

The Religious Landscape of Turkey

Pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Anatolia

According to official statements, 98% of Turkey's population is Muslim (there are, however, no recent nationwide statistics on religious affiliation.) This figure might give the impression that there is not much more to say about the religious landscape in Turkey. Yet a glance at the (modern) religious history of Turkey and a closer look at the statistical statement itself reveal a different picture. For this reason, in what follows I will give an overview of the religious history of Anatolia up until the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and then move on to the current situation focusing on the impact of political and demographic changes in modernity.

The Republic of Turkey covers virtually the territory of Asia Minor or Anatolia, with just 3% of its territory located on the European landmass in Eastern Thrace. Asia Minor is situated between three different seas and influenced by various cultural spheres. A look at the physical map explains why Turkey has been influenced throughout history by the three monotheist religions and other more regional cults, and by economic and military conflicts in all of these adjacent areas. Anatolia was settled and re-settled time and again by different peoples and tribes, and state power has changed hands several times. But every ethnicity or people has left traces of its culture in Anatolia; when a new power with different beliefs took over, this did not necessarily mean that the whole of the population had to change its beliefs too. And even forced population exchanges or the banishment of certain groups never succeeded one hundred percent, so that some individuals or settlements averted extinction and became a part of the new state. This is why Andrews and Benninghaus were able to identify some 47 religious and ethnic communities in Turkey during their research in the 1980s (Andrews/Benninghaus 1989).

Anatolia is home to one of the oldest sacred sites in the world, the shrines of Göbekli Tepe in the Southeastern part of Turkey, which were built around 11.000 years ago and have only recently been excavated. Other pre-historic and historic peoples have left their religious mark in the form of graves and monuments, too. But the oldest religion still represented in today's Turkey is Judaism. Despite being of great religious and cultural significance, Asia Minor's Jewish history has been neglected, largely for political, but also for religious and academic, reasons. According to the most popular narrative, the Jewish history of Anatolia only began in the 15th century A.D. when the Ottoman Sultans opened the doors to Jews (Sephardim) escaping the Reconquista of the Catholic Church in the Western Mediterranean. In reality, Jewish settlements can be traced back to the fourth century B.C. or earlier. The settlements were for the most part located on the shores of the Mediterranean and around

(both sides of) the Aegean Sea. The Apostle Paul drew upon those communities when he journeyed westwards on his Christian missionary tour. The Jews in Roman Asia Minor developed their own language written in Greek letters, called Romaniot, this name later being adopted for the community itself. When the Sephardim migrated to the Ottoman Empire, the Romaniot became an economic and social minority within the Jewish population. Throughout the centuries, Jews of different geographic and denominational origin joined the Ottoman Jewish community—Jewish merchants from Venice, or Ashkenazim escaping the pogroms of czarist Russia, for example.

Anatolia was also of outstanding importance for the emergence and development of Christianity. The Apostle Paul was born in Tarsus (next to the modern Turkish-Syrian border); St Paul's Church in Tarsus is one of the major sanctuaries of the Roman Catholic Church. The Apostle Peter is believed to have founded the church of Antakya (Antiochia). The region of modern Efes (Ephesus) in Western Turkey was one of the centers of the early missionaries, and also the place where important ecumenical synods took place in the following centuries. Throughout the centuries, a variety of Christian communities emerged in Anatolia, among them the Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Aramean (Syrian), including different subgroups within these denominations. In the 4th century, most of Anatolia was under Roman rule. With the end of Roman persecution of Christians in 313 and finally the proclamation of Christianity as the state religion in 380, the Christian faith and church attained their dominant position in the religious landscape of Anatolia; the spiritual and worldly power of the Greek Orthodox church came to be symbolized by the imperial capital, with its seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In 301 A.D. (or 314), Armenia, stretching from the East of Anatolia to the Caspian Sea, embraced Christianity and was the first state to combine state, church, and language under one heading: Armenian/Armenia. The Armenian Holy Cross Church on the island of Ahtamar in the middle of Lake Van was built in the 10th century and was the seat of an Armenian Catholicos from the 12th until the 19th century.

