

From Asia Minor to contemporary Turkey: “Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom in History and Geography”

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The Cemetery of the Church

The land, history and peoples of Asia Minor remain to this day as extraordinary witnesses to the deep scars, challenges, and sufferings of the Church throughout the ages. Outside of the Holy Land, it is hard to find another place in the world where so many significant events of the Christian faith have converged. This is the land known as “the cradle” of the Church. It is where the first Gentile church was founded, thus inaugurating the universal church. It is where the first missionary church began, hence initiating the Church’s global expansion. And finally, it is the home of all seven churches of Revelation which foreshadowed and today exemplify the glories and hardships of the earthly Church.

However, this land that witnessed the extraordinary vitality which pioneered the Church through the centuries has now become known as “the cemetery of the Church.” Unfortunately, Christianity has been virtually eradicated today from this soil. So, what exactly happened in this span of twenty centuries? What caused this decline? The answer: innumerable sufferings, persecutions and martyrdoms.

Asia Minor is the home of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers which watered the garden of Eden; of Mount Ararat, where the ark rested; of Haran, Abraham’s native land; of Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul; of Syrian Antioch, the first missionary church; of Patmos, where John was exiled; of Galatia, Bithynia, Iconium, Thrace, and Cappadocia; and finally, of the 7 “candlesticks” of Asia Minor. At this point it would be good to remind ourselves that none other than the Lord himself can blow out the candlesticks of the Church; and that no one but the community of believers has a responsibility to keep this flame alive. Nor must we forget that the Lord is the one who “will rebuild the ancient ruins,” “raise up the devastated areas of old,” and “will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations,” bringing salvation, joy and justice to all peoples (Isa 61:4, 10, NIV).¹

As a worker with over 25 years of experience in the field, I believe great lessons must be learned from the devastation experienced in these lands. We must take them to heart and equip ourselves for the great spiritual restoration to come.

¹ In places like Turkey, the spiritual application of such passages as “blessings for all peoples” is easily distorted by people that want to see these hidden imperialist agenda in these statements, as if our objective was to strip them of their land. Nothing is further from the truth! In reality, this type of commitment to add a political content to the Gospel’s message is another form of persecution. It is a way of exerting an intimidating pressure on the legitimacy and freedom of Christian thought.

An Epistle for Asia Minor

What roles have adversities, persecutions, and massacres played in Asia Minor? What lessons stand out? I would not want to make a simplistic or cold review of all historical facts – which would not be possible–, but rather tell some “inside” stories (i.e. the *Acta Martyrum*) of the suffering and therefore, the victorious Church! What better stage to echo the words of the Apostle Peter and identify with “the family of believers throughout the world [who] is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Pet 5:9, NIV). Peter wrote these words *specifically* to the “scattered” churches in Asia Minor: “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Pet 1:1, NIV).

In the book of Revelation, the Lord speaks to the seven churches of Asia Minor which are threatened from both outside and inside forces. He speaks to them with words of warning or praise; but there are only two churches that He does not reproach: Smyrna and Philadelphia. He only uses words of approval and encouragement with these communities. Why? They are the only two churches that are trying to survive by engaging in efforts to overcome persecution. One church (Smyrna) suffers the persecution of their preachers and evangelists, (i.e. *speakers of the Word*) and the other (Philadelphia) suffers a defamatory persecution against the proclamation of the Gospel. The Lord has no words of reproach for those who are faithful in the midst of suffering. They are not perfect people or communities but they bear the “mark of Christ on their bodies;” and this glory completely overshadows any of their defects. This gracious treatment towards sufferers was true then and has continued to be true throughout the entire history of the church.

Today we live in a world and see a Church that is ever more obsessed with *the eradication of pain from everyday life in favor of its welfare*. In contrast, the first churches lived to *eradicate evil from the world regardless of sacrifice*. Which of these two positions fits better with the purpose and message of the Gospel? Ending suffering is one of the objectives of the Gospel, but it is a collateral purpose, if I may say so, and not the central objective. Seeking healing, comforting the depressed, praying for provision, and pursuing happiness are all aspects of living the Gospel, but if all we want is a life without diseases, without adversity, and of continued success are we not drifting somewhere else? If our desire of ending suffering makes us desist from any task that requires sacrifice, are we not imprisoned by ourselves and are we not shunning the major difficulties we face in proclaiming the Gospel in the world’s most challenging areas?

