

Armenia and Karabakh

Hratch Tchilingirian

In 2001 Armenia celebrated the seventeen-hundredth anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as the state religion. It is believed that two of Christ's Apostles, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, were the first evangelisers of Armenia, in the mid-first century. Tertullian (155 – c. 240) and Eusebius (c. 260–340) record that there were Christians in Armenia as early as the first half of the third century. Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion, in the early fourth century, when King Tiridates III (ruled 298–330) was baptised by Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240–325), the patron saint of the Armenians. Gregory, a descendant of a noble house in Parthia and brought up as a Christian in Cappadocia, was consecrated a bishop by Leontius, the metropolitan of Caesarea, as the first Bishop of Armenia. He established the Armenian nation's Holy See in Vagharshapat, today known as the Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin (Etchmiadzin), located 25 km from Armenia's capital, Yerevan. He is called Illuminator for 'enlightening the nation with the light of the gospel' and is considered the first catholicos (patriarch) of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

Armenia's formal conversion to Christianity not only meant stronger political and cultural ties with the Roman world, but also determined the future course of Armenian history and culture. As Christianity took roots in the life of the nation, the invention of an Armenian alphabet was necessitated to make the Scriptures and worship services, which were conducted in Syriac and Greek, accessible to the people. In 406, Mesrop Mashtots (c. 355–439) created the Armenian alphabet, under the auspices of Catholicos Sahak (c. 348–438), and soon after, together with a group of associates known as Holy Translators, translated the Bible into Armenian, followed by the biblical, theological and liturgical writings of leading church fathers of the time. This most important era is known as a golden age in Armenian history.

Divided Between Empires

Geographically, Armenia has been at the crossroads of competing empires and regional powers and subject to invasions and destruction. As a result, the size and borders of the country have changed many times. The territory of the Republic of Armenia today is only one-tenth of what it used to be

historically. Over the centuries, Armenia was divided between the Persian, Ottoman and Russian empires. It has seen Persian rule (430–634) and Arab domination (c. 654–851), been an independent Bagratids kingdom (885–1079) and was the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, or Lesser Armenia (1080–1375). Indeed, the history of Armenian Christianity is intimately woven with the history of the nation and its tribulations. Armenian language, literature, architecture, music and Armenian culture in general have been influenced by the nation's Christian heritage.

Political and social developments of crucial significance in the nineteenth century – for both Eastern Armenians under Persian rule and Western Armenians under Ottoman rule – brought about major legal, organisational and institutional changes in the Armenian Church. Many Armenians looked to tsarist Russian rule for potential relief from Persian rule, which was carried out through virtually autonomous khans in the Caucasus. Indeed, most Armenians of Turkey and Persia viewed the Russians as champions of Christendom against Islam and hoped Romanov Russia would lead them to liberation. Seeking refuge and relief – and as permitted by the Treaty of Turkmanchai (1828) – some 50,000 Armenians from northern Persia emigrated to Russian Armenia. As historian Richard Hovhanissian writes, 'Along the entire route, Armenians welcomed the Russian troops as liberators and rejoiced that the day of deliverance was at hand' (*Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 1918, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 8). But such hopes were to be cut short by the signing of the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829, when Russia agreed to withdraw its troops from Erzerum and Kars. Fearing Muslim retaliation for their support of Russian forces and the undesirability of staying under Ottoman rule, by 1830 some 100,000 Armenians emigrated from the plains of Erzerum and Alashkert to the Transcaucasus, just like their Persian Armenian counterparts.

Christianity in Armenia, 1970 and 2015

Tradition	1970		2015		Average annual growth rate (%), 1970–2015
	Population	%	Population	%	
Christians	859,000	34.1%	2,849,000	94.4%	2.7%
Independents	2,300	0.1%	65,000	2.2%	7.7%
Orthodox	854,000	33.9%	2,534,000	84.0%	2.4%
Protestants	350	0.0%	39,700	1.3%	11.1%
Catholics	0	0.0%	235,000	7.8%	25.1%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	45	0.0%	30,300	1.0%	15.6%
<i>Pentecostals</i>	2,100	0.1%	117,000	3.9%	9.3%
Total population	2,518,000	100.0%	3,018,000	100.0%	0.4%

Source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo (eds), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill), accessed March 2017.