From 1299 onwards the Muslim Ottomans gradually became the main rulers of the Middle East and the Balkans and Christian *rule* over Asia Minor came to an end; however, the Christian *population* usually had no reason to convert to Islam. Since Islam tolerates the 'Religions of the Book', i.e. the other monotheistic religions, and since the early Ottoman rulers were interested in the functioning of the state and the activities of the elite but not in the faith and ethnicity of the masses, already-existing religious communal structures remained untouched. On the contrary: Each inhabitant was considered a member of a certain religious community, a *millet*, and the head of each community communicated with the Ottoman state. The so-called millet system favored the existence of three distinct communities, the Armenian, the Greek Orthodox and the Jewish. Legal cases were settled according to the rules of each community; if a Muslim was involved in the conflict, the decision was made by an Islamic court.

Although the privileged and dominant religion was Islam, the sheer existence of the other above-mentioned religious communities as a part of the state and of society was never denied, nor were systematic attempts made to extinguish them. This approach distinguishes the classical Ottoman policy decisively from the position taken by Turkish nationalists from

the end of 19th century onwards. The 19th century brought the complete restructuring of the Ottoman Empire. Vast territories were lost, and the idea of national self-determination spread among the various linguistic, religious, and ethnic sub-communities. The terms *millet* and nation started to blur, the meaning shifting from 'religious community' to 'nationality' and finally to 'nation'.

With the foundation of Greece in 1830, for example, the Greek-speaking Greek Orthodox inhabitants of the Ottoman territories suddenly had a 'motherland', a state and nation they 'belonged to'. The Muslim elite were very slow to understand the power of nationalism and to use it in their own interests. In 1839, (legal) equality between all inhabitants of the empire was promulgated by the sultan; and the new ideology of Ottomanism in the late 1870s represented an attempt to create an inclusivist Ottoman citizenship and identity with the clear aim of salvaging the remains of the Empire. But the enthusiasm around this did not last for long, and Ottomanism was replaced by Turkism, the latter including a strong Muslim element until the end of the 1920s. This ideological turn also reflected the demographic change in the Empire: as a result of military and political defeats, the percentage of Muslims in the population became much higher after 1878, and after 1913, for the first time in Ottoman history, ethnic Turks became the majority of the population.

Nationalism has been a decisive element in Turkish politics throughout the 20th century. It has co-opted various ideologies and adopted different forms, such as religious, racist or leftist nationalism. However, the religious minorities, which themselves were not uninfected by nationalist ambitions, were liable to suffer severe persecution whenever they seemed to endanger the new national project and state. The first minority to be almost extinguished were the Armenians of Anatolia, when in 1915/16, on the pretext of military necessity, they were driven from their homes, dying in death caravans bound for the Syrian desert. About 800, 000 of 1.5 million Armenians perished (Zürcher 2004, 164).

The Turkish Republic

The end of the First World War meant the end of the Ottoman Empire. The peace treaty of Lausanne (1923) stipulated, among many other things, the future of some of the religious minorities. The Greek Orthodox Christians or "Greeks" of Anatolia were forced to leave for Greece, and the Muslims or "Turks" of Greece had to move to Anatolia. This so-called Great Exchange was a political instrument of the time, backed by the League of Nations, but resulted in hardship and poverty for those affected. The confusion of religious belonging and nationality was likewise codified by this international treaty. As a result of the exchange, the Greek community in Turkey dwindled to 120.000 people (for the most part residing in Istanbul). Furthermore, Section III of the Lausanne Treaty stipulated religious freedom and legal equality of the remaining non-Muslims in the Turkish Republic. To date, this section has predominantly been interpreted as covering the rights of Greek Orthodox and Armenian Christians as well as Jews, but not those of any other Non-Muslim community or individual.

As of 1928, the Turkish constitution does not mention an official religion; since then, Turkey has been considered a secular (Turkish *laik*) state. However, since the overall aim of the

young state was to build a strong homogeneous Turkish nation with a Western appearance, any aberration from this one path had to be suppressed. Even Islam has been under complete state control via the Presidency of Religious Affairs since 1924. Independent Islamic communities such as Mystic Orders were banned in 1925, their monasteries (such as *tekke* and *zaviye*) closed and desecralized.

