

# The Impact of Christian Minority on Shaping Türkiye's Profile

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## **Abstract**

*Given the fact that Türkiye is located in a culturally-diverse and multi-confessional area, interactions with alterities have been numerous. We analyse some relevant encounters with Christians and their impact on shaping Türkiye's profile, given that Christians have been present in Turks' history and development as a state. Our methodology is qualitative, with a focus on a SWOT analysis regarding "strengths", "weaknesses", "opportunities" and "threats" and the results focus on the impact of Christians in shaping the country's profile: Christians have been present in Turks' history. The results of the analysis reflect varied interactions between the two entities: military (coercive), social and political, today being shaped under the umbrella of cultural or public diplomacy practices. "Strengths" are mainly related to the inheritance of the Ottoman millet, "weaknesses" are related to perception as alterity; "opportunities" describe the state's actual public diplomacy, while "threats" might arise from nationalism and faith-based diplomacy.*

## **Keywords**

*minority, Islam, Christianity, Türkiye, encounters, impact*

## **1. Introduction**

Our premise has its foundation on a paradox: a *humanist* and *dogmatic* approach, i.e. the fusion in one of humans and their beliefs. In other words, people humanise their religions and religions spiritualise people, merging the two entities under the umbrella of Schleiermacher's described "feeling of absolute dependence" (Schleiermacher, 1928: 14) and "reciprocity", explaining the interconnection between human and divine.

If we accept that there is an impact of humankind on religion and of religion on humankind, we can further address the matter of interactions between different peoples of different faiths and the impact they have on each other.

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Geographically, Türkiye is located in one of the most culturally-varied regions, which makes today's Türkiye spiritually infused, after many years of interactions with alterity. The inheritance of cultural interactions between Christianity and Islam is visible in the country's actual profile, combining elements both in rituals, but also in the political sphere.

### **1.1. Literature Review**

Interactions between Christians and (Muslim) Turks are, in essence, interactions between two identities. If we accept that "identity is found as a form of *expression*" (Brie, 2025; 11), then we can further admit that both communities have their own manifestations, declarations of selves that interact with one another. Hence,

In the case of Turks, due to the above-mentioned significant location in terms of variety of peoples, confessions and cultures, we can state that its importance as a regional actor, its internal and external profiles, its historical development into a coherent state – they have been all studied and approached in niche literature in the field of international relations.

As scholars consider that the late Ottoman model of governance had not been suitable with that time's trends in political organisation, the Kemalist Revolution can be framed as "an adaptative reaction" of the Turkish society (Popescu, 2024: 263).

What we can further understand from this fitting is that in its modern-time-existence, the Turkish state started and continued to follow its own interests for its own boon.

The paradox of the current international system or community is that, on one hand, there is more profound discussion and theoretisation on the matter of minority groups and communities, *interactions* between different communities of one single country and the *impact* of ones on the others; and on the other hand, a rising support of scholars for the realist paradigm to be the one that best describes the (latest) developments in the field. Hence, concepts like "interest", "power", "hegemony", "conflict" or "(military) force" are more and more present.

If we attempt to corelate these concepts with the case of Türkiye as an actor of the international community, we can explain its acts and measures as an ambition to become or re-become a regional power, driven by a strong *feeling* of nationalism supporting the idea that Türkiye is "a Türkiye *of Turks* and *for Turks*".

In this manner, lately, Türkiye is more and more placed in the realist paradigm – "Türkiye, often seen as a pivotal player at the intersection of continents, is increasingly asserting itself as a regional power while straddling its traditional alliances and emerging ambitions" (Landry, 2024).

Some of the key concepts in the realist theory of international relations are: “power”, “national interest”, “competition”, “self-interest”, “security” etc. Starting from those, we can understand that according to this paradigm, states’ self-interests are primary to other aspects and “each state is always seeking to increase its wealth, power, and influence” (Biscontin).

Therefore, placing Türkiye in the realist paradigm is a defining step for the entire regional and international display as power and influence become more and more important for the existence of state entities, which are at *risk* because of the rise of numerous non-state actors, conflicts, and have to assure their own security.

Even though the realist theory is important in explaining (Ottoman) Turkish expansionism, today’s regional ambitions etc., our approach on analysing impact of Christians on Turks’ profile can be better understood by appealing to social-constructivism, which preaches that identities are *constructed* rather than given by nature (Wendt, 1999: 1).

Moreover, according to constructivists, there is a society not only within states, but also between states – explaining the importance of interaction between actors as crucial in shaping their existence by means of “*shared ideas*”, formed from *experience* (Mead, 1934: 2-5).

