An unwanted child

Secularism, religious freedom, and the Turkish Protestant Church

James Bultema[1]

Abstract

Turkey's secularism and the extent of religious freedom in the country are affected by enduring Ottoman influences. These influences have not only hindered the integration of secularism into all levels of state and society but have obscured evidence of a synergy between secularism, religious freedom, and the Turkish Protestant Church (TPC). Although intertwined with Sunni Islam, secularism has provided a context in which well-protected religious freedom, granted in the 1961 Constitution, could catalyze the TPC's emergence. Moreover, the TPC has helped the state and society to manifest and nurture its commitment to religious freedom, so that it has proven to be more than the arbitrary religious tolerance of Ottoman times.

Keywords secularism, Islam, religious freedom, Turkey, Turkish Protestant Church.

1. Introduction

In 2008, as part of my doctoral research, I interviewed a 31-year-old Turkish Christian named Marko Kiroglu.[2] He had been a Christian for seven years, and Tilmann Geske, who was later martyred with two Turkish Christians in Malatya, Turkey, co-baptized Marko in 2002. In 2006, in the city of Adana, Marko suffered what, in hindsight, amounted to a portent of the 2007 Malatya martyrdoms when five young men attacked him after a worship service. With fists and feet, iron bars, and a butcher knife, they tortured him, demanding that he deny his Christian faith. Instead, he declared his faith. Even when bloody and verbally threatened with death, Marko responded unequivocally, "Jesus is God."[3]

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[2] Marko Kiroglu is the interviewee's recently adopted name. Marko now lives in South Africa, where he is the founding director of Countdown to Christ Ministries.

[3] Marko's interview transcript will be made public, along with my other interview transcripts, after my

Marko explained in our interview that he had been an unwanted child. In his infancy, his birth mother abandoned him and his father, and he remembers only apathy and aversion from his stepmother. When he was seventeen years old, the stepmother told him, with tacit approval from his father, "We don't want you in this family anymore. You're actually not part of the family. You are the son of a very evil woman." As a sobering summary of his early years, Marko said that he had "no happy childhood memory."

Marko's rejection became for me a metaphor for the Turkish Protestant Church (TPC). I propose that the interplay of secularism and religious freedom in Turkey has helped to make possible the largely unwanted TPC. Of course, the story of the TPC's emergence is far more complex than my metaphor-motivated suggestion. However, in this essay I will argue that secularism and religious freedom have helped to facilitate the rise of the TPC and that the TPC in turn has helped to functionalize religious freedom in Turkey.[4]

This argument is not meant to disregard or detract from the various struggles that have marked the TPC's history. Like absent parents, the lack of consistent secularism and religious freedom in Turkey has contributed to menaces and martyrdoms for the TPC, as in the aforementioned cases. Nevertheless, to properly understand the governmental, societal, and legal struggles that the TPC faces, one must first appreciate the Ottoman era's influence on secularism and freedom of religion. These concepts have protracted and contested histories in Turkey, and the resulting forms do not entirely match common meanings.

1.1 Turkish secularism and Ottoman-Islamic sway

The formation of Turkish secularism had been in process long before the founding of the Turkish Republic on 29 October 1923. According to Erik Jan Zürcher, secular trends in the Ottoman Empire were evident in decrees of sultans as early as the eighteenth century (Zürcher 2004:9-10). Secularization gained momentum in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly during the *Tanzimat* (reforms), Young Turk, and Democratic eras (Zürcher 2004:50-70, 93-337).

However, despite centuries of secularizing efforts and advances, the pervasive influence of ancestral Islam has kept secularism in check. Accordingly, Carter Vaughn Findley (2005:57-66) asserts that no transformation has been more profound in its consequences for Turks than Islamization. Indeed, Turkish secularism has Islamic strings attached to it. This reality has led Taha Parla and Andrew

doctoral dissertation is published.

[4] Although, because of my data, I focus only on the functionalization of religious freedom, one could also argue that the TPC has contributed, to some degree, to the functionalization or furtherance of Turkish secularism.

Davison (2008:58-73) to argue that, in Turkey, Kemalist laicism serves as an obstacle to, rather than an impetus toward, the development of genuine and extensive secularism.

