

*RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND THE CHURCH  
IN MOUNTAINOUS KARABAGH 1988-1995*

When limitations on religious freedom were lifted, starting with perestroika in the mid-1980s, most countries that were under the influence of the Soviet empire saw a resurgence of religious faith and revival.

Among the Armenians, the sudden return to religion and the subsequent ritual catharsis sought by the people caught the established Church in Armenia by surprise. The late Catholicos Vazken I of All Armenians admitted, "We never anticipated that the freedom of religion that was granted would create such a situation for which we were certainly not prepared".<sup>1</sup> The Church was ill prepared to deal with this phenomenon. It did not have the resources, the personnel, or the leadership to respond to the growing interest of people in religion. As in the case of other Churches in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics, the Armenian Church "was also faced with the problem related to the anti-religious socialisation and ignorance of the flock, and with accusations of collaboration with the communist regime."<sup>2</sup> Starting in 1988, the earthquake in Armenia, the struggle for independence, the war in Karabagh, and the blockade of both Armenia and Karabagh have all shaped the public and private lives of Armenians. Parallel to the political, economic and social factors of these events, a religious perspective has been added to Armenian public discourse.

This article will examine the role of the Armenian Church and clergy in Karabagh and the language of religious discourse in the context of the war. Karabagh, like Armenia, besides its rich cultural heritage, has a long religious history. For centuries, it has been a region with vibrant religious institutions, hundreds of churches, monasteries and church schools.

*The historic roots of the Church*

In the fourth century, soon after Armenia's conversion to Christianity,<sup>3</sup> the Kingdom of Albania (not to be confused with Albania in the Balkans), which

---

1 - Hratch TCHILINGIRIAN, "The Price of Freedom. A conversation with His Holiness Catholicos Vazken I," *Window Quarterly* ["Church-lovers who minister: the Brotherhood of the Armenian Apostolic Church"] (San Jose, CA) 3, 1 (1992), p. 7.

2 - Eileen BARKER "The National Church and Other Religions," *The ASEN Bulletin*, 11 (Summer 1996), 25; (paper presented at the Sixth Annual ASEN Conference on *Nationalism and Religion* (22 March 1996, London School of Economics).

3 - 301 A.D. has been traditionally accepted to be the date of conversion. However, recent studies by H. Manadian, G. Garitte, and B. Ananian have shown that 314 was the actual date; see Hratch TCHILINGIRIAN, *A Brief Historical and Theological Introduction to the Armenian Church* (Montreal, 3rd impression 1995), pp. 1-4.

included the provinces of Artsakh (the future Karabagh) and Utik, converted to Christianity through the efforts of Gregory the Illuminator, the evangeliser of Armenia. Grigoris, the grandson of Gregory, was appointed the head of the Albanian Church around c. 330. He was martyred in 338 while evangelising in the north-east region of the country near Derbend (currently Daghestan). His body was brought to Artsakh and buried in a church in Amaras (Martuni region). In 489, King Vachakan the Pious renovated the complex and built a special chapel dedicated to Grigoris.<sup>4</sup> Until today, the monastery of Amaras is one of the most important shrines in Karabagh and is considered a holy site for pilgrims. Karabaghtzians are also proud of the fact that Mesrob Mashtots (c. 355-439), the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, established the first Armenian school in Amaras.<sup>5</sup>

The Albanian Church, having been established by the Armenian missionaries, pledged canonical allegiance to the Armenian Church. At the wake of the controversy over the 'dyophysite' Christology of the Council of Chalcedon, the two churches, along with the Iberian Church, convened the Council of Dvin in the sixth century and rejected the decision of Chalcedon.

In 552, the seat of the head of the Albanian Church was moved from Derbend to Partav and an Albanian Catholicosate was established. The patriarch of the Albanian Church was given the title "Catholicos of Aghuank" (Artsakh and Utik) and received his ordination and canonical authority from the Catholicos of Armenia.<sup>6</sup>

From the 11th to the 13th century, more than forty monasteries and major religious centres were built in Karabagh through the patronage and efforts of the "Armenian princes of Artsakh". In time these monasteries became, as one historian bishop put it,

chimneys of enlightenment and a warm hearth of Christianity, incense-full houses of worship, protectors of faith, hope and love, defenders of nationality, language, literature, and holy places that unwaveringly defended the unique and orthodox doctrines of the Armenian Church.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most famous clans to have contributed to the revival of the Church and piety in Artsakh is the Hassan Jalal princely family who, besides building the famous monastery of Gandzasar, have given several Catholicos and bishops for the service of the church in Karabagh. The epitaph of Metropolitan Baghdassar, the last clergyman in the Jalal clan, who is buried in the courtyard of the monastery of Gandzasar, reads: "This is the tombstone of Metropolitan Baghdassar, an Armenian

---

4 - Shahen MKERTCHIAN, *Historical and Architectural Monuments of Mountainous Karabagh* (second edition), Yerevan, 1985, pp. 140-142 (in Armenian).

5 - LEO, *Collected Works* Vol. 2, Yerevan, 1947, p. 152 (in Armenian).

6 - Bagrat ULUBABIAN, *Studies in the History of the Eastern Provinces of Armenia, 5th-7th Centuries*, Yerevan, 1981, pp. 201-204 (in Armenian).

7 - Bp. Makar BARKHUDARIANTS, *History of the Albanians* Vol. 1, Vagharshapat, 1902, pp. 193-195 (in Armenian).

Albanian, from the family of Jalal the great Prince of the land of Artsakh, dated 3 July 1854". Prince Hassan Jalal was also buried in the same monastery in 1261.

Starting in the 15th century, the monastery of Gandzasar became the seat of the native Catholicos of the Albanian Church. The existence of a separate Catholicosate in Karabagh, with its own autonomous religious institutions, attests to the importance of the region as a religious centre.