Tsar Nicolas I (ruled 1825–55) had given lavish promises to the Armenians and filled them with hope for political autonomy once liberated from Persian and Ottoman rule. However, all such promises proved to be empty. Soon after the establishment of Russian rule, the tsar attempted to bring the Armenian Church under its control as well. Following negotiations of several years – and in line with its policy on non-Russian religious and ecclesiastical institutions within the empire – in 1836 a church constitution (the *Polozhenie*) came into effect after being ratified by the tsar. The Catholicos of All Armenians accepted the document with reluctance, inasmuch as it curtailed the power of the head of the church, both internally vis-à-vis the bishops and the clergy and externally vis-à-vis the state. This constitution brought the eastern dioceses of the church and the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin under the tight control of the tsarist government and left the laity virtually out of the administration of the church.

In the western part of the Armenian world, in the Ottoman Empire, more or less the opposite happened. Overwhelming power was given to the laity. A national constitution was established in 1863 for the Armenian *millet* (nation). From as early as 1461 the patriarch was the Sultan's designated head of the Armenian nation in the empire; the absence of clearly defined regulations or a constitution had given titled Armenian dignitaries, the *amiras*, and the wealthy barons of Constantinople great influence over the patriarch and, by extension, the Armenian population. A constitutional commission was set up in 1855 by an imperial edict. A number of drafts were debated over some eight years between conservative- and liberal-minded members of various committees. A final version of the constitution was approved 'by all classes of the Armenian population of Constantinople' and ratified by the sultan on 20 September 1863. As historian Robert Hewsen put it, 'the Armenian millet within the Ottoman Empire thereby entered the modern world' ('Introduction' to *The Armenian National Constitution (1863)*, Cambridge, MA: Society for Armenian Studies, 1987, 2). The constitution drastically reduced the traditional ecclesiastical authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople as well as of the clergy in general. It established the rule of popular general election of all candidates for sacred office in the church. It created organs for the government of the church that were almost completely dominated by laymen, irrespective of the degree of their commitment to the Christian faith. The National Assembly of Deputies, composed mainly of laymen and presided over by the patriarch, was recognised by the state as being the highest representative body and governing authority throughout the Ottoman Empire for the administration of the 'Armenian nation'. The constitution became defunct in the early years of the Turkish Republic.

From the 1890s until 1923, the Armenians were subjected to state-orchestrated and state-executed mass killings, and during the First World War virtual annihilation, in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians perished between 1915 and 1923. Today, the large Armenian diaspora, estimated at some 5 million, is made up largely of the descendants of the survivors. More than any other event in history, the Armenian genocide has had a major traumatic effect not only on Armenian identity, but also on Armenia and the Armenian Church.

Under Soviet Rule

Armenian Christianity, as with all other religions in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), suffered enormously under Soviet rule, anti-religious propaganda and state-sponsored atheistic indoctrination. Like its counterparts, the Armenian Church was persecuted, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. A vast number of churches were destroyed, priests were exiled or executed, and assets and treasures of Ejmiatsin were confiscated. The Soviet state, especially in the early decades of the communist regime, spent large amounts of resources and energy in seeking to expunge Christianity from society. By 1940 only nine functioning Armenian churches remained in the entire Soviet Union. It was thanks to the importance of the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin to the large Armenian diaspora that the centuries-old institution was saved from complete oblivion.