As an adjective, the term "Kemalist" refers to the ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president and founding father of Turkey. Most writers on the subject equate, or use interchangeably, laicism (which calls for non-clerical control of a society and its institutions) and secularism (which entails fully non-religious, irreligious, or even anti-religious control of a society and its institutions). However, unlike secularism, laicism can be pro-religion, as is the case with Sunni Islam – exclusively – in Turkey.[5]

1.2 Turkish tolerance and religious freedom

Like secularism, religious freedom has Ottoman roots. Embryonic expressions of religious freedom can be gleaned already in Osman Ghazi's (n.d.) fourteenth-century testament to his son Orhan, in which he commanded unqualified extension of tolerance, kindness, justice, and virtue to the subjects. Bruce Masters (2004:16-40) explains that throughout subsequent generations, the level of religious tolerance in the empire fluctuated, due not only to sultans and their decrees, but also to the influence of Islamic judges and foreign powers. In the realm of religion, however, Islam dominated.

Actual freedom of religion reached an apparent peak in the Turkish Republic, when it was elucidated as a basic human right in the 1961 Constitution.[6] However, as Mine Yıldırım (2017:133-134) makes clear, that same fundamental law constitutionalized the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which, since its establishment as an institution in 1924, has consistently supported and perpetuated Sunni Islam. Accordingly, religious freedom in Turkey, although constitutionally established and protected, has often seemed little different from the oft-shifting religious tolerance of Ottoman times.[7]

1.3 Overlooked links between secularism, religious freedom, and the TPC

Literature on the TPC reflects the above considerations. Soner Cagaptay (2006:1) claims that Turkish converts to Christianity brought the TPC into existence, but he

[5] Tarla and Davison (2008:60) explain regarding laicism and secularism, "The two terms are not two different names for the same phenomenon. Laicism is distinct from secularism, … and Kemalist laicism is a particular kind of laicism. Interchanging the two occludes an understanding of the distinct character of Kemalist laicism, which is not only something significantly less than secularism but also … more limited than other forms of laicism."

[6] An English-language translation of the 1961 Turkist Constitution can be found at http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1961constitution-text.pdf. See especially Article 19.

[7] Peter Pikkert (2008:86) describes it as "a haphazard pattern of freedom and persecution."

neither gives a timeframe nor cites constitutional religious freedom as a contributing factor. Esra Özyürek (2009:403) attributes the rise of the Turkish Protestants to a renewed opportunity for mission work in the 1980s and 1990s, without mentioning religious freedom. Numan Malkoç (2006:92-105) connects the 1960s with the reinvigoration of the Protestant missionary movement in Turkey, but he neither explains this reinvigoration nor connects it to freedom of religion. Despite detailing significant TPC growth and development since the late 1970s, Pikkert (2008:166-168, 182-185) concludes that the presence of religious freedom "on paper" has had minimal practical effect.

With a focus on Turkey's ancient Christian traditions, Abdullah Kiran (2013:52-54) links the introduction of religious freedom with the 1924 Constitution, even though it also declared that the "Religion of the State is Islam". Kiran makes only brief mention of the improvements of the right of religious freedom in later constitutions.[8] Wolfgang Häde (2012:87-100; 2013:65-84) provides illuminating research on various perceptions of Christians in the country, as well as on the impact of persecution on Christian identity, but he addresses the origin of neither the Turkish Christians nor religious freedom in the land.[9]

Thus, not only does the TPC remain an under-studied religious movement after nearly six decades,[10] but relevant literature does not adequately connect the interplay of Turkish secularism and constitutional religious freedom with the TPC's emergence, nor does it recognize the TPC's functionalizing influence upon religious freedom. Therefore, I address the following two questions in this article: how have secularism and religious freedom interacted to facilitate the rise of the TPC, and how have the TPC and its members helped to functionalize religious freedom in the country? My primary data source is the transcripts of interviews I conducted as part of my doctoral research from 2007 to 2014, as the TPC movement marked 50 years in existence.[11]

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[8] Kiran gives a more detailed account of Christians during the Ottoman era and the impact that the empire-to-republic transition had upon them. He argues similarly that the burdensome restrictions on religious freedom for Christians in present-day Turkey are deeply rooted in the Ottoman era.

[9] In his published doctoral dissertation, Häde (2017) briefly covers the origin of the TPC, but the origin of the TPC and religious freedom in Turkey were not within the scope of his doctoral research.

[10] My drafted but as yet unfinished Ph.D. dissertation on the TPC will offer an interpretation of its emergence.

[11] For this article, I used twenty-four transcripts that addressed the topics of secularism and religious freedom – topics that arose spontaneously in the interviews due to my use of open-ended questions. The interviewees included Protestant missionaries, TPC converts, and an observer of the movement. Because of the unavoidable human tendency to reconstruct our autobiographies, these transcripts should be understood as containing narrative truth rather than historical facts. However, the discernible overlap between interviews confirms that the transcripts yield valuable data regarding the research topic and the questions at hand.