In the 19th century, the status of the native Catholicosate was drastically reduced. When tsarist Russia liberated Karabagh from Persian domination, Catholicos Sarkis of Karabagh, upon his return from exile, was demoted to the rank of Metropolitan by a decision of the imperial authorities in 1815. Metropolitan Sarkis headed the See until his death in 1828. After his death, upon the request of the Meliks (princes), Catholicos Yeprem of Etchmiadzin, in 1830, ordained Baghdassar, a nephew of Sarkis, Primate of the Diocese of Karabagh. He was ordained in the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Catholicosate of Karabagh was reduced, first to a Metropolitan seat and then to a diocese of the Armenian Church.

Between 1820 and 1930, Karabagh was a hub of vibrant religious and cultural life. The Diocese of Karabagh and Swiss missionaries—Basel Evangelical Association—operated ten schools in Shushi alone<sup>9</sup> and founded the first printing press in the region in 1828. Church and privately owned printing houses published over 150 titles on biblical, theological, philosophical, scientific and literary subjects. More than a dozen newspapers and journals were also published in Shushi, such as ethnographer Yervant Lalayan's *Ethnographic Journal* (the first volume). A remnant of this religious-cultural renaissance is the famous Cathedral of Our Saviour (1868-1887) in the Kazanchetsots neighborhood of Shushi.<sup>10</sup>

Prominent scholars and teachers taught at the diocesan school in Shushi, among them, the well-known monk-teacher Hovsep Artsakhetsi. He was the first Armenian philosopher on Synthetic logic after the German school of philosophers, and wrote on logic and epistemology. His first work was *First element of Philosophy: Logic* published in 1840.

Interestingly, there were also women monastics and deaconesses in Shushi, a rare phenomenon in the Armenian Church, who were involved with social and pastoral work under the aegis of the Diocese.<sup>11</sup>

8 - M. TER DANIELIAN, "Gantzasar," *Etchmiadzin* monthly 5, 3-4 (1948), pp. 62-67 (in Armenian).

9 - See, for example, the report of the Diocese of Karabagh about the elementary school in Shushi presented to the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin. It gives statistics on the student body, teachers and committees, as well as a financial report for the academic year. *Ararat* monthly 4, 5 (September 1871), pp. 295-301.

10 - Yervant LALAYAN, *Collected Works* Vol. 2, Yerevan, 1988 (in Armenian); R. H. TER GASBARIAN, *The City of Shushi*, Yerevan, Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1993 (in Armenian).

11 - One of the nuns was Deaconess Varvara Bahatirian (*Ararat* monthly December 31, 1887, p. 562). For a general discussion on the subject, see Fr Abel OGILUKIAN, *The Deaconess in the Armenian Church*, New Rochelle, 1994.

### *The Church in the early Soviet period*

In 1918, the Bolshevik Revolution gained force in the Transcaucasus, the Russian army disintegrated, and the Ottoman Turkish army marched over the region, threatening the population of the region. Faced with the possibility of a complete Turkish take-over, the representatives of the Georgians, Azeris, and Armenians formed a Transcaucasian Federation, as a preventive measure. Within a few months, by May 1918, the Federation had failed; Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia proclaimed independence and became new republics. However, as national administrative boundaries were not clear, the newly-established states became embroiled in a series of territorial conflicts, “the most protracted and crucial of which centred on Mountainous Karabagh”.<sup>12</sup>

Having been left to face their own uncertain future, Karabaghtzis formed the First Assembly of Karabagh Armenians and elected a People’s Government in August 1918.

In February 1919, the Assembly dispatched Bishop Vahan of Shushi and Hrant Bagaturian, a member of the Executive Council, to Tiflis to present the case of Karabagh Armenians—the issue of their security and freedom—directly to the representative of Great Britain, General Thomson. However, not only their concerns were not addressed, within six months Karabaghtzis were forced to sign an agreement with Azerbaijan putting Karabagh under the jurisdiction of the latter provisionally until the final outcome of the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>13</sup> This also signaled the beginning of the end for the Armenian Church in Karabagh.

In 1923, when under Soviet rule Mountainous Karabagh became an Autonomous Oblast, the Armenian Church was the first national institution to face monumental obstacles vis-à-vis the growing Soviet pressure on the church.

A 85-year-old man recounted how his village ‘operative’ dealt with the church:

When the Communists came, they brought a ‘Gorbachev’<sup>14</sup> to our village, just like the one who destroyed Russia. This Gorbachev destroyed our village. When that *seriga* [bastard] died, the entire village got some rest.

I have visited many villages and regions in Karabagh and have seen how the church buildings are still standing, but this *seriga* destroyed our village church. In many villages they didn’t bother with the priests, but in our village, that *seriga* was so cruel that our *Terter*

12 - Richard HOVANNISIAN, “Armeno-Azerbaijani Conflict Over Mountainous Karabagh 1918-1919,” *Armenian Review* 24, 2 (1971), p. 4.

13 - Bagrat ULUBABIAN, *The Artsakhian Struggle*. Yerevan, 1994, pp. 67-70 (in Armenian).

14 - Throughout the interview, the old man referred to Communists as “Gorbachev”. For him Gorbachev embodied all the ills and failures of the Communist regime. I had the feeling also that he was using Gorbachev as an image and personality that I, as a foreigner, would be most familiar with as the man who “destroyed Russia”.

[priest] committed suicide by drinking poison. Our priest, Fr. Ohannes, realized that he is going to be sent to Siberia and he thought it was better to drink poison and die. That's how our priest died in 1923 or 1924.<sup>15</sup>

Another 78-year old man described what happened to the churches in their village:

We had two churches in our village, I was anointed and christened in the church. But over the years, because of the policies of the *seriga* government, both churches were turned into ruins. (...)