In contrast, if we assume that the task of the church is fighting evil in the world regardless of the sacrifice required, then the words of Peter to the suffering believers in Asia Minor becomes very significant: “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin” (1 Pet 4:1). We must arm ourselves with the kind of mental attitude found in Hebrews 12:4 if we want to recover a worldview of our mission against “sin” and “evil;” even if this means it will cost us suffering and maybe the shedding of our own blood. It’s not that we should seek mortification and suffering as a goal itself, but it’s time we rediscover the ultimate cost that we will face when pursuing the Kingdom legitimately. The aim is to overcome evil, the cost is sacrificial self-denial.

The seeds planted by Diocletian

During the first three centuries of Church history, the Roman Empire led 10 major waves of persecution against the Christian faith. Such was the persecution in the lands of Asia Minor

that Ignatius Martyr, Bishop of Antioch (68-107 AD) coined the following famous phrase: “I am God’s wheat, and I need to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts [of the Roman circus] that I may be found the pure bread [of Christ].”² Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (74-155 AD), said to his executioner: “Eighty and six years have I served Him (Christ), and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment...”³ Then came to the famous statement of Tertullian (160-220 AD): “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”⁴

Persecution did not erase Christianity. However in spite of persecution, or perhaps because of it, Christians survived the Roman Empire itself. Between 303 and 313 AD Emperor Diocletian ordered and approved (perhaps instigated by Galerius) the last and most devastating of the imperial persecutions which took place in Asia Minor. It is said that half of all the martyrdoms of the entire Roman era occurred between those dates.⁵ Both Eusebius⁶, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, as well as Lactantius⁷, in *Death of the Persecutors*, report this same fact. This wave of persecution was so intense that Diocletian raised a column with the inscription: “The name Christian is extinguished.”⁸ Today, in the place of his palace in ancient Nicomedia, stands the city of Izmit in modern Turkey.

In 1998 the Lord led us to start work in Izmit (*not* to be confused with “Izmir” or *Smyrna*). After a year of church planting we decided to look for a building that we could use as a church and would be affordable by our limited economic options. On August 17, 1999, an earthquake measuring 7.4 on the Richter scale devastated the city. More than 35,000 people died within 45 seconds! Our building immediately became a center of distribution for humanitarian aid sent by evangelical organizations around the world. The church was not damaged, but several of the buildings neighboring us collapsed. Underneath these collapsed buildings appeared the remains of Diocletian’s palace! Of all places in a city inhabited by over a million people, unbeknownst to us, we had planted the church on top of the palace that had shed the most blood of martyrs throughout the history of Rome. Was it coincidence or providential guidance? If we remember Tertullian’s maxim – “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church” – the answer does

² *Epistle to the Romans* (St. Ignatius) IV, 1.

³ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Chapter 9, 11.

⁴ *Apologia*, 50,13.

⁵ The eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon reduced the number of casualties during the Great Christian Persecution to a maximum of 2,000 and suggested a total of 4,000 for the entire imperial period. Historians now say that you can not determine an exact number, the numbers being considered range from 10,000 to 100,000 martyrs: “Judging from the calculation of L. Hertling one could estimate that during the second half of the first century (Nero, Domitian) the martyrs would be about five thousand; during the second century (Hadrian, Trajan, Antonio, Marco Aurelio) about ten thousand; for the whole third century (Septimius Severus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian) about twenty thousand; and the late third and early fourth century (Diocletian, Galerius, Maximinus Daja) some fifty thousand. This calculation would give us number of approximately one hundred thousand martyrs during the persecution of the Roman Empire.” (Gómez, Álvaro. *Historia de la Iglesia, Edad Antigua*, Madrid 2001, pp. 104-105).

⁶ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII, iv, 2–3.

⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, X, 1–5.

⁸ “Extincto nomine Cristianorum.” Harold, J. Sala. *Why You Can Have Confidence in the BIBLE*, Harvest House Publishers, 2008, 58. There is also talk that a coin was minted with the inscription: “Diocletian emperor who destroyed the Christian name.”

not offer much doubt! This small, faltering church remains there today, struggling against all odds to succeed.