In the following decades, the Non-Muslim population of Anatolia shrank from roughly 20% in 1914 to somewhere between 2% and 0.2% in 2005. Although the state did not officially espouse a racist policy or violate the stipulations of the Lausanne Treaty, legal measures were tailored to hit the minorities financially and culturally (e.g. confiscation of real estate property; conscription to labor battalions 1941; Capital Tax 1942); and aggressive acts carried out by 'the mob' or 'misdirected individuals' seemed - and still seem - to be tolerated if not backed by state institutions (the anti-minority Incidents of September 1955; the anti-Alevi arson in Sivas in 1993; the murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007).

For the Jewish community, the foundation of Israel in 1948 was a relief and a threat at the same time. Now there was a state that would protect them, or to which they could migrate, as had long been the case for Armenians and Greeks. On the other hand, any tension between Turkey and Israel would inevitably weaken their position as citizens of Turkey.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the religious landscape of Turkey has changed again in terms of law, religious and political practice, and the quality of secularism. The developments include apparently contradictory elements such as the growing dominance of (allegedly) Islamic values and rules in public on the one hand, but a general openness towards EU legislation on human rights and religious freedom on the other. Among other explanations for this seeming contradiction, it can be stated that the pragmatism of the AKP allows the government to refer to 'neutral' or 'secular' aims such as public health or freedom of religious expression when introducing new regulations, whereas looked at from a different perspective the aim is likely to be the introduction of an Islamic public order. Moves to lift the ban on the headscarf in public institutions or to restrict public consumption of alcohol (see Kadri 2013) are much-discussed examples of this Janus-faced approach.

For the Non-Muslim communities, meanwhile, the situation remains unclear: while churches are proudly included in the newly-emerging, state-supported 'Faith Tourism', and a law, albeit an insufficient one, relating to the restitution of real estate to the communities was passed in 2012, other simple problems remain unsolved, such as the re-opening of the Orthodox Seminary in Istanbul, Heybeli Island. (The Halki Theological Seminary was closed down in 1971.)

Finally, it should be added that the 'moderate path' of the AKP is severely criticized by Islamic and nationalist factions and parties as a betrayal of faith and nation.

The Alevis and Other Communities Beyond the Grid

While the situation for the above-mentioned communities—the Christian and Jewish communities acknowledged and protected by the Lausanne Treaty— is far from ideal, and even mainstream Sunni Islam as it is presented and controlled by the Presidency of Religious Affairs is patronized and not allowed to act in an autonomous and self-determined way, for several other faiths and communities, the situation is almost unbearable. First of all, there is no legal security since these groups do not fit the grid: neither the legal structure of the Ottoman Empire, the Millet System, nor that of the Turkish Republic.

Arameans: (There is more than one Aramean church and liturgy but this is not of major importance for issue at hand.) Currently, some 40.000 Arameans still live in Turkey; at the beginning of the 20th century, there were about 500.000 people living in just one of their core areas in south-eastern Turkey, Tur Abdin. During Ottoman times they were considered part of the Greek Orthodox millet; in the 19th century, many short-lived micro-millets were established, among them three Aramean ones. Extinction and exile started in the 19th century; during the age of nationalism and fragmentation of the Near East, no power reliably protected the community. The armed conflict between the PKK and the state in the 1980s and '90s made it all the more difficult for them to stay in south-eastern Turkey. Today, there are large Diaspora communities in the USA, France, Germany and Sweden. There have been attempts by the Arameans themselves to resettle in Turkey, but a general underlying hostility towards them, along with the alienation of the younger generation with respect to their remote and rural areas of origin, makes a revival of Aramean culture in Turkey look rather unlikely.

Yezidis: The Yezidis are a Kurdish-speaking ethnic group who originally settled in the whole of the area between Georgia in the north and Iraq in the south. Their main sanctuary is Lalesh near Mosul. Their religion includes elements of various geographical and historic origin. However, even though figures of Islamic mysticism have left an important imprint on Yezidism, the Yezidis have experienced persecution by Muslim neighbors and states, having been considered 'deifiers of the devil'. Today, the Yezidi community of Germany is larger than that of Turkey, with more than 45, 000 members.