This was between 1928 and 1932. I remember while studying in the seventh grade, people from the top [leadership] came to our school to establish an atheistic *organizatzia*. This seemed very unpleasant to me. Up to that point, I had wanted to become a *komsomol* [youth member of the Communist Party], in fact I went to their meetings and used to like them. But then they started to deport the saints [priests], started to destroy the churches, the tombstones (...) Those ungodly, useless people... that Soviet system... these were cursed policies.

And when asked how the villagers reacted to this policy, he said:

In their hearts, people did not accept this, but the Communists at the top ordered [it]. ... people continued to believe in God, in the church. Yea... they had faith and continue until today.<sup>16</sup>

In 1924, the Armenian prelate of Baku, Bishop Mateos, in a letter dated November 3, addressed to the Supreme Religious Council in Etchmiadzin, reports that despite the "state's general decree on freedom of conscience and religious services," local communist leaders are taking violent and extreme measures against the priests and the church. The people and the priests, "ignorantly thinking that these are state laws are not daring to complain to the higher authorities... They have neither protection nor chief-prelate, they are left in doubt." At the end of the letter, Bishop Mateos urges the Supreme Religious Council to send a prelate to Karabagh without delay and, in the meantime, asks them to write formally to the central authorities in Karabagh "to bring to their attention the illegal acts of the regional officials".<sup>17</sup>

In response to the recommendation of the prelate in Baku and in view of the growing persecution of the church in Karabagh, in 1925 the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin appointed Archimandrite Vertanes (later Bishop) as the prelate of the Church in Karabagh and dispatched him to the region to oversee the administration of the Church. Since the city of Shushi was out of bounds—the Armenian neighbourhoods had been burnt down and the Diocesan headquarters closed—the new prelate chose the monastery of Gandzasar as his diocesan centre.

---

15 - Interview K4b and K4c: 503-513. Note: throughout this article, the "K" and number on the left of the colon indicate the reference given to the taped-interviews, the numbers on the right of the colon refer to the line numbers in the transcript of the interview.

16 - Interview K3: 69-81.

17 - *Documents on the History of the Armenian Church: 1921-1938*, compiled by Santro BEHBUTIAN, Yerevan, Department of State Archives, Republic of Armenia, 1994, pp. 55-56 (in Armenian).

The new prelate visited the churches and monasteries in Karabagh and sent several reports to Etchmiadzin about the worsening conditions of the Church and the pressure on his own activities.<sup>18</sup> His activities were closely monitored by the Commissar for Internal Affairs of Mountainous Karabagh.<sup>19</sup>

In 1929, the now Bishop Vertanes, in a letter to the Catholicos, Kevork V (1911-1930) in Etchmiadzin, laments the situation of the Church in Karabagh. "Every-day dozens of churches and monasteries are being closed, clergymen are being imprisoned and exiled. (...) Please help us in this dire situation (...) all we are left with is 112 functioning churches, 18 monasteries, and 276 priests".<sup>20</sup> Meantime, the efforts of Etchmiadzin to negotiate with the authorities over the plight of the church in Karabagh did not yield any results. On February 7, 1930, Bishop Vertanes was arrested and jailed. Having spent almost two years in prison, he was released on January 1, 1932, as "the Supreme Court did not find [him] guilty of any crime". Upon his release, he returned to Etchmiadzin "to recuperate" and was never allowed return to Karabagh.<sup>21</sup> Thus ended the activities and formal existence of the Armenian Church in Karabagh.

There were 250-300 priests serving in Karabagh and its regions from the late 19th to the early 20th century.<sup>22</sup> Today there are only six clergymen in Karabagh, including the prelate, Bishop Barkev Martirossian. For more than fifty years, there were no functioning churches or clergymen in Karabagh.

### *The return of the Church to Karabagh*

In March 1988, in an effort to pacify the popular uprising and demonstrations in Yerevan and Stepanakert, which had been held during the previous month, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a decree on

18 - *Documents (op. cit.)*, pp. 171-172, 241-242.

19 - In a March 16, 1927 report to the Commissar, Vertanes writes: "In response to your verbal request on March 8, I herewith have the honour to give you the details of our activities as Prelate of Karabagh (...). Being a disciple of the High Priest Jesus, the preacher of human equality, brotherhood and harmony and a servant of His principles, our sermons have been and shall be purely religious in content, so that, remaining loyal to the Church and the Christian commandments of love, brotherhood, harmony, the faithful may strive and work, for, as the apostle Paul says, 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat' [2 Thess. 3:10]" (*Documents (op. cit.)*, p. 101).

20 - *Etchmiadzin Archives*, Chancellery of Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, file, Diocese of Karabagh., and *Documents (op. cit.)*, pp. 172, 242.

21 - *Documents (op. cit.)*, p. 242-243.

22 - While, to my knowledge, no formal statistics exist about the number of clergy in Karabagh and its regions, *Ararat* monthly (Vagharshapat) provides a valuable source of information. From 1871-1887, the December issues of *Ararat* list all the names of its subscribers, lay and clergy, with the names of their respective regions, towns and villages. Based on the calculations of the number of clergy subscribers between 1871 and 1887, the average number of priests in Karabagh is 277 in four major regions alone: Shushi 178, Noukhi 55, Gantsak 32, Norshen 12. (See *Ararat*, December issues of 1871, 1873, 1875, 1877, 1879, 1881, 1883, 1887). Started in May 1871, *Ararat* was the official organ of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin which covered "religious, historical, philological and moral" topics. In 1887, it had 1,287 clergy subscribers throughout the Russian empire (including Armenia, Karabagh region and the rest of the Caucasus).

social-economic developments in Nagorno Karabagh. This also created a climate for a cultural and religious revival in the region.

Prior to the formal opening of the church, a renewed interest in religion and the church was created by the visits of preachers belonging to the Church-loving Brotherhood of the Armenian Church (*Եղբայրակցութիւն*) who, starting in 1987, attracted a group of people who later “converted” and became “committed Christians”.<sup>23</sup> This coincided with the time at the beginning of the “national liberation movement”, when, secretly, protest signatures were being collected in Karabagh.