The fruits of persecution

During the reign of Diocletian, a soldier of the Emperor's personal guard named *Georgios* was ordered to participate in repression. Instead, he chose to publicly declare his Christian faith and oppose the imperial decision. An enraged Diocletian ordered his torture, and he endured it without uttering a single complaint. He was subsequently executed. *Georgios* was beheaded outside the walls of Nicomedia (Izmit) on April 23, 303. The testimony of his suffering convinced Empress Alexandra and an anonymous pagan priestess to convert to Christianity. They too would eventually join *Georgios* in martyrdom. Today this martyr is known as St. George.

The history of persecution in places like Nicomedia and Cappadocia, though initially a seeming blow to the survival and expansion of the Church itself, are illustrative of how persecution and martyrdom revitalized the Church and were ultimately epic victories over all the powers of evil. It is through this history of suffering that the ultimate goal of the Gospel was fulfilled.

On the one hand, these persecutions would prove to be the seeds of the great artistic heritage found in the churches carved into the caves of Cappadocia. On the other hand, these histories would bring about one of the most influential stories in popular consciousness: the legend of St. George and the Dragon. Both of these cases, beyond their anecdotal and mythical aspects, make it clear that any sacrifice made by faith ends up being the seed needed for the restoration and revitalization of believers.

The last and bloodiest of all the persecutions in Rome soon led to the eventual recognition of the Christians in the empire. Gradually, however, a new and more terrible form of persecution ensued: that of Christians against Christians, and of Christians against other religions. This movement would reach its peak with the Crusades and the Inquisition. These new persecutions were even more terrible because they were done in the name of Christ! This is an episode that we can not avoid if we want to understand the situation in Asia Minor following the 15th century. Although the crusades may seem like an item that has nothing to do with our topic, we can not nor should we ever stop mentioning them. The Crusades have left deep, unhealed scars throughout the Middle East. Moreover, this wound is not just in the historical memory of the Muslims, but also that of our fellow Orthodox, Armenian, Nestorian, and Coptic Christians.

While my Turkish friends often mention the Crusades and the Inquisition as two sides of the same coin, I say that "we, the Protestants" were as much victims of this persecution as were Jews and Muslims (that is, by the Inquisition); we can not ignore or walk away from these two scourges of "Christianity." Moreover we must acknowledge the atrocities done in the name of Christ and ask forgiveness for them. Only then will we have the authority to denounce any other injustice. If persecution causes humiliation and pain, forgiving and knowing to apologize—even if you are the victim—dignifies and heals. Ultimately, it makes us participants in His glory (1 Pet 4:14) and a herald of His fair trial to come (2 Thess 1:4-6).

The day we begin assuming the role of persecution within the outcomes of divine providence we stop being victims and become victors. This change in mentality, in turn, also helps us celebrate His liberation in advance. Several years ago the following words of the suffering Jeremiah taught me this valuable lesson: "It is good for a man to...offer his cheek to

one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace. For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love” (Lam 3:27, 30-32, NIV).

Martyrdom has its most far-reaching effect when those who suffer persecution grant a full pardon to their persecutors. This, ultimately, helps to spread the seed so that it’s truly effective: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them... So those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went... and they were many...” (Acts 7:60, 8:4 ff., NIV).

Towards Contemporary Turkey

Following the rapid spread of Islam in the eighth century, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century the religious setup and map of the Mediterranean world drastically changed. While Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, fell into the hands of the Ottomans (1453); the last capital of the Umayyad Caliphate, Granada, was re-conquered by the Catholic Kings (1492) and consequently Muslims were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (1502). Luther nailed his 95 theses onto the door of Wittenberg (1517), while the Ottomans expanded their empire practically to the gates of Vienna (1529).

The Ottoman Turks grouped different populations according to their *millet* (i.e. ethnic nationalities). These “nationalities” were determined by religious denominations. Apart from the ruling Muslim *millet*, several other “nationalities” included the Jews, the Armenians, the Catholics (there was even a Protestant *millet* in the nineteenth century), and finally the Orthodox *millet*, the highest *millet* after the Muslims. These “nationalities” enjoyed a good degree of autonomy and were governed by their religious leaders. This system remained the same until the time when nationalism began to push for independence during the nineteenth century.