Therefore, ideas and implicitly, perceptions are crucial for determining how alterity contributes to the construction of self – in other words, how different actors perceive each other and implicitly, how they perceive themselves, for self-perception is modelled by others’ perceptions on them and contributes to the construction of the “looking-glass self” (Griffin, 2012, pp. 58-59) i.e. the way in which people imagine they look to others.

Literature in the field presents significant presence of Christians in the history of Turks, but in very many cases, significant literature is focused on the impact of Turks on Christians, given their expansionist policy in the Ottoman period and focusing on conflicts between Christians and Muslims in history. To provide a concrete case, we can appeal to Paul Wittek’s *Ghazi Thesis*, explaining that “the (Ottoman) Turkish military elite were fighting in the name of religion, at the very basis against the Byzantines, the Christian alterity” (Cosma, Ottoman Inheritance in the Republic of Türkiye. Impact on the Interactions with the West, 2025: 217).

Therefore, we find our proposed paper significant for the field of international relations and able to bring relevant contribution.

## **1.2. Concept Analysis**

Etymologically, Christianity comes from Christ, referring to the figure of the Son of God. The word Christ originates from Greek (Christos), a noun which is derivate from the verb *chrío*, literally meaning “to anoint”. Therefore,

Christos is the anointed, and Christians are His followers. We can, thence, state that the creed behind faith is the predominance of the idea of anointment (blessing). This has a dual character: the chosen God (the divine) and the chosen people (the earthly).

“Muslim” comes from the “*s-l-m*” root, meaning peace and submission. “*Aslama*” is the verb standing for “*to submit*”, therefore Muslims are *the ones who submit* (to God).

Commonalities between Christianity and Islam can be deduced in general terms by exploring their names, for “name” represents “identity”, “reputation” i.e. a symbol of self. In both cases, there is a similar interaction between God and the people, between the divine and the earthly.

In Christianity, God (the son of God and God, implicitly) sacrifices for the people (generally representing the earthly element), while in Islam, the people sacrifice (i.e. submit) for and to God.

Our case study takes the shape of a SWOT analysis, where we shall analyse some relevant aspects in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The aspects to be tackled represent measures, policies of the Turkish state regarding the relation with Christian minority and cover different profiles: the internal profile (strengths and weaknesses) – more specifically, the register of the action inside the state – and the external profile (opportunities and threats) – regarding aspects that reflect into the foreign spectrum, outside the borders of the country. This analysis is not exhaustive, representing a compression of some of the most relevant aspects regarding the research theme.

## **2. Methodology: Objectives. Research Question**

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the main interaction between Christianity and Islam in Türkiye, following the historical path. In other words, we aim to describe the most relevant moments of interaction and the way in which these shape today’s profile of the country.

Our methodology is qualitative, more specifically a historical-interpretative analysis of the historical development of the ideological and cultural interactions between Islam and Christianity in the region of Anatolia. Our case study is focused on today’s Türkiye, representing a strategic analysis by means of a SWOT analysis: a descriptive-evaluative perspective aiming to tackle the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats resulting from the interactions between Christianity and Islam in Türkiye – the way in which the actual framework looks like.

Our research question is: “What are the most relevant aspects that could be framed into <<strengths>>, <<weaknesses>>, <<opportunities>>”

and <<threats>> regarding the interaction and rapports between (Muslim) Turks and Christians?"

### **3. Early Encounters and Historical Developments**

#### **3.1. Coercive Encounters**

Given the tribal existence of early Turkic people, they have always encountered other peoples whom they had to resist (i.e. fight against) for the perpetuation of the pre-state and then state apparatus. One of the most relevant encounters with Christians was the Battle of Manzikert – between Seljuk Turks and the Byzantines (Mehmed, 1976: 76-83). This moment is relevant for the rapports between the two, given that Seljuks' victory against the Christians meant access for Turks in deeper Anatolia, conquering Caesarea. Ideologically, for the Turkish collective mind, that very moment set a precedent for their future and eventual actions towards Christians.

##### *3.1.1. Ideological and Military Interactions*

Afterwards, following the establishment of the Ottoman State, the fall of Constantinople represented another stalemate in the interaction with Christians, shaped under the form of conflict – both military and ideological – culminating with the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, under Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Mehmet II) (Clot, 1990, p. 45). After 1453, Fatih Sultan Mehmet “allowed the election of a new patriarch as the head of the entire Christian millet, with the right to administer, tax and exercise justice over all the Christians of the Ottoman Empire” (Meyendorff, 2025). As a continuous environment of interaction, the Ottoman state took advantage of the rather numerous presence of Christians and starting the XIVth century, the *Yeniçeri reform* takes place in the Ottoman military system, regarding the recruitment of Christian young males to serve the Ottoman state. (Mehmed, 1976: 137-138). *Yeniçeri* means “*the new army*” – symbolically, the new element is represented by the Christian element, being the first time in the Ottoman history when Christians were recruited to serve the Ottoman army. One of the most relevant aspects is that Christians who had already learnt Turkish or had already been circumcised were not accepted (Mehmed, 1976: 138-139).