2. Findings

This section identifies and illustrates three thematized findings from my analysis of the transcripts. Although the transcripts represent the views of a relatively small number of Protestant missionaries to Turkey and Turkish Protestant converts, I had more than enough informants to attain theoretical saturation, as described by Anna Davidsson Bremborg (2014:313-314). It should also be noted that my findings are inferential and not necessarily broadly generalizable, since none of the interviewees had experience with the TPC dating back to its origin and because personal experiences in different parts of the country can vary greatly.

2.1 Secularism as a context for mission and conversion

Turkish secularism provided a suitable context for mission work and for conversions from Islam. Nearly all interviewees viewed secularism, compared with Islamism, as a source of greater societal openness toward Christians, their faith, and the possibility of religious conversion.[12] A German missionary who has been in Turkey since 1987, speaking of this openness, said that he expected the TPC to continue growing, especially by attracting secular Turks.[13]

A 29-year-old convert described his family as, paradoxically, "secular Turks" who are "quite committed to Islam." Although this young man himself was open-minded enough to attend a Christian worship service with some friends in the mid-1990s, and then to convert to the Christian faith a few years later, his parents were incensed when they discovered his conversion to Christianity. The parents' indignation toward their son, to the point of cutting off communication with him, suggests that deeper than their alleged secularism is their core belief that "real" Turks are Muslim. Markus Dressler explains that this widespread Turkish belief is a core element of Turkish nationalism (2015:16).

Several interviewees indicated that secular academia and media helped raise general awareness of the presence of Christian missionaries in the country and of the possibility of religious conversion. One veteran US missionary recalled watching, in the 1990s, a "secular TV talk show" in which someone asked whether there were missionaries in Turkey. After several ambivalent responses, one participant exclaimed, "Of course! They've been here for centuries." According to the missionary

[12] Interestingly, the one exception to the stated view came from a convert to Protestantism from an Assyrian Christian background. In his 2014 interview with me, he stated, "Even though the [current Turkish] government is Islamic, they did a great thing for the Christians: the most freedom is in their time. ... They like the Christians, and they give them freedom, more than any other government."

[13] This missionary's stated aim is to evangelize and disciple not secular and modern Turks but traditional and Islamist ones.

interviewee, the subsequent discussion promoted a common understanding that missionaries are indeed working among the people of Turkey.

Another missionary remembered taking a university philosophy class in the early 1980s. One day, the Turkish professor asked the approximately 200 students, "Is it theoretically possible for you to be a non-Muslim?" Two thirds of the students answered no – they were born Muslims, and that could not be changed. However, one-third of the students, with other students joining them as the discussion progressed, acknowledged that they could change their faith if they wanted to do so.[14]

Interviewees also credited Turkish secularism with the provision of legal protections, the facilitation of church planting, and the institutionalization of the TPC through the Law on Associations, passed in 2004 as part of the EU harmonization process.[15]

2.2 Religious freedom as a catalyst for mission and conversion

Religious freedom, as enumerated and elaborated in the 1961 Constitution, served as an effective catalyst for missionary work and conversions from Islam.[16] After the 1960 coup d'état and the subsequent Westernized constitution, which provided religious freedom for all, mission-minded Christians serving elsewhere quickly became interested in Turkey. Just three months after the constitution was ratified, the first pair of Protestant missionaries arrived in Istanbul. Since then, a multitude of others have followed, from six continents and at least three dozen countries.

The missionaries' backgrounds were diverse, but they all shared a sense of divine calling to serve in Turkey. Evangelizing, discipling, church planting, distributing literature, and Bible teaching made up their main activities and constituted the pattern for how the mission work developed. A prototypical Swiss missionary arrived in 1962 to do "low-key evangelism." He recounted, "When I reported … that I was interested in going, one of the strategists said, 'Good, we can send him as a guinea pig'" (i.e., an experimental missionary).

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[14] However, widespread popular distaste for and occasional popular backlash against the presence of foreign missionaries and their work on Turkish soil continues. For more on these phenomena, see Häde (2015:181-187).

[15] "Institutionalization" is my interpretive word, based on the interviewee's statements. He claimed that, although the situation is not ideal, TPC congregations' ability to organize as legal associations has been a "great improvement." This ability, granted in 2004, was part of Turkey's process of harmonization with the EU.

