

Turkey: Where Christians are seen as a Threat

The April 17, 2007 murder of 3 Protestant Christians in Malatya, Turkey, a city of 400,000 residents, horrified the world. This event makes the tensions within Turkey ever more clear, particularly those arising from the various contradictory movements and ideologies which are shredding the social fabric of the country. Freedom of religion remains a distant goal.

A commentary by Christine Schirrmacher:

The most contradictory social movements imaginable are touching off deadly tensions in the land of Turkey. We see the European oriented, “enlightened” elite, often educated in government schools, in which women enjoy the freedom to make decisions and set the direction of their lives; we also see the vast numbers of followers of traditional Islam with its conservative separation of men and women into prescribed roles; and we see a combination of radical nationalism with religious extremism which repeatedly responds to a perceived threat from the “Christian” West with violence. This last group perceives in the mere existence of Christians on Turkish soil an immediate assault which threatens to undermine the unity and character of the Turkish nation, and this threat becomes unbearable when Christians proclaim their faith.

Turkey: Far from Freedom of Religion

Freedom of Religion remains a distant goal for Turkey, at least if that freedom is understood in the western sense which is utilized by all religious groups in the western democracies. In spite of and contrary to the significant improvements in Turkish law related to the hope of EU entrance, Christians are still substantially hindered in the practice of their faith. This would be especially evident in the areas of purchasing property, constructing facilities, and the education of their children. And, at times, there are attempts to intimidate or disrupt Christian worship services.

Christians in Turkey had good reason to wonder if the security forces would effectively protect them from the frequently threatened attacks on their property and lives, and they had good reasons for these concerns before the recent tragedy.

Turkey: Where Muslims become Christians

When bondage and oppression rule, people begin to ask questions. In spite of societal prejudice and threats, some are turning from Islam and converting to Christianity. The independent evangelical churches in Turkey are the only churches experiencing significant growth, though their total membership of about 4,000 people is still extremely small. It is their mere existence which is prompting violent animosity and antagonism.

The presence of such extreme antagonism from radical groups, which is not effectively restrained by the security forces, is confirmed by a series of recent events in Turkey:

- The murder of the Catholic priest Santoro, in Trabzon in 2006, supposedly as retaliation for insults to Mohammed by Danish cartoonists
- The yet unsolved murder of the journalist Hrant Dink a few months ago

- The brutal execution of three Protestants who did nothing more than offer Bibles for sale.

Turkey: Aggressive Proselytizing?

We must cease using mindless clichés to report on this situation. A major German newspaper ascertained from a distance that the three murdered Christians in Turkey were “aggressively proselytizing” (aggressiv missioniert). Does this newspaper intend to communicate with this terminology that the reaction of the assassins is somehow understandable or acceptable? No one aggressively proselytizes in Turkey, unless he wants to be arrested or expelled from the country immediately. But when people raise questions and want to discuss their own faith and the Christian faith, when people even want to own a Bible, then it is a fundamental human right to allow them to think, talk, and buy books, even Bibles.

The Islamic Studies Scholar, Prof. Dr. Christine Schirrmacher, is Academic Director of the Islamic Studies Institute in Bonn and author of several books about Islam. Her most recent is *Islam und christliche Glaube: Ein Vergleich (Islam and the Christian Faith: A Comparison)*, published by Hänssler Verlag in Germany.

English translation by Prof. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson, Director of the Comenius Institute, Prague; and Fellow of the International Institute for Christian Studies.

One of the Turkish martyrs, Necati Aydin, was a student at the Martin Bucer Seminary study center in Ankara, Turkey (www.bucer.eu). Drs. Schirrmacher and Johnson teach in the various MBS study centers. Martin Bucer Seminary has begun a special effort to raise money to support Mr. Aydin’s widow and two small children. Anyone who can contribute to this fund should contact Dr. Johnson at Johnson.thomas.k@gmail.com or prag@bucer.de.