First, with the independence of Greece and later, with the wave of Balkan independence on the brink of World War I (i.e. former Yugoslavia, Albania, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria), the Christian *millet* or “nationalities” began to be seen as treacherous forces eager to support the West and end the rule of the Ottoman Empire. This situation created waves of suspicion, and with it came a sense of urgency “to crush the enemies installed in our backyard.”

Under the guise of preventing an uprising, in 1915 the Armenians were forced to evacuate their lands in eastern Turkey and the consequence was that they suffered unprecedented destruction along with their exodus. The Armenians took the brunt of ethnic suspicion. This latest massacre had claimed three hundred thousand victims, according to some, and up to a million and a half lives, according to others. What Turks remember, however, is the perception of “betrayal” of these *millet* groups towards their Empire. These suspicions were confirmed when in 1919 the Ecumenical Patriarchate hailed the Greek army’s invasion of Western Anatolia. From that moment onward, the Patriarchate and ethnic minorities became known for many Turks as the “fifth column”⁹ that is, a group of infiltrated traitors.

Although we can not delve into details here, this very rapid analysis will be useful to understand the trigger for what is remembered in modern Turkey as “black September” or “the events of September 5 and 6” in 1955. It was a time when public *psyche* was deeply disturbed by the conflict in Cyprus. Assaults, looting, murder and rape ravaged the central districts of Istanbul where Christian and Jewish minorities and their businesses were concentrated. The events were

⁹ In Turkish “besinci kol”; i.e. espionage and sabotage forces aiming to overthrow the Turkish state.

triggered by a false story about a bomb explosion that supposedly had taken place the previous day in Thessalonica (Greece), in the house where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic was born in 1881. A mob stormed and razed for nine hours straight, more than 5,000 premises of the Greek minority, Jewish and Armenian minorities also suffered.¹⁰ The mob was encouraged by some organized groups who were responsible for locating homes, businesses, churches and cemeteries in these communities.¹¹ Some 11 to 15 people died (depending on sources), and there were 30 to 300 wounded; between 60 and 400 women were raped.¹² This further accelerated the emigration of ethnic Greeks (or *Rum*, in Turkish) from Istanbul, whose Greek minority population declined from 135,000 in 1924 to about 7,000 in 1978.¹³

While these unjustifiable events were not acts perpetrated against Christians as a direct result of their faith but, rather, due to chauvinistic and ultra-nationalistic reasons, they do provide us with a framework that aids us in understanding the reactions against Christians and attempts to spread the Gospel in today's modern Turkey.¹⁴

A New Beginning

Not until after the 1960's did evangelical work in Turkey restart, after a lapse of half a century trying to survive unnoticed. There was virtually nothing left of the revivals of the late nineteenth century. Turkey or what was then the large area of Anatolia belonging to the Ottoman Empire had, at one point, witnessed many revivals among ethnic minorities of Christian origin. The sons and daughters of these revivals lost their lives in the events of the century that followed or fled to other regions and continents, seeking to save their own lives. Today these remnants are still scattered throughout Europe and the Americas.

In the 1980's, however, an unheard of phenomenon emerged: Turks of Muslim background began to convert to the Christian faith and started to form small "Turkish Protestant churches" where the word "Turkish" meant "ethnic Turks" and not Christian ethnic minorities. In the 1990's they began trying to obtain legal recognition in a country that declared herself secular and unprejudiced to all religions, but in practice, viewed Christians as a threat. By the late 1990's, these Turkish converts began to appear on television debate programs; they were courageous witnesses of their faith and suffered all kinds of criticism against the Gospel. In 2005, the State Security Commission identified the three major threats against the Turkish state as the following: Kurdish terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the proselytism practiced by missionaries.¹⁵ News articles began to emerge about "thousands" of hypothetical underground churches hidden in homes, which came to be called "pirate churches," and speculations that billions of dollars were used to buy land and recruit native missionaries by deceiving young

¹⁰ "6-7 Eylül Olayları" *Radikal* Newspaper. September 6, 2005.