[16] Kiran is correct that religious freedom was listed in the 1924 Constitution (Kiran 2013:52-54). However, that document also contained antithetical statements that rendered exercising that freedom all but futile. The statement of religious freedom in the 1961 Constitution, with elaboration, protective clauses, and a judicial system of review, was more compelling, user-friendly, and ultimately effective in enabling the TPC to thrive. See Özbudun (2011:41-43).

The secular nature of the 1961 Constitution and its religious-freedom provisions caused missionaries and mission agencies to recognize an opening in Turkey. Since then, their interest in Turkey has waxed more than waned, and it has borne the fruit of thousands of regularly congregating converts from Islam. Perhaps the oldest of those converts is Abdullah. Born in 1926, he remembers being in his fifth and final year of schooling when Atatürk died. After studying the New Testament in 2001, Abdullah converted to Christianity. A quotation from his interview encapsulates what I call the interplay of secularism and religious freedom that has facilitated the rise of the TPC: "If there weren't secularism, they would kill me [for apostasy]. But we are free."

2.3 The TPC as a contributor to the functionalizing of religious freedom

Time and again during its history, the TPC or TPC actors have helped to functionalize religious freedom in Turkish society. On one level, this has occurred through personal interaction. The Swiss missionary cited above recounted an argument between him and a Turkish police officer in which each man was trying to persuade the other of his interpretation of religious freedom. Another missionary from the 1960s recalled his team leader giving him and his co-workers pocket-sized copies of the 1961 Constitution, with the articles regarding religious freedom highlighted. The missionaries were told to show the articles to anyone who questioned them about their activities, or to the police if they were arrested. In other words, the missionaries were equipped and advised to educate Turks regarding Turkish religious freedom.

This functionalizing of religious freedom has also taken judicial, advocacy, and diplomatic forms. Kraig Meyer told of the first court case against a TPC missionary, in 1963.[17] The public prosecutor sought the death penalty for the alleged crime of Christian propaganda. However, the defense attorney argued that, according to the constitution, Christian evangelism was not illegal. The judge found the missionary innocent and he was released (Meyer 1986:69).

In 1985, a veteran missionary "felt a very strong call … to go back to Turkey and seek to establish a framework for legalizing new churches."[18] After a five-year effort, involving the advocative abstract of a Turkish law professor and a diplomatic visit by Sir Fred Catherwood, the Vice President of the European Parliament,

[17] I interviewed Kraig and his wife Susan, but he also wrote a historical account in which the following story is told. Referring to "more than one hundred" arrests during a twelve-year time frame, he wrote, "In every case Turkish judges have upheld constitutional law" (Meyer 1986:69).

[18] He had done literature distribution in Turkey in the 1960s but had suffered the same fate as many early missionaries: the police deported him, not on the grounds of illegal activity, but rather simply as a *persona non grata* (Meyer 1986:69).

the Turkish government provided a practical ad hoc solution but stopped short of producing a written document for general use. However, later that year, Nurver Nureş of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a follow-up letter to Catherwood, informing him that the Turkish Parliament had established a Human Rights Inquiry Commission "to ensure respect for human rights in Turkey in line with the norms of International Law in this field" (Catherwood 1990).

Not only missionaries but also TPC converts have helped to further the functionalization of Turkey's religious freedom, with regard to both the TPC and other religious minority groups.[19] As one result of Turkish church leaders' meeting with Catherwood in 1990, they organized into a representative committee called Temsilciler Kurulu (TEK).[20] Despite its initial extralegal status, TEK engaged in advocacy on behalf of Turkish Protestant churches in the country.[21] In 2009, this committee gained legal status as the Association of Protestant Churches, and legal advocacy for member Protestant churches has been one of its main purposes and activities.[22]

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have highlighted and sought to explain an unexplored synergy involving the TPC. Part of this synergy has been between Turkish secularism and freedom of religion, as stated and elucidated in the 1961 Constitution and reaffirmed in the 1982 Constitution.[23] Secularism provided a context in which religious freedom could function as an effective catalyst encouraging the arrival and activity of Protestant missionaries, the conversion of Turkish Muslims to the Christian faith, and the establishment of Turkish churches. However, the TPC also has had a role in this synergy. Those associated with the TPC movement have acted in various ways to improve the functioning of religious freedom in Turkish society. In short, the interplay of secularism and religious freedom has helped to facilitate the rise of the TPC, and the TPC has helped to functionalize religious freedom in the land.

This interpretation can serve to enrich the understanding of other researchers of the TPC movement. The movement's origin need not be simply assumed or presented imprecisely. Researchers can better appreciate the vital importance of the generous provision and timely promulgation of religious freedom in the 1961 Con-

[19] With regard to other religious minority groups, see Çınar and Yıldırım (2014); Yıldırım (2017).