In early 1988, these new converts started to collect signatures secretly to have churches reopened in Karabagh. The signatures were presented to the authorities and a copy was given to the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin. One of the converts describes the conditions of the time: “The KGB was chasing us for doing this. They were threatening us and all sorts of things. But we didn’t pay much attention to it. We collected the signatures and went to see the Catholicos with a delegation from Karabagh”.<sup>24</sup>

This campaign of the “believers in Karabagh” provided Catholicos Vazken I with additional leverage with the authorities to reestablish the long-defunct Diocese. In November 1988, he appointed Barkev Martirossian as Prelate of Karabagh. However, prior to the announcement, he had sent a young native-born priest, Fr. Vertanes Aprahamian, to Karabagh with the returning delegation that had visited Etchmiadzin. Fr. Vertanes, (renamed after the last Bishop of Karabagh) was the first clergyman to visit the enclave in decades. He stayed with believers and “secretly baptised people in homes, because the OMON forces [Special Forces of the Soviet Interior Ministry] were spread throughout the regions and were chasing the youth who were active [in the ‘Karabagh Movement’] and arresting them.”<sup>25</sup> About seventy people were baptised, creating the core of workers who would later help in the reopening of the churches.

Soon after, the newly appointed Prelate, together with four priests, came to Karabagh to establish the Diocese. The first church was formally reopened on October 1, 1989 at the Monastery of Gandzasar, after six months of preparatory work and reconstruction. On that day, the Bishop declared in his sermon: “Today is the beginning of our victories.” The head of RMK<sup>26</sup> Radio and Television Broadcasting who was present at the opening and the inaugural Divine Liturgy described the significance of the event:

---

23 - One of those who converted in 1987 was a 24-year old student, who later became very active in Christian ministry. “I used to smoke hashish and be involved in a thousand and one strange things. When I accepted Jesus, I went to Yerevan and got baptized in the Armenian Church. At the time we didn’t have a church in Karabagh. God changed my life. Since that day I’ve had peace in my heart and until today I continue to walk with Jesus” (Interview K12: 81-86).

24 - Interview K12: 230-232.

25 - Interview K12: 247-249.

26 - Republic of Mountainous Karabagh.

[This] was the first Divine Liturgy in Gandzasar, celebrated for the first time in sixty years. (...) I remember there was a Russian reporter who was filming the event and I approached him and asked what was his impression of this event. He had captured our ethos, he said, 'A people whose faith is impossible to kill, murder, or destroy, is invincible. You are such people'. (...)

From the very beginning they were trying to take away not our land, but our faith. And they thought they were successful, because for sixty years there weren't any functioning churches in Karabagh. They had turned the churches into animal barns. This was part of the Communist propaganda and its atheistic ideology. All of us, including myself, were cut off from all that. It is now that every Saturday and Sunday—in any given church in Karabagh, even the ones that are not functional—people go there, not only to light candles or pray for the sake of praying, but go there as believers, even if they don't know what exactly that entails.<sup>27</sup>

The first task of the church leadership in Karabagh was to renovate churches and provide places of worship. Special attention was given to the opening of historically important monasteries, such as Amaras and Gandzasar.

Between 1989 and 1991, the clergy were involved in active evangelisation throughout Karabagh. Sunday Schools were established, teachers were trained to instruct the children and prepare them for baptism. Weekly lectures on religion and Christianity were presented by the Bishop at the Stepanakert Institute (later the University of Mountainous Karabagh) and other schools where several hundred students would gather to hear the lectures.

During the 1989-1990 academic year, a seminary was opened by the Diocese, with 12 students, but it closed in less than a year because of the war. Since all male citizens of Karabagh between the ages of 17 and 45 are required to serve in the army, all the students were conscripted. This has greatly affected the Church's recruitment efforts to secure priests to serve the growing needs of the Diocese. The Bishop was allowed to keep only three young deacons in his diocese by special permission of the RMK Defense Minister.

A significant project of the Diocese of Karabagh was the establishment in Yerevan in 1990 of the Gandzasar Theological Centre, which produced en masse literature and religious publications for both Karabagh and Armenia. Today the Centre employs more than forty scholars, theologians, experts and support personnel and is the publisher of the first *Theological Journal* in Armenia and Karabagh.

Within three years of its re-establishment, the Armenian Church had regained its legitimacy not only as religious institution, but also as a national institution that fought alongside the people of Karabagh. Freedom of religion, ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union, coincided with the struggle for liberation. The evangelistic efforts of the church were eclipsed by the national aspirations of the

---

27 - Interview K15: 256-281.



people and the mass mobilisation process for Karabagh's independence. The Church was one of the first national institutions that was "reclaimed" by the people, even by those who were unbelievers, as a historically significant source of their religious and national identity. The functioning of their "mountain-protecting monasteries" and churches provided hope for Karabaghtzis who were facing uncertainties in their struggle, while the prospect of war with Azerbaijan was increasing.

