



THE FATE OF CHRISTIANS IN TURKEY

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There is a political will to eradicate the Christians of Turkey, who were present long before the Turks, this region being one of the cradles of Christianity. Even today, they suffer persecution and humiliation in this country to a general international indifference.

When one travels through Turkey with the New Testament in hand, one reality becomes clear—this immense territory, formerly called Asia Minor, gradually conquered by the Turkmen who came from Central Asia from the 11th century onwards, is one of the main cradles of Christianity. This is evidenced by the multitude of archaeological sites and religious buildings: Antioch on the Orontes, the first apostolic seat established by St. Peter; Tarsus, the birthplace of St. Paul; Ephesus, where the Virgin Mary stayed after Pentecost and where the third ecumenical council took place in 431, during which she was proclaimed Theotokos ("Mother of God" in Greek).

The present territory of Turkey hosted six councils in all, the first in the history of the Church: Nicaea (325 and 787), Constantinople (381 and 680) and Chalcedon (451). There the first dogmatic definitions were fixed, especially those concerning the Trinity and Christology.

From Asia Minor also came Fathers and Doctors of the Church (Saints Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa and Irenaeus). St. Basil of Caesarea organized a flourishing monasticism there, especially in Cappadocia. Martyrs, such as St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, offered their lives there out of faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Finally, the seven churches of the book of Revelation are located in Anatolia.

It is therefore undeniable that Asia Minor played a decisive role in the consolidation of Eastern Christianity and in its universal influence. But what remains today of this flourishing past? The figures speak for themselves. According to the researcher Joseph Yacoub, the presence of Christians in Turkey, estimated at around 20% at the beginning of the 20th century, is now less than 0.2%, or 100,000 out of 84 million inhabitants.

The status of the Christian communities is generally presented, as established by the Treaty of Lausanne (July 24, 1923), an international act of recognition of post-Ottoman Turkey. This document contains provisions relating to the rights of "non-Muslim" minorities, described as "protected." It guarantees them "equality before the law and the same treatment as that which applies to Muslim nationals in the matter of civil, political, cultural and religious rights." It also recommends "protection for churches, synagogues, cemeteries and other religious establishments of non-Muslim minorities." And it

guarantees that "all facilities and authorizations shall be given to the pious foundations and to the religious and charitable establishments of the minorities" (art. 37 to 44).

Christians Discriminated Against

But since these minorities are not named in the text, the Turkish state has decided unilaterally to confer the benefit only on the Apostolic Armenians (non-Catholics) and the Greeks of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The former were under the authority of Patriarch Sahak II Machalian, the latter under that of Bartholomew I, both residing in Istanbul. In 1923, the Armenian and Greek populations, although decimated by the genocide and massacres committed by Kemalist troops during the war of independence, were still quite large—but today the Armenians number 60,000 faithful; as for the Greeks, only 2,000 remain.

With regard to them, the Turkish authorities have adopted a restrictive interpretation of the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne. Their institutions are subject to a 1935 law, which required the churches concerned to draw up an inventory of their property and to declare it, which they did. However, in the absence of implementing decrees, the state inflicted serious discrimination or spoliation on them, resorting to police orders.

For example, in 1970, the Armenian Holy Cross Seminary in Istanbul was arbitrarily closed. The following year, a similar measure was taken against the theological institute of the Orthodox Patriarchate on the island of Halki in the Sea of Marmara. Neither has been returned to its owners. These closures make it impossible to ensure the succession of local clergy and could eventually lead to the disappearance of both patriarchates. According to a rule set by the state, the incumbents must be Turkish and elected by metropolitans (bishops) of Turkish nationality.

Despite the primacy—of honor and/or jurisdiction—of the Orthodox patriarch over some 250 million faithful worldwide, Ankara does not recognize his ecumenical title. For Turkish authorities, he is only the manager of a local cult. In 1994, the establishment of an official representation of the Patriarchate at the European institutions in Brussels was protested by the Turkish government on the grounds that "the Patriarchate has no legal existence." In fact, none of the Constitutions of the Turkish Republic (from 1928 to 2016) mentions the recognition of these churches.

Even their charitable work is hindered, since they are subject to corporate tax. In 1974, a decision of the Court of Cassation prohibited the sale of real estate to Christian minorities on the grounds that it would harm the national interest. It also required the seizure of some of their orphanages, hospitals and schools on the grounds that they had become owners after 1936. Small consolation—on December 16, 2019, President Erdogan signed a decree allowing the Armenian patriarch to wear his religious habit outside his places of worship. In the name of secularism, Atatürk had indeed abolished religious dress for all rites.

Among the other Christian denominations present on Turkish territory, two groups must be distinguished. First, there are the Churches of Syriac culture, which are divided between Catholics (Chaldean, Syriac and Maronite) and non-Catholics (Assyrian)—about 15,000 faithful in all. The Turkish state has always refused to apply to these "Orientals" the clauses of the Treaty of Lausanne relating to minorities, even though they meet the criteria, since they have ecclesiastical structures in the country, notably dioceses and parishes. But only individuals are taken into account, and as such they are granted a certain tolerance for the practice of worship. Their churches have no legal status and can therefore neither own nor manage their own educational and social institutions or seminaries, nor build churches. This prohibition also applies to the transmission of their language and culture. The Greek Catholic Church, of the Byzantine rite, is subject to the same treatment.

As for the "Westerners" (Latins and Protestants, 25,000 in all), they only justify the legitimacy of their presence in the country on the basis of the letters that the Turkish government addressed to the French, Italian and British authorities as an adjunct to the Treaty of Lausanne, guaranteeing the maintenance in the country of their educational and hospitable works founded several centuries earlier by European missionaries. However, deprived of any legal personality, they are only managers and cannot acquire real estate, by purchase or inheritance, nor employ personnel, go to court, etc. For such transactions, they had to resort to a lawyer. For such undertakings, they have to rely on individual lay faithful who then act in their personal capacity.

In 1906, during the reign of Sultan-Caliph Abdülhamid II, the last church was built in Istanbul. There is no church in Ankara, the capital of the country. Some sanctuaries (St. Paul in Tarsus, the House of Mary in Ephesus) were transformed into paying museums under Atatürk.

The celebration of masses is subject to authorization from the administration. In 2011 and 2013, two former Greek Orthodox churches dedicated to Saint Sophia, one in Trebizond, the other in Nicaea,

which had been converted into mosques under the Ottomans and then into museums under Atatürk, were reopened to Muslim worship.

"We exist and at the same time we do not exist," said Bishop Luigi Padovese, Vicar Apostolic of Alexandria, in 2010 shortly before his assassination. None of the steps taken by the popes since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Turkey (1960) have made it possible to repair these injustices.

In a context where Islamism is combined with exacerbated nationalism, how can we be surprised by the development of an anti-Christian climate that has been expressed in a series of humiliations, lootings, aggressions and assassinations, including against priests and pastors, during the first decade of the twenty-first century?

Annie Laurent is specialist in the Middle East, Eastern Christians and Islam. She is the founder of the association Clarifier and is the author of L'Islam, pour tous ceux qui veulent en parler (mais ne le connaissent pas encore), L'Islam peut-il rendre l'homme heureux, and Les chrétiens d'Orient vont-ils disparaître? This article appears through the kind courtesy of [La Nef](#).

[Featured](#): Church of Theotokos Pammakaristos, Istanbul, 11th-14th centuries.

