormously to the theological, spiritual, and cultural life of Syriac Christianity. The Syriac community traces its origins to the apostles Peter and Paul.



For centuries, Syriacs, and Christians in general, in southeastern Anatolia have been subjected to violent attacks, plunder, land grabs, kidnappings, and forced marriages by local Kurdish tribes. Like their Armenian and Greek Christian counterparts, the Syriacs/Assyrians were also the victims—more than 250,000—of the genocide during World War I, which they call *Sayfo* (“the year of the sword”).

Unlike the Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, the Syriac community is not formally recognized as a minority in the Lausanne Treaty, by their own choice. In the background of the atrocities committed against the Christians during World War I, and as the Turkish Republic was taking shape, Syriac patriarch Ignatius Ilyas III (1917–1932) formally declared that the Syriacs did not consider themselves a “minority” but wished to be treated as equal citizens of Turkey. During a meeting in Ankara in 1922, the patriarch told the Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk that the Syriacs wished to abide by the same laws as the Turks. Perhaps as a way of ensuring the physical protection of his community, the patriarch assured the new authorities in Turkey, “We are partakers of all the benefits and blessings of this country and are ready to sacrifice for her sake.” A picture of the patriarch with Atatürk taken at this meeting was prominently displayed at the Zafaran Monastery as a badge of loyalty.<sup>4</sup> However, despite this cordial relationship, Patriarch Ilyas was exiled in 1924 and stripped of his Turkish citizenship in 1931. The Patriarchal See was moved in 1932 from the Zafaran Monastery (Mardin) to Homs and then to Damascus in 1959. These measures were part of Atatürk’s secularization policy; Atatürk thought that all religious institutions in Turkey should be abolished, as had been done with the Islamic caliphate.

Since the 1970s, thousands of Syriacs have left their native lands as their lives and communities have been affected by not only the decades-long, devastating armed conflict between the Turkish army and Kurdish insurgent groups but also, like the Armenians and the Greeks, endless legal and administrative hurdles imposed by the government and society. Against this arduous background, in February 2019, the Turkish government gave permission, uncharacteristically, for the construction of a Syriac Orthodox cathedral in the Yeşilköy neighborhood of Istanbul. This is the first time since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 that the government is allowing the construction of a Christian place of worship.

## THE CATHOLICS

The Catholic Church in Turkey, estimated at around twenty thousand, is composed of a number of ethnic and ritual branches: the Armenian, Greek, Syriac, Chaldean, Maronite, Latin, and Levantine Catholic churches. After World War I and over recent decades, each community dwindled from tens of thousands to a few thousands or even less than a hundred adherents, like the Greek Catholics. The largest is the Latin Church, mainly in Istanbul, Trabzon, and Adana. Its origins go back to Italian and French Catholics, who had moved to Turkey from the Levant in the 1930s and returned to Europe in the 1950s. In recent years, due to the wars in Iraq and Syria, hundreds of Christian Arab refugees have found spiritual comfort in the Chaldean Catholic Church in Istanbul, Diyarbakir, and Mersin.

A number of high-profile premeditated murders and hate crimes have been committed against Christians in the 2000s. The clergy have been the main targets, especially Roman Catholic priests: Father Andrea Santoro, shot dead in 2006 while praying in front of the altar of his church in Trabzon, and Father Pierre Brunissen, stabbed to death the same year in Samsun. These were followed by the assassination of Hrant Dink, editor of the Turkish-Armenian *Agos* newspaper, in January 2007 and the gruesome killing of three members of the Zirve Bible Publishing House—Necati Aydın and Uğur Yüksel (both Turkish Evangelicals) and German pastor Tilmann Geske—who were tortured to death by ultranationalists in April 2007. A few decades earlier, in 1979, their fellow Protestant missionary from the United States, David Goodman, was shot at point-blank range in front of his house door in Adana. In 2010, Catholic bishop Luigi Padovese, the Vatican's apostolic vicar of Anatolia, was decapitated by his driver in Iskenderun.

Death threats against Christian clergy and congregations are regular occurrences in Turkey. For instance, a Syriac priest in the Mardin region, where a small Christian community still exists, reported that he and his congregation are harassed continually, adding that people ring his doorbell day and night and his congregation is robbed and insulted on a regular basis. In 2008, a man who wished to “become a martyr” locked himself inside the building used by the Evangelicals in Diayrbakir and, while reciting verses from the Quran, burned Bibles and audiovisual materials. In Istanbul, harassment of Christians, graffiti on church walls, and stone throwing at worshippers are common occurrences.

## THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY

There is a small Protestant community in Turkey, whose roots go back to the missionary work carried out in the nineteenth century by the Anglican Church Mission Society, the Basel Mission, and the American Board. The oldest among them is the Armenian Evangelical Church, which was established in 1846 through the work of American missionaries. There are an estimated six thousand Protestants in Turkey today. Besides some single-congregation churches of European origin—such as the German Protestant Church in Beyoğlu district and the Swedish Lutheran in the Tünel district of Istanbul—there are dozens of Turkish Protestant communities, whose members are largely Turkish Muslim converts to Christianity. Since 1958, there also has been a small community of Seventh-day Adventists.

The Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey (TEK), established in 1989, is made up of 140 small and large fellowships, mostly in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Some 25 of them are house fellowships; the rest use public places for worship but do not have legal status. Their beginnings go back to the missionary work of the US-based Operation Mobilization mission agency in the early 1960s. This movement was strengthened by the return of Turkish Christian preachers who had converted to Christianity while living in Europe. They provided leadership and direction to growing Protestant communities, who continually face nationalist backlash and intolerance. One of the significant achievements of Turkish Evangelicals is the translation of the New Testament into Turkish and later the entire Bible, which was published in 2001.

Even as some restrictions on religious minorities have been eased, the Protestant congregations or groups do not have legal status or registration. A 2017 US State

Department report on religious freedom in Turkey stated that Protestant groups faced numerous restrictions. Many local Turkish officials “continued to impose zoning standards on churches, such as minimum space requirements, which they did not impose on mosques,” said the report. The State Department enumerated a number of critical problems and restrictions imposed by the Turkish government: among others, parents or students cannot obtain exemptions from mandatory religion classes on Islam in public schools; Christian congregations cannot operate or open houses of worship; continued legal cases are brought against Christian communities; and restrictions are placed on training of their own clergy to serve their spiritual needs.

## CONCLUSION

Christian communities have lived in Turkey since the early years of Christianity. With deep roots in these lands, the two-thousand-year presence of Christians has produced a magnificent missionary, theological, dogmatic, liturgical, religious, architectural, and literary heritage, the traces of which are still visible in numerous towns and cities. Christians are among the oldest native communities of Turkey. Today, even as, individually, they live in relative harmony with all the rights and privileges of citizenship, as a religious community, collectively, they experience perennial legal difficulties and discrimination. If the trends of the last few decades are any indication, the future is bleak for the Christian communities as their numbers dwindle and their institutions weaken even further. The Christian presence in Turkey remains a precarious existence in the twenty-first century.

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