In the early days of the Karabagh Movement until the declaration of independence in 1991, the Church played a surrogate role as the advocate of the people and their rights, similar to the role of the churches in Poland and East Germany. In the absence of recognized political leadership, the Church became the unofficial representative of the people of Karabagh to the outside world.<sup>28</sup>

### *The role of the clergy*

The young and charismatic Bishop, Barkev Martirosian,<sup>29</sup> and his five priests, despite their small number, have established a theological context for the war and have rendered vital pastoral service to the people, especially the soldiers. The Bishop explains:

[The Azeris] are forcing us to go to war. They are forcing us to use our weapons. Their desire is to destroy Karabagh by force—to occupy our land by force. That is evil. This is the work of the evil one. This is very clear. When you are unable to stop the evil through prayer

---

28 - For example a January 5, 1992 letter of Bishop Barkev Martirosian sent to: "The Hierarchs of all Christian Churches, the UN General Secretary, the Heads of All States, All Charitable Organisations and Societies, and All People of Good Will" in which he appeals for intervention to stop the war. He writes, "It is not only the perpetrators of crime and evil who commit sin, but also those who stand by, seeing and knowing, and who do not condemn it or try to avert it". Catholicos Vazken I's cable-messages sent to the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Patriarch of Russia, the WCC and the Conference of European Churches, *Soviet Karabagh* May 4, 1991. See also Zori BALAYAN (*Hell and Heaven*, Yerevan, 1995, p. 498 [in Armenian]) about Bishop Barkev's visits to foreign embassies in Moscow and other international fora on behalf of Karabagh. For similar appeals by Azerbaijan's religious leader, Sheik-ul-Islam Allah-Shukur Pasha-Zadeh, to Islamic countries and his 1989 official visits to Turkey, Syria and Iran with Zia Bunyatov, a member of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, see *Spark* (Beirut) 1 January 1990.

29 - Bishop Barkev Martirosian, whose parents are from Chardakhlou, Karabagh, was born in Sumgait in 1954. At the age of six, his parents moved from Karabagh to Yerevan, where he received his primary education. In 1971, he graduated from Yerevan State University, majoring in Mathematics. As a graduate student, Martirosian studied at the Russian Literature and Foreign Language Institute, where in 1976, he submitted a thesis on Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita"—for which he was awarded a golden medal for the "Best Thesis in the Union". Upon completing his military service in the Soviet Army, he worked in Yerevan for two years and, in 1980, applied to study at the Seminary of Holy Etchmiadzin. Having completed his studies at the Seminary in 1984, Martirosian was sent by the Catholicos of the Armenian Church to study at the Leningrad Theological Academy. He studied there for two years and wrote a thesis on "Knowledge of God" both in Christianity and non-Christian religions and philosophies. Upon his return to Etchmiadzin, he served as assistant dean of the Seminary for a year and, in 1987, he was appointed Abbot of the Monastery of St. Hripsime by His Holiness Vazken I. He taught Systematic Theology at the Seminary until November 1988, when he was appointed Primate of the Diocese of Karabagh by the Catholicos. Currently, Bishop Martirosian resides in the historic city of Shushi where his diocesan headquarters are located.

and by words, and he is coming to devour your body, by raping and perpetrating immoral acts to your sister and mother, to your daughter and children, it is your duty to protect and safeguard their lives. (...) When you are defending [the innocent], it does not mean that you are killing [your enemy] and doing evil. That's your moral obligation. Secondly, when there is evil, evil has to be uprooted. (...) Morally, we are obligated to do this, all of us.<sup>30</sup>

This moral code provides the Karabaghtzis with a basis to deal with the inevitable immorality of the war. At the height of the fighting, 1991-1992, in the face of destitution, fear and isolation, the clergy would provide hope and spiritual strength: "We cannot rely on anybody in this war and struggle. There is God in Heaven and there is us, Karabaghtzis, here on earth. Whatever God's will is, it will happen".

Most often the role of the clergy in Karabagh is compared with the role of the clergy during the Battle of Vartanantz in the fifth century, that is, providing spiritual counsel, encouragement and offering prayers for the soldiers.

Many remember especially those times when the priests were with the soldiers during the fiercest and most crucial battles (for example in Martakert and Shushi). Scores of soldiers would come to the priests before heading to the battlefield to be baptised. One priest describes:

The soldiers used to come to the priests or the Bishop in large numbers, 30, 40, 70, 100 of them, get baptised and go back to the front. They wanted to have some holiness with them, they wanted to receive strength from God, they wanted to receive God's blessings. They wanted to fight with a Christian vocation.

The priest and the soldiers were together. Those days, those experiences created a bond between the church, the soldiers and the authorities, it was a unifying bond. It was like Vartanantz.<sup>31</sup>

There were instances, especially when churches were bombed or attacked, the priests were caught in the fire but continued to provide their pastoral care to the people and the soldiers. The priests' presence and witness in the battlefield, facing the same dangers and consequences with the soldiers, have accorded the priests the same status as those who are honored for defending the land.

One of the experiences of the pastor of the monastery of Gandzasar illustrates the level of involvement and the difficult role of the clergy during dangerous situations:

On January 20, the Turks [Azeris]<sup>32</sup> have a holiday, called 'Kara Janwar' [Black January], commemorating the massacres of the Turks by the Soviet Army. On that same date, January 20, 1993, the Turks launched a major attack on us. They attacked from the air our field hospital, which was also a military post. There were 150 soldiers there and a few medical support personnel. Eight soldiers were killed and 17 were wounded at once. In fact I was going into the hospital and out of the blue a man stopped me and said, 'Father, I want

30 - Hratch TCHILINGIRIAN, "Theology of War. A conversation with Bishop Barkev Mardirosian," *Window Quarterly* (San Jose, CA) 4, 1 (1994), p. 6.

31 - Interview K6: 278-290.

32 - Generally, in Karabagh Azeris are referred to as "Turks".

to tell you something' (...) right at that very moment, the missile hit the exact place where I would have been if it weren't for this man who stopped me on my way. I used to go there everyday and park my car at that exact place; that 30-second delay saved my life. I drove right into the rubble and started to rescue people who were buried under the ruins. We tried to rescue the wounded and sent them off to our field hospital 15km away.

There was a woman under the rubble (...) People were scared and fleeing, there was big commotion, screams and crying (...). The military plane appeared again. Everyone escaped for shelter. I didn't. I wanted to carry that woman out of the rubble. Her head was crushed under the rocks. The plane fired another missile (...) the pressure-wave of the explosion knocked me away 3-4 meters against the wall and a piece of shrapnel cut my ear. But I didn't feel the pain. I wasn't aware that I was wounded. But I felt an excruciating pain on my arm and shoulder (...) imagine being knocked against the wall in a 4-meter range. I got up and saw two soldiers running (...) another missile was fired (...) one of the soldiers was hit so badly that his lungs were hanging out, it was a horrific scene. Finally I was able to rescue that woman from under the rubble, but she was already dead. (...)