After the recruitment, the young Christian males were given to Ottoman Turkish families, converted to Islam and socialised within Turkish families – all these prior to their military service (Stone, 2021: 41). This acculturation process meant the construction of new identities for the Christian males – giving up their old ones so that no other ties would impede them from being loyal to the *Bâb-ı Âli* (Sublime Porte) and ensuring “strict discipline and prevalent order” (The Force that Forged an Empire: Janissary Corps and their Role in Ottoman).

### 3.1.2. Social Encounters

Not only militarily, but also socially, Christians were involved in the governance of the Ottoman Porte. One of the most relevant elements in this sense is that many of the *hatun*'s<sup>2</sup> in the Ottoman harem were Christians. Given that Muslim women were free (therefore could not have been treated as slaves in the harem), Christian women were brought to the *saray* (palace) in the Ottoman harem were Christians. Given that Muslim women were free (therefore could not have been treated as slaves in the harem), Christian women were brought to the *saray* (palace). Even if they were later on converted to Islam and given Ottoman names, the Christian influence was still present. Therefore, numerous descendants of the Ottoman sultans were, actually, of Christian origins (Peirce, 1993: 17).

### 3.2. Significance of These Encounters

All these cases indicate that even though through conversion to Islam and Ottoman Turkish education, Turks have attempted to give Christians new identities, the Christian cultural baggage was still present there in the "background".

Therefore, what we can deduce is that numerous encounters with Christians were not necessarily against Christians, but rather in favour of Turks – i.e. meant to preserve their continuity as a people. Nevertheless, Turks' efforts to *turkify* Christians meant interacting with Christians, i.e. subconsciously borrowing certain aspects and being influenced by the Christian culture to some extent – under the premise that no interaction is possible in the absence of an exchange.

What we can see is that in numerous relevant cases throughout history, Turks' interactions with Christians were meant to turn Christian into "artificial" Turks, or, in other words, to *turkify* and islamise them. These practices were built on a form of early Turkish nationalism and prevalence, even if paradoxically, the Ottoman state was multinational, multi-confessional and minorities were tolerated. This form of ideology was strongly based on Islam, where foreigners (like *yeniçeri*, women in harem etc.) were converted and given new names i.e. new identities. Therefore, this means that Islam represented a great part of the Turkish identity throughout their history. We can, therefore, state that Christianity – through its Christian minority in the Turkish (Ottoman) state represented a solid part of its *aspect*, both politically and socially.

A complete upset was brought by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who turned secularism into one of the new state's support pillars, in the process of

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<sup>2</sup> Old Turkish term used for concubines in the Ottoman harem

constructing a new collective identity, where faith was no longer placed at the foundation of the state, but rather at the foundation of each individual.

In the newly founded Turkish Republic, Christians were considered “recognised groups” and given rights, under Article 38 of Treaty of Lausanne (1923): “All the people of Türkiye shall have the right to freely practise any religion that does not intervene with public order. Non-Muslim minorities will have freedom of movement and migration (...)” (Lozan Barış Antlaşması Tam Metni, n.d.).

## **4. Case Study. SWOT Analysis**

### **4.1. Strengths (internal)**

Strengths are considered internally – in other words, we refer to the aspects that tighten the interaction between Islam and Christianity in the internal spectrum.

One of the most important characteristics of the Ottoman governance regarding the matter of minorities was the millet system, under which the different minority groups were placed (Ortaylı, 2019: 23). Coming from Arabic, the term “millet” means “community” or “religion” and it represents the system in which minority communities were allowed by the Ottoman rulers to govern themselves (self-governing), given its multinational and multi-confessional profile. (Ortaylı, 2019). Moreover, it is to be noted that before the 16th century, non-Muslims were more numerous than Muslims in the Ottoman Empire (Howard, 2021: 138).

This represents a strength due to the fact that it has had benefits for both Ottomans and the Christian minority: on one hand, the Christian minority was given the right to self-govern, on the other hand, the Ottoman state governance was assured and conflicts starting from minority issues were avoided.