¹¹ Koçoglu, Yahya. *Azınlık Gençleri Anlatıyor*. Metis Publishers, Istanbul, 2001, pp.25-31.

¹² "400 Kadına Tecavüz Edildi," *Sabah* Newspaper. 26 Eylül 2009.

¹³ Kuyucu, Ali Tuna. "Ethno-religious 'unmixing' of 'Turkey': 6-7 September riots as a case in Turkish nationalism", *Nations and Nationalism*, Volume 11, Issue 3, July 2005, pp. 361-380.

¹⁴ All evangelistic activity, or proclamation and defense of the Christian faith, is understood by some sectors as illegal proselytism and therefore as another strategic branch of the "fifth column."

¹⁵ "İç Güvenlik Strateji Belgesi" (*Internal Security Strategy Document*) dated from October, 31 2005. <http://ikincicumhuriyet.org>; 3.11.2010.

misfits through promises of financial compensation created a climate of global fear and psychosis against Protestants. This fear culminated in the statements of the former first lady Rahsan Ecevit, of a secular-left party, in a press release in 2005: “Our religion is wasting away¹⁶...In our country, churches have infiltrated apartment buildings. Some citizens become Christians due to various interests. Unfortunately, the authorities turn a blind eye to all this... I do not want to be governed by camouflaged sects. I want my country back.”

In a culture where discourse about “invisible enemies that want to overthrow the state” created psychosis, children who were 5 or 6 years in the mid 90’s, grew to adulthood under the ‘threat’ of “illegal” proselytism, and under a State which identified missionaries as “public enemy number one” and declared that it could not do anything to combat them. Some of these young men were literally indoctrinated with the need to save the homeland from the intrusion of Christianity and they became “cannon fodder” for ultra-nationalist sectors that incited them to murder.

Harassments

According to the *Pew Global Research* on “Global Attitudes,” dating from 2008, in recent years the country with the largest growth of hostility toward Christians has been Turkey.¹⁷ This contrasts with the Turkish public opinion that there is complete religious freedom in this country. Is there an explanation for such dichotomy?

On the one hand, freedoms are guaranteed on paper and the average Turk naturally accepts the presence of native Christians; their only real concern is to make ends meet, to pay their mortgage, and their children’s school. But on the other hand, both the educational systems at schools and much of the media transmit a worldview on international developments in terms of a Christian crusade. This creates fear towards the idea that Christianity might be expanding in their homeland. This feeling causes both private and personal reactions as well as organized pressures, either by radical groups or sometimes by public authorities. This hostility can translate into a wide variety of actions that can range from verbal abuse to physical assaults and arrests at the slightest complaint about anything “Christian.” Molotov cocktails have been launched at churches and even death threats and murders have taken place. But before we consider the specific cases of martyrdom, let’s try to explore some of the environment that faces the evangelical work on a day-to-day basis.

The most systematic of these harassments occur when authorities apply the “letter” of the law to Christians, while in other cases easily “turn a blind eye.” Thus, pastors have been fined according to a law banning religious manifestations in public (TCK 529) for leading the ‘public’ worship service of their church, when many mosques on Friday often invade the streets and nobody objects to anything. Native Christians have been fined thousands of dollars for alleged violation of data protection law, writing and visiting Bible correspondence course contacts. Sometimes places of worship are sealed on the grounds that they are illegal because they are not registered in the zoning code. One church was raided because “there was a lead” that it had a hidden arsenal. The police sometimes request lists of church members or require the

¹⁶ *Radikal* Newspaper, dating from January 3, 2005.

¹⁷ “In 2004, about half (52 %) of Turks gave Christians an unfavorable rating; today roughly three-in-four (74%) hold this view” (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/955/unfavorable-views-of-both-jews-and-muslims-increase-in-europe>, 26.11.2010).

identification documents of new attendees. There are foreign families who are deported for “working illegally” when in reality they were voluntarily aiding with the leadership of a local church in Turkey. A foreign pastor was threatened with deportation for going to another church, outside of the one that employed him, to preach. Through the usage of bureaucratic excuses, a church was penalized for hosting refugees lawfully in the country. One church building threatened to be demolished for allegedly failing to comply with anti-earthquake regulations. Anyone who tries to preach the gospel openly is stopped, claiming a breach of public order. These actions are always justified with explanations like “we only abide by laws,” which makes it very difficult to prove that it is a systematic policy of attrition and assimilation.