The plane fired another missile (...) it snatched a soldier's leg away and threw it up, hanging on a tree (...) that kid died. It cut off another one's head away leaving a headless body bleeding on the ground (...) the brother of that soldier was crying and running around like a mad man screaming, 'This is my brother's body'. Try to picture the whole scene (...). I cannot describe it to you with words. (...)

For a month I couldn't lift my arms or move my shoulders. Even in that state, I used to go and visit the guys in their posts, joke with them, encourage them (...) that everything would be fine. They would say, 'How could you speak about being fine when the Turks are right here near the village'. I would say, don't worry, it will be fine, they cannot take our village. Nowadays they tell me, 'Father, you were right, you said they cannot take Gandzasar and they couldn't'. I said to them, 'The Turk doesn't have a cross, the cross is ours. They cannot take our cross away. Gandzasar is our protector, they cannot touch her.' I used to tell them, 'Armenian rivers do not tolerate foreign bridges and Gandzasar would not bow before the Turks.' Gandzasar has never been in slavery in her entire life, throughout the centuries. She has never been occupied by foreign forces. This was proven again.

Thank God, now we are able to reconstruct and build, we are able to defend her, our Gandzasar. And if, God forbid, the possibility of attack lurks again, we are ready to fight and defend; defend our lands, not to take someone else's land, but defend what is ours.<sup>33</sup>

The Bishop and three other clergymen have recounted similar experiences of "life and death" situations. These experiences in turn have become part of the language of religious discourse and narrative used by the clergy.

### *The language of religious discourse*

In Karabagh, the language of religious discourse is quite different from that in Armenia. While in Armenia one barely hears about "miracles", in Karabagh "there are a great many miracles taking place".<sup>34</sup> The perception that God is "present" and

33 - Interview K11:201-259.

34 - For example there is a regular column in the official organ of the Diocese of Karabagh, *Khosk* [Word], called "Contemporary Miracles" that documents "miracles" taking place in Karabagh.

“visible” in Karabagh constitutes the basis of religious discourse. The war has a definite theological implication. The Bishop articulates this theology: “Our movement is holy and just. God has created us as Armenians and we have been baptised Christians and he has given us this land and we are obligated to preserve it in the best way we could”. This perception is accentuated by the use of symbolic religious language. Hence, there are no victims, but *martyrs* and death is considered a *sacrifice* for the welfare and “regeneration” of the people; *sinners* are defeated by the determination of *saints* who are willing to be killed for the greater “glory of God”. The soldiers “realise that in order to attain victory, they need great spiritual power. (...) They need God’s power”.<sup>35</sup>

In June 1995, during his first pontifical visit to Karabagh, Catholicos Karekin I reaffirmed this theology:

Blessed be those who sacrificed their lives so that our nation might live on. (...) Brave servicemen of Artsakh (...) prepare for our struggle, namely the defense of the homeland. We ask only one thing—that no one try to usurp our lands, the lands of Artsakh and Armenia, the sacred inheritance from our forefathers.

Karekin I stressed that the Armenian people faces an “invisible enemy”, that is “the temptation to be soft, to be weak and to retreat from our principles.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Religious discourse in Azerbaijan*

The Azerbaijanis have not called the war in Karabagh a *jihad*, but, nevertheless, their nationalism has primarily been anti-Armenian in content and Islamic in context.<sup>37</sup> For example, the party programme of several Azerbaijani political parties contain Islamic elements in their objectives.<sup>38</sup>

Concerning Karabagh, in October 1988, the head of shi’ite Islam in the Transcaucasus, Sheik-ul-Islam Allah-Shukur Pasha-Zadeh, strongly attacked the “enemies of Islam” and called for “mobilisation and vigilance of the faithful”.

This was not quite the call for holy war that the more militant Muslims wanted, but it was sufficiently strong to persuade many hesitating Azaris [*sic*] that the nation had to close its ranks and put itself on a war footing. Ayatollah Pasha-Zadeh’s move coincided with the start of the shi’ites’ mourning months of Muharram and Safar. On Tassu’a, the ninth day of Muharram that marks the start of the final cycle of martyrdom in the shi’ite calendar, a

35 - TCHILINGIRIAN, “Theology of War”, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-8.

36 - *The Armenian Reporter International*, June 10, 1995.

37 - Cf. Rob MARTIN, “Inter-ethnic Conflict in Soviet Azerbaijan,” *Thames Papers on Political Economy* (Thames Polytechnic, London) new series, No. 1, Autumn 1990, p. 8; Dilip HIRO, *Between Marx and Muhammad*, London, Harper Collins, 1994, pp. 85-86; William REESE, “The Role of the Religious Revival and Nationalism in Transcaucasia,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research*, December 5 (RL 535/88) (1988), pp. 1-3.

38 - For instance, the People’s Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) and the Islamic Progress Party; see “Program of the People’s Front of Azerbaijan”, English translation in *Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle* 8, 4 (1989), pp. 7-10, and HIRO, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

series of mass demonstrations took place in Baku, Kirov-Abad, Sumgait, Shemakhi, Sheki and Lenkoran. Tens of thousands of men, all dressed in black, followed by women wearing the Islamic *hijab* [the black shroud covering face and body] for the first time in decades, marched through the streets.