Alevis: The Alevis of Turkey are the most peculiar feature of the religious landscape of Turkey. It is estimated that between 15 and 20 percent of Turkey's population are Alevis. Their creed and ethnicity developed in Anatolia in several stages, the 13th century being of particular importance for early Alevism. Without doubt, Alevism has a fundamentally Islamic heritage. On the other hand, neither all Muslims nor all Alevis consider Alevism to be a denomination of Islam. A large percentage of the Alevis are Turks, the smaller part Kurds. While many Turkish Alevis and Sunni Muslims are of the opinion that Alevism is the Turkish variety of Islam, hence the *original* Turkish Islam, some Kurdish Alevi spokespersons hold that Alevism is far older than Islam and Christianity, a truly Kurdish religion originating in Mesopotamia. However, Islamic mysticism in the form of traveling dervishes who addressed rural society rather than the learned elite is one of the main pillars of Alevism. Violent conflict between Alevis and the Ottoman rulers only began in the 15th/16th century, at which

time the Ottoman Empire was well established but having to fight the emerging dynasty of Iran, the Safawis. Sunni Islam was supported and enforced as an antidote to the Shi'ite Islam of the Iranians. The so-called Qizilbash-Alevi fought for the Iranians and so the Ottoman state persecuted them bloodily. From then on, Alevi started to live in remote areas and to develop their own social structure, avoiding Sunni areas and concealing their religious affiliation when contact was unavoidable.

Alevi supported the Turkish nationalists when they fought for Turkish independence and a modern state after the First World War. It was hoped that the end of the Islamic Ottoman Empire would end their own persecution, but things did not quite turn out this way. The banning of the mystic Bektashi order, most crucial for Alevism, in 1925, the massacre of Dersim in 1938, when some 10.000 Kurdish Alevi were killed by the republican state, and further incidents taught the Alevi to continue keeping their convictions to themselves. Rigorous anti-religious leftism in the 1970s amongst the Alevi themselves, and labor migration to Europe, seemed to herald the end of Alevi culture and religion.

Nevertheless, since the 1980s the Alevi have started to replace their quietist attitude with a self-confident "going public"; first in the Diaspora—Germany—followed by ongoing activities in Turkey. Likewise, 'Alevism' is a rather recent term; it stresses the fact that several subgroups have developed an umbrella identity, based on the veneration of Saint Ali, the historical son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and on their history of being a suppressed and marginalized community. The arson in Sivas in 1993, when 37 intellectuals were killed during an Alevi cultural festival, furthered this process of growing Alevi consciousness. At present, Alevi face both recognition and intimidation by the state and by non-Alevi society. The AKP has started to proclaim the Alevi Opening, a dialogue among equals, while religious education teachers in schools continue to curse Alevism in their lessons and Sunni neighborhoods increase their pressure on Alevi to obey the rules and values of Sunni Islam.

Further religious groups and communities: As with any other country, religious and spiritual global trends affect Turkey too. Furthermore, Christian communities which are regarded as foreign to the history of Turkey, such as the Roman-Catholic and Protestant churches, or proselytizing communities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, can look back on a fairly long history in Anatolia, yet their political and legal status is complex and so they tend to keep a low profile with regard to state and legal conflicts.

To end with a quotation from the murdered journalist Hrant Dink's family lawyer Fethiye Cetin: "Let's not forget, the Constitution, which is the product of a mentality that sees minorities as threatening to the republic, has not been changed" (Doğan 2012).

Issues of conflict in the current religious landscape of Turkey

The legal basis and content of religious education in state schools:

Religious education has always been a political issue in Turkey, and the state has made great efforts to control it. The related legislation and practice have seen many changes throughout

the republic's history. Two tendencies currently prevail: with the support of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), parents have gained the right to exemption from religious instruction in state schools, and the name of religious instruction classes has been changed to Religious Culture and Morals. At the same time, the state explicitly supports Muslim religious instruction in all educational institutions. From a European perspective the situation is rather volatile and unsatisfactory.