Turkey remains a paradise of contrasts and contradictions, and we should not ignore that it is the only country with a Muslim majority which allows the presence of public communities composed of converts from Islam. It is also the only Muslim country that contemplates the legalization of church buildings, although the process is proving to be very arduous and costly.¹⁸ Whenever a situation has been led to the courts, although being a lengthy process, the state has decided in favor of the rights and freedoms. Turkey is also the only Muslim nation that sponsors debates on national television between Muslim and Christian theologians that, of course, discuss the corruption of the Christian faith,¹⁹ and yet it tolerates the presence of radio and television channels that proclaim the Gospel. This land can be both a haven of peace and a powder keg ready to explode.

The emerging native church, however, is not waiving its Turkish identity or its desire to serve its country, and continues to persist today in its attempts to achieve an officially recognized place in society!

Today's Martyrs

As we have seen above, every act of aggression has its period of gestation. We should not ignore the spiritual causes leading to persecution, but neither should we ignore those economic, social, cultural, or political causes that also have an impact on the spiritual, and vice versa. It's inevitable to consider some contextual details that has, in recent years, led to another black page in the history of Asia Minor.

Elsewhere in the world, Christians in many other circumstances live dramas that are much more tragic due to their faith. But the Turkish case is unfortunate as it's a nation that prides itself on being an example of tolerance and freedom in the Islamic world, worthy of being followed by others. In practice, however, it is airing a message which states that “infiltrated enemies” are to be eliminated. Those who do not subscribe to this speech think that Christians should remain silent and not provoke the masses and instigate their prejudices. The prevailing idea in public opinion is that: “the victims would not have encountered a tragic event if they had not sought after it.” Unbelievably, the victims are the ones that end up being guilty of disturbing what some have called the “*Pax Ottomana*.”

But who are the ones that are really disturbing the peace? Forgive me, for I cannot write dispassionately about these issues that have affected me so closely. The alleged disturbers of peace were actually messengers killed for preaching peace in word and deed.

¹⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gCZ_Y9YcfA, 26.11.2010.

¹⁹ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xd6219_haberturkoz-el-subtitles-eng-93mb_lifestyle, 26.11.2010.

Since 2006, seven Christians were killed atrociously and there have been other failed attempts. I use the word “atrociously” because they were cruel, premeditated murders, including tortures in some cases.

On February 5, 2006 Andrea Santoro, a Catholic priest in Trabzon (the Black Sea coast), died having been shot twice in the head while praying on the pews of his church. His crime? Trying to rescue some prostitutes from their ignominious life, and annoying some individuals due to his integrity and enviable testimony. His murderer was justified on the grounds of the offensive Mohammed cartoons.

On January 19, 2007 a born-again believer and Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, was shot dead in the entrance of the Armenian newspaper office in Istanbul; Why? Because he sought after ways to reconcile Armenians and Turks by courageously making both parties face the facts, and not deny them systematically.

On April 18, 2007, three Protestants were tortured and murdered in a publishing house in Malatya (southeastern Turkey). Their throats were slit. Two of them were Turkish converts from Islam, Necati Aydin, 36, and Ugur Yüksel, 32. They were the first martyrs of the Turkish church (in the ethnical sense). The third, Tilman Geske, 45, was a German citizen. Their crime? Distributing Bibles, celebrating Christmas in a hotel with friends and relatives, and preaching the gospel to those who were interested.

On December 16, 2007, Adriano Francini, a Catholic priest, was stabbed and injured in Izmir. Fortunately, he survived. The day before the event, the aggressor had called our church office in Eskisehir (Anatolia). The Turkish pastor in Eskisehir, who had been beaten a couple of years ago after attending a similar call, apologized and hung up the call. The aggressor then decided to call the following address in Smyrna. Apparently he had a list of church addresses from the Internet. His justification? He had been influenced by a Turkish TV series (*Kurtlar Vadisi* – “Valley of the Wolves”) that shows Christians as conspirators against Turkey.