Even though, paradoxically, the millet system does not tighten, but rather appears to loosen interaction between Muslims and Christians – in other words, create distance between the two – it was really an effective measure in order to avoid coercive interactions. Moreover, Christians were considered dhimmi or muahid under the millet system. The word “dhimmi” comes from the Arabic “dhimma”, meaning “protection” or “custody” and “muahid” represents a “covenant”; in other words, Christians were “protected people” under the Ottoman Islamic rule (Al-Qattan, 1999) and considered “people of the Book”.

### **4.2. Weaknesses (internal)**

One of the most important aspects to be mentioned in terms of weaknesses lies at the matter of subconscious or unobservable: i.e. the matter of perception. Therefore, it is not sufficient to mention that there have

been numerous conflictual interactions between Turks and Christians, but rather we attempt to analyse what is there at the foundation of those coercive decisions. If decisions and actions are guided by thought (or, in other words, if thought is primary to action), then we admit that Turks' several attempts to fight against Christians (must) have been guided by a negative perception attributed to Christians.

This negative frame or lens through which Turks perceived Christians is related to the idea of alterity – Christians being associated the West, intruders (otherness) in the way of Turks' accomplishing their fate. Christians were always there, on the lands Turks wanted for themselves. Therefore, the matter of conflict is not primarily rooted in the differences of religions or cultures, but rather in framing of perceptions.

To exemplify, we can provide the example of Hagia Sophia, which Ottomans turned into a mosque after the fall of Constantinople. In several sources of hadith<sup>3</sup>, there is a prophecy related to the fall of Constantinople under Muslims: “*Konstantiniyye mutlaka fethedilecektir. Onu fetheden komutan ne güzel komutan, fetheden ordu ne güzel ordudur*” (İstanbul'un Fethinin 572.Yılı Kutlu Olsun...!), meaning “It is certain that Constantinople will be conquered. What a great commander, the commander who conquers it; what a great army, the army which conquers it.” Turks have, therefore, fought for the ultimate ideal and prophecy, assuming the role of its fulfillers.

### 4.3. Opportunities (external)

The field of opportunities in this case is related to the external dimension i.e. expanding over the boundaries of the Turkish state. We shall consider the following aspects as “opportunities” because by means of Turkish public diplomacy, they represent and support dialogue between communities. One of the most relevant parts of the national brand of Türkiye is the “Turkish hospitality”. It is described as a souvenir from the tribal and migratory lifestyle and described in Turkish under the term of “*konukseverlik*”, literally meaning “love of guests”: “*konuk gelince kut gelir*”, meaning “a guest coming to a house brings good fortune” (Tezcan, 2000: 202) and appears in the Turkish folklore as the essential part of a household: “*misafiri gelmeyen kara evler yıkılsa daha iyi*” (Tezcan, 2000: 202), meaning: “the dark houses having no guests would better be demolished” – therefore, a household which has no guests has no purpose. This is strongly related to the Islamic teachings, where guests symbolise bereket (prosperity) for whoever accepts them.

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<sup>3</sup> Sayings, actions, teachings of Prophet Muhammad, considered source of law in Islam, after the Qur'an.

Following this path, Turks' economy is massively based on the idea that everyone is welcome and promoting numerous types of touristic spots included in the brand "Go Türkiye", the official travel guide of the country.

For Türkiye, this represents a benefit, both literally and metaphorically: economically, the country's Christian heritage sites welcome "over 1.5 million visitors from all over the world every year" (The intersection point of faith); politically and diplomatically, the country's image towards the international community (international organisations and other state actors) is emerged by showing interest in investing, developing and promoting Christian heritage sites.

These aspects are strongly related to the rules imposed by the European Union to candidate countries, taking into consideration that Türkiye is the state with the longest candidature to the European Union, having a vast history of encounters with the organisation. Following the statement that "a united Europe is necessarily a <<union of minorities>>" (Tsilevich, 2010), where "diversity is not only ethno-religious, it is also cultural and mental" (Brie, 2011).

Therefore, protection of minorities is a very important criterion composing the Copenhagen Criteria (1993). In the case of Türkiye, giving more rights to minorities (here, Christians) represents a central aspect, because even though some prohibitions have been lifted, "some cultural rights are still considerably restricted" (Hochleitner). Therefore, the initiatives to promote cultural heritage sites might be understood as an opportunity for Türkiye to develop a tight rapport with (its) Christian minority.

#### **4.4. Threats (external)**

Threats represent situations or events, political measures which lead to discrepancies between Islam and Christianity.

Many of the relevant aspects presented as "threats" have their origins in a matter of perceptions and cognitive distortions. Even though they might affect other groups, they are actually primarily related to Turks' diachronic self-perception. More precisely, Turks perceived the coming of Atatürk with all the reforms as alterity, as foreign to their authentic self, therefore developed an "adaptive response" under the form of Neo-Ottomanism and faith-based diplomacy (Cosma, Faith-based Diplomacy and Neo-Ottomanism, 2025: 171).

