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TURKEY: What causes intolerance and violence?

By Güzide Ceyhan

The trial in Malatya of those accused of murdering three Protestants has drawn attention again to the question of what causes such intolerance and violence. Güzide Ceyhan, a Turkish Protestant, in a personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org/>>, identifies three trends behind the murders: disinformation by public figures and the mass media; the rise of Turkish nationalism; and the marginalisation of smaller groups from Turkish society. All three trends feed off each other, and all of Turkey's smaller religious communities - those within Islam and Christianity, as well as Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses - are affected by them in various ways. Many Turkish people - of all religions and none - are committed to furthering democracy and human rights, while civil society is growing stronger. But for the fundamental right of all Turkish citizens to freedom of thought, conscience and belief to be truly protected, a human rights-based approach is indispensable.

After speaking at the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly on 3 October, Turkey's newly-elected President Abdullah Gül insisted to journalists that members of various religions live in harmony in Turkey. He called the murders of Hrant Dink, an Armenian Turkish journalist, and Fr Andrea Santoro, a Catholic priest, "politically-motivated killings", but did not discuss the recent murders of three Christians in Malatya.

Fr Santoro - an Italian - was murdered in his church in Trabzon in February 2006 (see F18News 9 February 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=724>). Dink was murdered in Istanbul in January 2007. April 2007 saw the murders in Malatya of the three Protestant Christians - two ethnic Turks, Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel, and one German, Tilmann Geske (see F18News 10 July 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990>). These three attacks have resulted in the murder of five people not belonging to the Sunni Muslim majority. This causes Turkey's smaller religious communities to view their future with fear and insecurity.

Turkey has many different religious communities. They include Alevi Muslims (the largest religious minority, with perhaps 17 million people); Islamic brotherhoods (the Sunni Nakchibendis, Mevlevis and others as well as the Shi'ite Bektashis); new Islamic movements (such as the Nurcus and Suleymancis); Protestant Christians; Catholic Christians; Armenian Apostolic Christians; Syriac Orthodox Christians; Greek Orthodox Christians; Georgian Orthodox Christians; Jehovah's Witnesses; and Baha'is (see F18News 10 July 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990>).

Intolerance against various groups varies over time. The experience of the community I know best, my own small 3,000-strong Protestant community, illustrates the problems that these communities face. In the case of the Protestants, these ultimately resulted in the Malatya murders. Other communities also suffer intolerance and violence. Because many Protestants are converts from an Islamic background, theirs is a very good "test case" to examine how far tolerance in Turkey can accommodate true religious freedom.

What is the source of the intolerance that has fuelled violence against Christians? I think three trends can be identified:

1. disinformation about Christianity in statements by public figures and through the media;
2. the rise of Turkish nationalism;
3. and the implicit and explicit approval both of the marginalisation of Christians from Turkish society and also of actions - including murders - against them.

All three trends feed off and interact with each other.

1. Disinformation

Disinformation about Christianity was highlighted in the European Commission's latest progress report on Turkey, released on 6 November. In the "human rights and the protection of minorities" section, under "freedom of religion", the Commission notes the continuing depiction of missionaries by both the authorities and the media as "a threat to the integrity of the country and non-Muslim

minorities as not being an integral part of Turkish society". And it adds: "To date, use of language that might incite hatred against non-Muslim minorities has been left unpunished." (The report is available at <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2007/nov/turkey_progress_reports_en.pdf>.)

Such disinformation - particularly around the topic of conversion to Christianity - is widespread in both the national and local media. The lawyer of the Turkish Kurtulus (Salvation) Protestant Churches, Orhan Kemal Cengiz, told Bianet (a respected independent journalism network) soon after the Malatya murders that although "missionary activity" is not a crime in Turkey, politicians and the media have by constant repetition invented such a crime. Individuals then decide to punish this "crime" (see <<http://www.bianet.org/2007/04/19/94817.htm>>).

The submission of the Prosecutor in the trial of the alleged killers of the three Christians in Malatya, which began on 23 November 2007, is a case in point. The Prosecutor's submission makes much of the missionary activities of the victims, not the actions of the accused. Cengiz, the lawyer representing the victims, complained that "they are trying to demonstrate that missionary activity is 'unjust provocation' which might then decrease any sentence," Milliyet newspaper reported on 20 November. The newspaper also reported that Cengiz thinks that this claim, along with the Prosecutor providing much information on the victims' activity, "opens the door to new attacks".

In news reports which started before the trial (which will resume on 14 January 2008), some parts of the mass media are continuing to attack the murder victims, not the murders. Ihlas News Agency, a major video news agency, persistently linked the lawyers for the victims with the legal defence of both suspects from the PKK terrorist organisation, as well as Hrant Dink's son who has been accused of "insulting Turkishness" under Article 301 of the Criminal Code. Ihlas also gave prominence to a statement from one of the accused that one of the murder victims said that "Christianity and the Bible were good and praised the PKK. I became angry at what he said." The Bianet news agency noted on 24 November that this kind of reporting was dangerous, as it was "putting the lawyers into the dart board."