On July 20, 2009, Gregar Kerkelink, a German tourist who left the St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Istanbul, was stabbed in the middle of the street by an assailant, who claimed to have woken up that morning wanting to kill a Christian.

On June 3, 2010 Bishop Luigi Padovese Apostolic Bishop of Anatolia had his throat slit by his driver in the city of Iskenderun (near Antioch, in southeastern Turkey). After the murder, the murderer climbed to the roof and cried “Allah’u ekber” (“Allah is great” –this was also shouted by one of the gunmen mentioned above) and then shouted: “I’ve killed the devil!”

In a country where the immediate and predictable impulse is revenge, the relatives and Christian friends of the victims, in all of these cases, forgave the murderers and testified of Christ’s love for them. I knew all of these victims either personally or through acquaintances, except for the German tourist. It is difficult to describe the emotions one experiences when these things happen to people that are close to you. It’s a mixture of agony and exultation. Therefore I want to honor the lives and deaths of these martyrs with three testimonies which have tearfully marked my life since then. All three testimonies illustrate the spiritual triumph that lies behind these earthly tragedies.

The first of these “testimonies” is the Biblical text that was painfully read amidst praises to the Lord at the funeral of father Santoro by his companions in the bishopric:

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will

lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (Jn 12:24-26, NIV).

The second is the reflection of Hrant Dink’s widow, Rakel –a believer committed to the Lord. On January 23, 2007, she read her text which still reverberates in the ears of people nationwide during the massive funeral held for her husband in Istanbul:

“...I know there was a time in which the murderer was a baby. What force of darkness is it that can turn a baby into a murderer? This is what we have to question... because only love alone will enter heaven...”

The third is a poem written by one of the martyrs of Malatya, Necati Aydin, in premonition of his own death:

“I have given my address to death
So it finds me without distress;
Do not think that I feared it,
That I shy away from facing it...

Let death be close to us!
Is she not ever present?
I’m leaving without a farewell
To those who have loved me so well.
I leave without satiating my soul enough
With beauty, goodness, truth, and love...
So I run every moment,
To achieve at any moment,
The ultimate goal: eternity.”²⁰

Conclusion

What do we learn about suffering, persecution, and martyrdom with respect to the specific case of Asia Minor and its long and complex cultural history? In my view, this lesson can be summarized in three brief thoughts:

1. From a cosmic perspective, the Church is not of this world and cannot rely on a comfortable life, nor should it seek it. The Church’s central struggle should not be to avoid persecution, but to preserve the values of the Gospel. When these central ideas disappear, sooner or later the testimony or “candlesticks” might disappear as well.
2. From a historical and socio-political perspective, no one is without fault and no one can cast the first stone. We should not form sides but learn to put ourselves in each other’s shoes, like Jesus did in his incarnation. Despite all injustices, we must learn to love hostile societies and overcome all hatred with forgiveness; by this, I do not mean that we should remain silent or justify these hostilities.
3. From a missiological perspective, persecution is an unavoidable travelling companion. Jesus said: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.” The Church should not be sedated with a “feel good”

²⁰ Necati Aydin, *Benim Adim Göklerde Yazili*, Gercege Dogru Publishers, Istanbul, 2008, 12, 46.

theology centered on avoiding pain but should be awakened to bring the Gospel to places of high risk; even if this means that a cross is waiting for us at the end of the journey.

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Discussion Questions

1. What percentage of the text in the NT written in *or* for Asia Minor includes the themes of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom? Does this figure correspond to the interest given to the topic in theological circles and *or* in the daily practice of Christians?
2. Is the theme of “suffering, persecution, and martyrdom” an issue only for the Early Church or for those parts of the world facing persecution? Is it valid for the churches that have managed to settle down and earn a respectable place in society? According to 1 Peter, how should these “settled down” churches act or how much should they get involved?
3. If this subject is equally valid and important for every church, Bible school, ministry, or contemporary Christian organization, how much should suffering, persecution, and martyrdom affect our cosmology, our participation in the socio-political arena, and our approach to missions?
4. How can one measure “success” in the context of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom? If in certain contexts there is no exponential growth taking place and we only witness adversity, is this an indication of failure? Should the missionary movement, in such cases, leave its mission field in favor of other regions or contexts that are more “productive”?

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