In other words, the Neo-Ottomanist doctrine and faith-based diplomacy practices are "nothing else but an attempt to solve and end an identity crisis" (Cosma, Faith-based Diplomacy and Neo-Ottomanism, 2025: 171).

The perception of Christians as alterity (otherness) and representatives of the West, as well as Turkish nationalism and the Neo-Ottomanist practices led to some changes in the former Kemalist architecture of the country: in 2020 Hagia Sophia was reopened as a mosque, ending the period in which it was a neutral entity (museum) since 1934, under the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Moreover, it is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site, for it was built 1500 years ago (Hagia Sophia: Turkey turns iconic Istanbul museum into mosque, 2020). Since the motif of the circle is very present in the Turkish cultural identity, we can analyse this measure as a form of going back to roots, fulfilling the prophecies. In the Islamic cult, there is the hadith regarding the conquest of Constantinople, when Prophet Muhammad prophesied its fall and Ottoman Turks have fulfilled it in 1453. Symbolically, the shift from museum to mosque represents a comeback to the sacred ideal. It signifies the comeback to a traditional identity, considered “forgotten” by the majority of Turks, possibly inspired subconsciously by the necessity to return to the *Deus Otiosus* whom people forgot, according to Prophet Muhammad – representing the core idea in Islam.

Therefore, these practices lead to a discrepancy in the equilibrium Mustafa Kemal attempted to maintain between the two entities by turning Hagia Sophia into a museum – at the moment, the balance is rather inclined, for the framing or the messages sent are related to an act of re-conquering of Constantinople, an actualised superiority of Islam towards Christianity (which has been latent).

## 5. Conclusions

Interactions with Christians are due to the mosaic of the Anatolian region in terms of cultures and peoples. There have been numerous notable types of interactions between Turks and Christians, from which we have mentioned the coercive but also the cooperative ones, or the ones in which the two have merged. Therefore, even though Christians have been perceived as intruders, alterity or inferior whom Turks wanted to defy, there have been numerous cases in which Christians contributed to the governance of the Turkish state in its history.

Regardless of Turks' intentions to Turkify or Islamise Christians, they have been present in Turks' history as a strong and different ideological element. The question which occurs is whether the expansionism of (Ottoman) Turks would have been possible in their absence, since if they had perceived Christians as familiar (rather than intruders or alterity), they would probably not have fought them or conquered them. In other words, Christians symbolise a necessary bad or alterity for their perpetuation and expansion as a people.

Christians' contribution is, to some extent, paradoxical: the fact that they (Christians) have been there was of use to Turks' accomplishing their holy calling to conquer and expand in the name of religion.

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the main interaction between Christianity and Islam in Türkiye, following the historical path. In other words, we aim to describe the most relevant moments of interaction and the way in which these shape today's profile of the country.

Our *objective* to analyse the most relevant aspects in the interaction between the two, following the historical path showed (us) that Christianity (and, implicitly, Christians) have been very present in Turks' history, contributing directly and indirectly to the state governance and shaping today's profile. In other words, the country's current profile is, to some extent, the result of these encounters and their developments. We can state the *results* of our analysis by appealing to our proposed *research question* ("What are the most relevant aspects that could be framed into <<strengths>>, <<weaknesses>>, <<opportunities>> and <<threats>> regarding the interaction and rapports between (Muslim) Turks and Christians?"), we can state that some of the most relevant aspects which could be framed into "strengths" are related to the inheritance of the multinational and multi-confessional profile of the Ottoman state, where the millet system permitted / represented a way of constructing non-coercive bonds between Christians and Turks; "weaknesses" are framed by the matter of perception, representing, thence, one of the aspects which are most difficult to be altered: as Turks formed their perception of Christians as alterity, otherness etc. due to dogmatic/ideological?? Differences, perceptions set limits in interactions.

In terms of "opportunities", Türkiye's cultural and public diplomacy represents a useful tool in enhancing dialogue with Christian communities not only within Türkiye, but also from around the world by promoting its Christian cultural heritage through tourism and national branding. Nevertheless, there are also "threats", such as doctrinal adjustments of Atatürk's secular model of governance, by adding elements of religion closer to the state apparatus.

When it comes to limits, we can state that this analysis is not an exhaustive one; in other words, there are plenty of moments of interactions between the two that have not been presented in this paper.

We can further state some challenges of possible future research, mainly related to rapid developments in the field of international relations, mainly due to the strategic positioning of Türkiye and its will to become / re-become a regional actor.

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