Restitution of real estate and property of minority communities:

In 1936, non-Muslim communities were called upon to register their property on a list. In the subsequent decades, many items of this property were seized by the state, and in 1974, an additional ruling banned the communities from purchasing further real estate. Starting with an amendment in 2003, the situation began to change in favor of the religious communities and some property was returned. But again, the implementation of the new laws has not been satisfactory. In 2012, the courts ruled against the Aramean monastery Mor Gabriel (Midyat, Southeastern Turkey) and its property.

Re-legalization of Islamic mystic congregations and other independent Muslim groups:

In 1925, all (Islamic) mystic orders were banned, their sanctuaries closed down, and any religious activity which seemed to violate the new state-controlled positivist understanding of religion forbidden. Under this law it is to date legally impossible to establish an independent Muslim religious community. On the other hand, mystic orders or 'superstitious' practices have never ceased to exist. It was a matter of political support (or lack of it) whether a community was enabled to act and grow (as with the Nakshibendi order) or persecuted (as with the Alevis). Eventually, in 2013, the government published a first recommendation to abrogate the ban of 1925.

Canceling of the notion of religious identity on the national identity card:

Although the national identity card has a space in which one may state one's religious affiliation, citizens are entitled not to do so. This regulation still causes many problems: leaving the space blank or notifying a religion other than Muslim can preclude individuals from jobs in both public and private sectors. An official list indicates which religions can be given; however, it does not include communities with a long Anatolian tradition (of suppression) such as the Baha'i, Alevi, and Yezidi. Individuals requesting a change to, or deletion of, this entry are liable to face harassment by officials.

Legalization of religious gatherings, teaching, and establishment of religious communities without state interference:

Despite the official avowal of religious freedom, including the right to participate in religious rituals and gatherings, legal restrictions and intolerant practice render religious activities outside of the above-mentioned framework an intricate if not dangerous business. For

example, unregistered religious groups cannot request legal recognition of places of worship, while holding religious services at a location not recognized as a place of worship is illegal. Landlords are hesitant to rent to such communities. Zoning standards, such as minimum space requirements, are imposed on churches but on mosques. Since 1923 only one new Christian church as a place of worship has been founded. Restoration and construction work is often impeded, citing the cultural value of the 'original' building.

Religious speech is regarded with suspicion and is met with occasional harassment; and this is not to mention the murder of various representatives of non-Muslim communities during recent years. Religious classes beyond Islamic instruction are restricted to Armenian, Christian-Orthodox and Jewish instruction at the respective minority schools.

Conscientious Objection:

Turkish state and society are decisively shaped by the idea that every Turk is a 'soldier by birth'. For this and other reasons, the concept of conscientious objection is alien to Turkish legislation and society. Among the members of the Council of Europe, only Turkey and Azerbaijan have not accepted the rights to conscientious objection; it is not recognized for any reason whatsoever.

Wearing of religious garments and symbols in the public sphere and in state institutions:

The wearing of a headscarf has been a political issue since the foundation of the republic. The current AKP government has softened the restrictions remarkably. From the school year 2013/14, girls will be allowed to cover their heads in several types of educational institution. There is no state interference with respect to Muslim men or women wearing explicitly religious costume in public. It goes without saying that this trend has been strongly criticized by many secular Turks. According to a law of 1934, moreover, it is forbidden to wear any religious vesture outside a religious site and religious service. This law is not strictly implemented but can be used against representatives of a religious community.

Societal acceptance of the existing multitude of religious belonging and identities beyond the official grid, including explicit atheism:

Despite, or because of, the strictly anti-religious character of the early Turkish republic, religion has remained a major subject of societal conflict, be it in favor of or against religion. At present, the state has issued some statements in favor of religious diversity of Turkish population. Nevertheless, the practice and implementation of the law obviously tend to privilege and reinforce (Sunni) Islam. Religious minority opinions, including atheism or adherence to New Religious Movements, remain under societal threat in a country where 85% of the population consider themselves "religious" (Muslim).

Legal and non-partisan state protection of a life with or without religion:

As the above-mentioned examples show, the Turkish state interferes heavily in religious affairs. Throughout the republic's history this interference has fluctuated between different interpretations of *laicism* (secularism), but comprehensive and equal protection of a life with or without religion for all the population has not been realized to date.

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