Mustafa Aydin, retired Head of the Interior Ministry's intelligence agency, the Security Directorate, also pointed to the increasing sensitivities over missionary activity. In an interview in the weekly news magazine Aksiyon just after the murders, he blamed statements about missionaries - by people without due authority which are then picked up by the media - that are "unnecessary, exaggerated and even have negative intent" (see <<http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/detay.php?id=27272>>).

Scores of television programmes have negatively covered Protestants, particularly those who have converted from Islam to Christianity. The popular TV series "Kurtlar Vadisi" ("Valley of Wolves") recently depicted missionaries as people who buy the faith of poor families and offer them a new religion. Professor Zekeriya Beyaz, Dean of Marmara University's [Muslim] Theology Faculty, takes the same line in his many articles and talks on missionaries and Christians. (Professor Beyaz is also controversial in some Muslim circles, because of his support for Turkey's university headscarf ban. For this, he himself has been the victim of a knife attack.) Speaking on Star TV's programme "What's Happening There?" in September 2007, he complained that "missionaries are making all our young people Christians and are opening unlawful churches under the protection of the law".

In Turkey, it is a fairly new phenomenon that people have experienced their fellow-Turks and foreign missionaries actively sharing non-Muslim beliefs such as Christianity. This has had a significant impact on Turkish society. In the 1980s, Turkish Protestants were a mere handful of people, becoming more numerous only in the past 20 years. But instead of seeing this change in society as a topic that needs unbiased investigation and reporting (which my fellow Turkish Protestants would welcome), Turkey's media has reacted with suspicion, hostility and stereotyping.

This societal change is commonly portrayed as the result of a plan by foreign missionaries with a number of alleged motives: to deceive those ignorant of Islam and those who are financially vulnerable and to weaken the national loyalty of Turkish citizens so as to ultimately divide the country. These alleged purposes are widely disseminated in publications and on scores of websites. In one of many examples of this, the Istanbul newspaper Üsküdar Gazetesi published a book of allegations called "Dikkat Misyoner Geliyor" ("Beware, Missionary coming"). Media coverage has mostly been sensationalist and has not given those accused the opportunity to respond. Disturbingly, the media has published the addresses of places of worship and names, putting individual Protestants at physical risk.

The government's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has also viewed the growing number of converts as a concern (see F18News 26 July 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=817>). The Diyanet has the mission "to engage in activities related to worship and ethics of Islamic Religion and enlighten people on religion and management of worship places". The Diyanet prepares and distributes Friday sermons to all mosques. Mosques under its control are the only ones allowed in Turkey, and these sermons are the only Friday sermons allowed in Turkey. (The Diyanet also runs mosques outside Turkey, in countries such as Germany.) In March 2005 a Friday sermon was distributed to all imams on the dangers of missionary activity, which described it as "a scheme of foreigners to steal the faith of the young".

Echoing this thinking, a day after the murders in Malatya, Niyazi Güney, a senior official in the Justice Ministry, remarked to Turkish parliamentarians that "missionary work is even more dangerous than terrorism and unfortunately is not considered a crime in Turkey". He repeated this view in the Milliyet newspaper. Terrorism - which remains a great threat in Turkey - and missionary

activity are thus seen as connected. And almost any manifestation of Christian belief - including gatherings in church buildings - is seen by those who hold these views as "missionary activity". I am fearful of what this approach implies for the safety of Christians in Turkey.

Missionary activity has also been on the agenda of the National Security Council (MGK), which is chaired ex officio by President Gül and also comprises the Chief of the General Staff, the commanders of all the branches of the Turkish Armed Forces and several government ministers. In a February 2005 evaluation of current and future challenges to Turkish security, the MGK drew attention to "a need for social activities that will prevent the spreading of organisations and ideologies that will have an impact on Turkey's unity". It suggested that "abusive missionary activities should not be permitted". What exactly was meant by "abusive missionary activity" was not defined.

2. Nationalism

The second factor fuelling violent attacks, nationalism, has always been strong in Turkey. This has risen in recent years, sparked, some Turkish observers think, by increased terrorist attacks by the separatist Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the socio-economic effects of globalisation. The rise in votes gained by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), from 8.3 per cent in the November 2002 parliamentary elections to 14.3 per cent in the July 2007 parliamentary elections, is a marker of this (see F18News 28 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=983>).

The current rise in nationalism has some extremely alarming characteristics. There is the expectation that every Turkish citizen will have ultra-nationalist "feelings". Nationalist discourse seems to define a Turk as only someone who is a Sunni Muslim Turkish nationalist. Nationalists see themselves as called to defend Turkey against "threats" from "others", who are frequently Turks who do not fit the nationalist stereotype. This approach alienates those defined as "others".