[20] Board of Representatives.

[21] This advocacy work by TEK began in 2000, after the first of several church closures in 1999.

[22] For more details, see the Association of Protestant Churches' "Reports" web page. Available at: http://www.protestankiliseler.org/eng/?page_id=638.

[23] The 1982 Constitution, while reaffirming religious freedom as stated in the 1961 Constitution, did also contain more restrictive clauses on its exercise (Özbudun 2011:51-52). This constitution remains in effect today.

stitution.[24] Without Turkish secularism, imperfect though it may be – and without religious freedom, restricted though it may be – the TPC would not be the substantial, "unstoppable" movement it is today, if it would exist at all.[25]

As for further research, my argument could be tested on other minority religious groups in Turkey. For instance, a 2020 *Hürriyet Daily News* article ("Turkey Violated" 2020) reported on a European Court of Human Rights decision that Turkey had violated the religious rights of Jehovah's Witnesses. Did the interplay of secularism and religious freedom since 1961 also help to facilitate the emergence of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkey? The article suggests that the Jehovah's Witnesses are also helping Turkey to better functionalize its religious freedom.

Finally, in this article I have spoken quite positively of Turkish secularism and religious freedom, at the expense of giving voice to those Christians, both Turkish and foreign, who have suffered or are suffering due to actions or policies of the current Islamist-nationalist alliance or due to practical restrictions of religious freedom. Tilmann Geske, his two co-workers, and Marko Kiroglu have certainly not been the only Christian victims of persecution in Turkey. As one of my interviewees stated regarding "the unofficial state attitude" toward Christians, "They're using social warfare to pressure us out of society." This warfare, which takes place at many levels of state and society, has ebbed and flowed up to the present day. An article on 5 July 2020 carried the title, "Turkey Deporting Protestant Christians" (Bulut 2020). What Meyer (1986:69) reported regarding the 1960s and 1970s – the deportation of Christians not as guilty of any crime, but rather as *personae non gratae* – is happening still today.[26]

Nevertheless, ongoing harassment and persecution must not blind adherents of the TPC to how far they have come. In just six decades, the TPC has grown from nothing to nearly 10,000 members in 180 churches throughout Turkey, reflecting an average annual growth rate far greater than that of the early church.[27] The synergy of secularism and religious freedom has smiled on the TPC movement, and, thanks in part to the TPC, the Turkish state and society have progressed in

[24] I owe the use of the word "generous" in this context to Hans-Martien ten Napel, whose phrase "generous protection of religious freedom" has stuck with me as a general aspiration and petition (Ten Napel 2017:161).

[25] One of my interviewees used the term "unstoppable" in 2013 to describe the TPC movement.

[26] Those discouraged or threatened by these deportations or by related realities may be encouraged by reading Christof Sauer and Dwi Maria Handayani's (2015:47-57) article, especially the section "Hope as Strength to Endure" (55).

[27] My research reveals that the TPC's average annual growth rate has been 14 to 14.5 percent, projecting roughly 8,800 TPC adherents in 2021 and 10,000 in 2022. Detailing this research is beyond the scope of this article. Rodney Stark (1997:6) estimates that the early church's average annual growth rate was 3.42 percent, although Stark's method of quantification is not accepted by all scholars (see Dreyer 2012:1).

their manifestation of constitutional religious freedom. However, the TPC must be patient, understanding that it is extremely difficult for a state and society to adopt a teachable attitude – especially toward an unwanted child.

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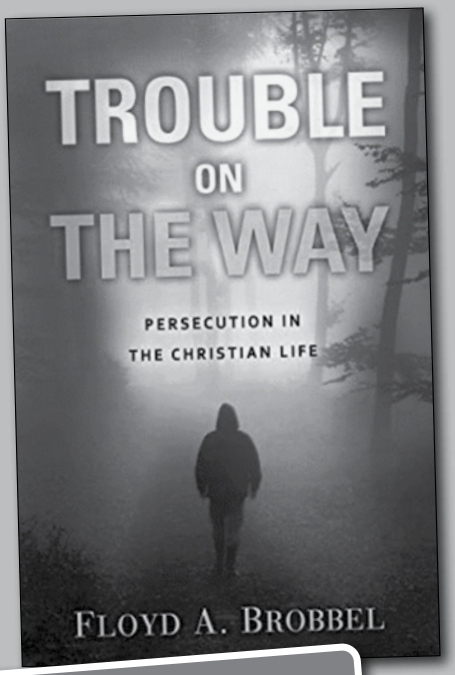

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