They carried flags and banners associated with the rite of mourning the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali, the third Imam of shi'ism. At intervals the crowds stopped to listen to mullah's sermons recalling the tragic events of Karbala in the eighth century. In parts of Baku, portraits of the Iranian shi'ite leaders Grand Ayatollah Abol-Qassem Mussavi-Kho'i and the late Grand Ayatollah Muhammad-Kazem Shariatmadari and the standard of 'Lion and Sun', were carried by the demonstrators.<sup>39</sup>

In other parts of the world, Islamic movements amplified the "religious dimension" of the conflict and presented it as yet another "conspiracy" against Islam. In *Al-Shi'raa* weekly (Beirut) Hussain Sabra wrote:

When in 1988 Gorbachev visited the United States, a group of Armenians, together with immigrant Soviet Jews, organized a demonstration asking Gorbachev to take a concrete position towards the issue of Nagorno-Karabagh, favourable to Armenians, against the Moslem Azerbaijanis.

Sabra continues his "analysis" by presenting an "Armenian-Islamic" issue and blames all Armenians for cooperating with the Zionists.<sup>40</sup> During the same period, *Al-Kifah al-Arabi* weekly reported: "Reliable sources in East Beirut reveal that the 'Lebanese Forces' [Christian Maronite militiamen] have moved their struggle to the Caucasus, this time not against federalism, but with separatist intentions."<sup>41</sup>

In January 1990, the Assembly of Islamic Religious Leaders issued a declaration stating that:

The issue of unifying Karabagh with Armenia is not realistic, it is unjust and not attainable, because, the enclave is situated within the borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan like an island (...) Many Armenians, escaping their areas for numerous problems and complications, found hospitable refuge among Moslem Azerbaijanis [and they were welcomed], just as they were welcomed by the Lebanese, Syrians and others [in the past] (...) The demand of Azerbaijan concerning the enclave is legal and that legality is rooted in geographic and historical evidence (...) the Tsarist armies conquered Armenia and separated it from Turkey and the Soviet armies conquered and separated Azerbaijan from Iran.

The Assembly found "certain Armenians" guilty of provoking and instigating unjust demands for Karabagh and called upon all Armenians to stop their demand for unification of Karabagh with Armenia.<sup>42</sup>

39 - Amir TAHERI, *Crescent in a Red Sky: The Future of Islam in the Soviet Union*, London, 1989, pp. 171-172.

40 - *Al-Shi'raa* weekly, January 15, 1990. See also *Al-Safir*, the second largest Islamic newspaper in Lebanon, January 21, 1990; *Al-Ah'hed*, the organ of Hezbollah (Party of God), January 26, 1990.

41 - *Al-Kifah al-Arabi* (Beirut) January 29, 1990. For the response of the Armenian Popular Movement to these allegations, see *Al-Kifah al-Arabi*, February 12 1990, p. 9; *Spurk* (Beirut) 1 March 1990, pp. 1-2.

42 - *Al-Ah'hed* (Beirut) January 19, 1990.

Similar "conspiracy theories" were suggested in Iran and Central Asian republics.<sup>43</sup>

In December 1996, the secretary-general of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Hamed Algabid, criticised the 1996 presidential elections in Karabagh and expressed "deep concern" about the elections, describing it as "an attempt to provide some legitimacy to the so-called Nagorno Karabagh republic". This was followed by a formal declaration by the foreign ministers from the countries of OIC meeting in Jakarta, Indonesian (on December 10, 1996), supporting "Azerbaijan's righteous cause" and "unequivocally" condemning Armenia's "aggression".<sup>44</sup>

As for the government of Azerbaijan, while it tries to "downplay [the] religious dimension of the Republic's popular movement",<sup>45</sup> in June 1995, President Aliyev, during a visit to the central Taza Pir mosque in Baku to offer prayers in memory of prophet Mohammed's grandson, Imam Hussein and seventy-two of his companions who were martyred in the seventh century, addressed the crowd:

"Today the Islamic world celebrates the day of execution of holy Imams, who have sacrificed themselves in the name of the Motherland, nation and the belief". He mentioned that the selflessness of Imam Hussein serves the example for hundreds and hundreds of Azeri citizens, who had put resistance to the Armenian aggression with credit, who did not spare their lives for the sake of the freedom and independence of the Motherland. [The] Azeri President said that today the whole Azeri nation bows its head before the memory of the heroes. "Our nation will remain loyal to its traditions, and to its belief". (...) President Aliyev expressed hope on prompt stoppage of the war, liberation of all seized Azeri lands and refugees home-coming.<sup>46</sup>

Back in 1992, when Abulfëz Elchibey became the first-elected president of the new republic of Azerbaijan, as a proponent of reforms, he emphasizing three principles: Islam, Turkism and democracy.<sup>47</sup> The platform of his party, the Azerbaijan Popular Front, having failed to appeal "for political and economic reform to

43 - See, for example, Nayereh TOHIDI, "Cultural and Political Dimensions of Development in the Republic of Azerbaijan: Women, Nationalism and the Quest for Identity," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 4, 3&4, Fall/Winter (1994-1995), pp. 424-425; Felix CORLEY, *Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader*, London, Macmillan, 1996, p. 354; for a survey of attitudes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan toward the Armenians see Nancy LUBIN, "Islam and Ethnic Identity in Central Asia: A View from Below" in Yaacov RO'1 (ed.) *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (London, Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 62-64.

44 - SPA news agency (Riyad, Saudi Arabia) 28 November 1996; ITAR-TASS new agency (Word Service) 10 December 1996.

45 - Shireen T. HUNTER, "Azerbaijan: search for industry and new partners," in Ian BREMMER and Ray TARAS (eds.), *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 238-390.

46 - *Turan* news agency (Baku) June 10, 1995.