One victim of this approach has been the Alevi community, who are Turkish and Muslim but not Sunni. An illustration of this was a 9 October judgement of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey (Application nr. 1448/04) (see <<http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?item=1&portal=hbkm&action=html&highlight=1448/04&sessionid=3585479&skin=hu doc-en>>). In the case, brought by Alevis, the ECHR noted that "the Government have recognised, however, in the 'religious culture and morals' lessons, the religious diversity which prevails in Turkish society is not taken into account." The classes are optional for those who are recorded on their identity cards as being either Jews or Christians (see F18News 26 July 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=817>).

The ECHR is becoming increasingly important in defending freedom of thought conscience and belief in Turkey (see F18News 18 January 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=901>).

A related nationalist strand also sees violence as acceptable, if used against "others" labelled as a threat to Turkey. References to the 1919-23 War of Independence are used to claim that "extraordinary measures" are still necessary against "threats". The person accused of Hrant Dink's murder was pictured standing in front of the Turkish flag, with a quote from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: "Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures." Protestant Christians' religious beliefs are often perceived as a "threat" which has the alleged purpose of weakening national identity, as being a Sunni Muslim is considered an indispensable part of this identity. Ultimately, Protestants are seen as having the aim of destroying the unity of the state. A July 2007 survey by the nationalist Turkish Education Union claims that 54 per cent of people consider that "missionaries" are the biggest threat to Turkey (see <<http://www.turkegitimsen.org.tr/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=627>>).

3. Marginalisation

The third factor fuelling violent attacks (closely connected with disinformation and nationalism) is the approval - both implicit and explicit - of the marginalisation of Christians in Turkish society. As noted above, this has even led to the approval of murders. Although state officials were careful to condemn the Malatya murders, one could detect the "yes, these killings are horrible but these missionaries had it coming" attitude from some officials' statements and media comments. (See F18News 9 February 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=724> for comments after Fr Santoro's murder and F18News 10 July 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990> for comments after the murders of the three Protestants.)

Related to this is the use made by some Muslims in Turkey of the Koran to glorify the killing of so-called "apostates". Those who murdered the three Christians in Malatya mutilated their victims in ways reminiscent of the language of Sura 8:12 of the Koran.

Turkish history indicates that groups stigmatised as "unacceptable" or "threats to the nation" can very quickly become the victims of violence by other citizens. Istanbul's Armenian and Greek communities suffered from the July 1955 pogrom, while in 1993 Alevi Muslims in Sivas suffered in a bomb attack which left 37 people dead. Sadly, such stigmatising is still happening. Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin are now being unlawfully stigmatised as PKK sympathisers. Turkish citizens who are Protestant, as an October 2007 statement from the Alliance of Protestant Churches noted, suffered "scores of threats or attacks" on congregations and church buildings in 2006.

"The perpetrators have not been found. At times, the security authorities, acknowledging that there is such a threat, advised the use of private security companies," the statement continues. It is surely right for the Alliance of Protestant Churches to point out that "this is unacceptable when the State should be guaranteeing freedom of religion and the security of individuals and property."

The need for a human rights-based approach

There is much to be concerned about within Turkish society. But despite this, Turkey has made genuine efforts to implement its national and international commitments to protecting human rights in general and freedom of religion and belief in particular. Turkey has great potential to become a well-functioning, stable democracy and has made significant progress in complying with human rights commitments. Many Turkish people - of all religions and none - are committed to furthering democracy and human rights, while civil society is growing stronger. It would be simply untrue to say that individuals who do not conform to Sunni Muslim Turkish identity experience constant hardship.

Fundamental human rights are protected to a great extent, although challenges remain in providing consistent daily protection of those rights for all. Steps must be taken to ensure that President Gül's statement in Strasbourg becomes Turkish reality. The first step must be to understand, disseminate information on and train officials - at all levels - on what the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief actually means.

Freedom of religion and belief, as understood in international human rights law, means among other things the right to have and change one's belief and manifest such belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance. It can only be restricted under certain clearly defined circumstances and criteria. Establishing places of worship, teaching one's belief to the followers of the belief, sharing one's beliefs with those of different beliefs, and engaging in humanitarian assistance are all protected by the right to freedom of religion and belief. Yet as we have seen, in Turkey such activities are viewed with suspicion and hatred. This fundamental right of all Turkish citizens - whatever their religion or belief (including such beliefs as atheism) - is threatened by disinformation, nationalism and the marginalisation of minorities.

A human rights-based approach to these problems is an indispensable part of the solution. If this approach is put into concrete action, there will be genuine cause to hope that President Gül's statement on living together in harmony will become a reality for the members of all Turkey's smaller religious communities. (END)

- Güzide Ceyhan, a Turkish Protestant, contributed this commentary to Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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A printer-friendly map of Turkey is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=mideast&Rootmap=turkey>>.

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