47 - Mohiaddin MESBAHI, *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union: Domestic and International Dynamics*, Florida, University Press of Florida, 1994, p. 107; TOHIDI, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

resonate strongly with the Azerbaijani population, increasingly became an “anti-Armenian, NKAO<sup>48</sup>-oriented platform” that brought “thousands of Azerbaijani supporters into the streets”.<sup>49</sup>

An important difference between the Armenian and Azerbaijani religious discourse is that the former is not directed towards the Azeri people, but against a regime and a nationalism that calls for the “expulsion of Armenians from Karabagh”.<sup>50</sup> The Armenian religious discourse is “introspective”, that is, the awareness of “the evil” within and without; that without “purifying” the soul from the evil within, the evil without cannot be overcome. “Disloyalty to God” would bring down God’s wrath upon the nation. The principal tenets of this religious discourse are: the eradication of evil (both within and without) and the protection of the land that “God gave” to Karabaghtzsis. Based on this theology, it is hoped that, ultimately, “Karabagh will become a unique country, where people will live piously and according to very high moral standards”.<sup>51</sup>

### *Preventing Moral Anomie*

The theological dimension of this religious discourse is further explained in a booklet by the Bishop, where he presents a “theology of liberation” (unlike the one in Latin America) and deals with the problem of “just war”.

War, like other catastrophic phenomena in life, creates not only physical and material destruction but also a moral crisis in the life of a society. The protracted military confrontation and struggle—and the uncertain prospects of the future—have had an impact on the bases of the moral and social orders in Karabagh.

Bishop Barkev Martirosian, in *Divine Help for the Christian Soldier*,<sup>52</sup> attempts to provide a meaning system and a basis for distinguishing between “right” and “wrong” ways of behaving under war conditions. In this pocket-size booklet prepared especially for the soldiers of Karabagh, religion—in its capacity as a response to crises of moral meaning—is employed as a means to prevent the occurrence of moral anomie.

The Bishop exhorts the soldiers to “be ready to welcome death with dignity”. Martirosian’s eclectic approach to the problem of “just war” and military ethics interweaves Biblical, patristic and national historical meaning systems with the new realities of life resulting from the war.

48 - Nagorno Karabagh Autonomous Oblast.

49 - Mirza MICHAELI, “Formation of Popular Front in Azerbaijan,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research*, December 9 (RL 558/88), 1988, pp. 1-2; Mark SAROYAN, “The ‘Karabagh Syndrome’ and Azerbaijani Politics,” *Problems of Communism*, 39, 5, September-October 1990, p. 24.

50 - David E. MURPHY, “Operation ‘Ring’. The Black Berets in Azerbaijan,” *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 5, 1 (1992), pp. 84-86; Helsinki Watch/Memorial Report, “Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaijan,” New York, 1991, p. 6.

51 - TCHILINGIRIAN, “Theology of War”, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

52 - Gandzasar Theological Centre, Yerevan 1995, pp. 32. (30,000 copies printed).

In his discourse, Martirosian affirms that the struggle of the Karabaghtzi soldier is “righteous”, giving extensive Biblical quotations. He writes, “There are numerous accounts—both in the Holy Bible and in our history—that confirm the presence of divine help for armies that carry out righteous struggles, especially when they appeal to God with faith, and accept the blessings of His faithful servants, [the priests]”. He then shows how military successes could be achieved in Karabagh, if the soldiers put their faith in God rather than solely in the strength of their arms. He gives several anecdotal examples of how, during the most crucial battles in Shushi and Martakert regions, the entire population of Karabagh, “young and old, were sitting in shelters because of the shelling and—under the candle light—were unceasingly praying to God, beseeching His Almighty power to help [the] young and brave fighters”.

Concerning the ethics of war, Martirosian warns: “a Christian soldier will be exposed to acts of violence and destruction”. God, on Judgment day, will ask the soldier to account “for the possessions [he] ravished from the poor unjustly and forcefully, or for the things [he] robbed from [his] masters”. He then outlines the “spiritual values” of a Christian soldier: obedience and order, unity, humility and prudence, being mindful of delinquency and sinful deviations, and reconciliation. He affirms that “the awareness of divine aid greatly reinforces and strengthens [the soldier’s] faith and reliance on God. But that reliance could be superficial if it is not coupled with a genuine Christian way of life”.

He then goes on to explain the “spiritual fortification of the soldier”. In order to “take up the armour of God”, the soldier is asked to be mindful of, a) Prayer and thanksgiving, which should accompany the Christian soldier, just as “all military training and combat exercises”; b) Honouring the Holy Cross, as “an enemy-chasing power in the war”; c) Bravery, because “God is the Lord only of the brave”. Martirosian concludes his exhortation by urging the soldier to “remember [his] glorious ancestors and the achievements of today’s heroes”; and assures him that “the nation is praying for [him] (...) so that [he] may be a loyal fighter and a true soldier of Christ”.

Durkheim argues that “every religion is also a means enabling men to face the world with greater confidence”.<sup>53</sup> In *Divine Help*, Martirosian uses Armenian Christian religion to give the Karabaghtzi soldiers this “greater confidence” to face the world—their world under war conditions. The “sacred cosmos” that Martirosian draws in *Divine Help* transcends and includes the soldier in its ordering of reality, thus providing him an “ultimate shield against the terror of anomie”.<sup>54</sup> Martirosian provides a clear reference to a meaning system that is particular, as well as universal in its scope.

53 - Émile DURKHEIM, *Selected Writings* (A. GIDDENS, ed.), New York, 1972, p. 227.

54 - Peter BERGER, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Garden City, NY, 1967, p. 27.



The Church in Karabagh has assumed the responsibility to set a certain moral and ethical context to the war on the one hand and the nation-building process on the other, by establishing a balance between the national aspirations of the Armenians and their religious values. However, since the declaration of independent statehood in Karabagh, the role of the Church has changed. A priest surmised that between 1989 and 1991, "the Church was much more significant, was much more valuable than perhaps it is today."<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it is still considered by many as an important moral and spiritual source, both as a national and religious institution. As a meaning-providing institution, the role of the Church in the process of construction of a new social order in Karabagh cannot be underestimated.

Hratch TCHILINGIRIAN.

---

55 - Interview K6: 287-289.