Persecution and pressure eased after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, and the election of the Romanian-born Catholicos Vazgen I (Baljian) in 1955 ushered in a new period in the life of the church. Under his leadership, the church gradually came out of its isolation. As the church had a long-established network of dioceses and churches around the world, Vazgen created bridges between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora through Ejmiatsin and strengthened relations with wealthy communities and institutions outside the USSR. This increased the church's prestige in the eyes of the communists, who were ever mindful of projecting a good image abroad, and asserted the catholicos's national position. Moreover, numerous donations from the diaspora enabled Vazgen I to renovate many historic churches and monasteries and to engage in cultural-educational activities inside Soviet Armenia, including the construction of a modern museum and the establishment of a new printing press in Ejmiatsin.

Mikhael Gorbachev's *glasnost* ('openness') and *perestroika* ('restructuring') in the late 1980s was the beginning of a new era for the church under communism and brought changes of attitude in government and society. Matters of church and religion, in general, were openly and publicly discussed. The restoration of the 'national character' of Armenia and Armenian institutions was part of this process, which included, for

example, renaming cities, towns, villages and streets. Reclaiming Armenian Christian identity, through baptism, became a common feature of the changes. The return to religion and spirituality, enhanced by *perestroika*, coincided with several major national events and developments that have had a far-reaching impact on Armenia and Armenians: (1) the Karabakh Movement – demanding the reunification of Nagorno-Karabakh (an autonomous region within Azerbaijan) with Armenia – which started in February 1988 and later turned into an independence movement; (2) the devastating earthquake in northern Armenia in December of the same year; (3) the pogroms of Armenians in Azerbaijani towns; (4) the war with Azerbaijan in and for Nagorno-Karabakh; and (5) the subsequent economic and energy blockade of Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey, which created harsh conditions for the population, especially in the winters of 1992 and 1993.

The beginning of the Karabakh Movement in early 1988 was a major test of Gorbachev's new policy of openness and a major turning point in Soviet Armenia. The dispute between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Karabakh – an enclave of only 4,388 km² and a population of about 150,000 – is the oldest unresolved conflict in the former Soviet Union, having started in the 1920s. A popular movement for self-determination by Karabakh Armenians turned into a full-scale war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 1991. A formal but fragile ceasefire has been in place since May 1994, but dozens of people continue to be killed every year on the line of contact, and the war has not ended.

The role of the Armenian Church, personified in Catholicos Vazgen I (1955–94), in the early stages of the Karabakh Movement was ambiguous. On the one hand, Ejmiatsin was reluctant to publicly oppose the Kremlin's policies; on the other, as an Armenian national institution, the church could not be indifferent to the popular struggle. Catholicos Vazgen argued that Armenia's survival was possible only 'within the great and mighty family of Soviet nationalities' and that popular demands for Karabakh's union with Armenia would not lead to any tangible results. Based on his decades-long experience with Soviet authorities, he feared – as expressed in his appearance on Armenian television – that an anti-Soviet movement would lead to 'offer[ing] Armenia on a platter to our centuries-old enemy'.

The Soviet Armenian government and the Armenian communist leadership in 1989 officially recognised the Armenian National Movement (ANM), which had overwhelming popular support. This was the beginning of the erosion of Soviet power in Armenia. In November of that year, ANM delegates visited Ejmiatsin to meet with the catholicos. Despite Vazgen's earlier cautious stance, the leaders of the Movement still considered him an important national figure and a supporter of pan-Armenian causes,

especially in view of the fact that he had influence in the diaspora through the church's dioceses and parishes abroad. In his welcoming address, Vazgen assured the delegates that 'All Armenians, whether believers or not, we consider them true children of the Armenian Church without discrimination'. He explained the role and position of the church throughout the centuries and positioned the church in the centre of national life.

The catholicos, shortly after the overwhelming 'yes' vote for independence, presided over the swearing in of the first democratically elected president of the newly independent Republic of Armenia and gave his blessings. In terms of his standing in Armenia and the diaspora, while the entire communist leadership was discredited, the catholicos was the only national figure who still enjoyed respect and public standing. Less than three weeks before his death in 1994, Vazgen I was the first national figure to be awarded the newly created highest honour of the Armenian state, the Order of National Hero.

Independence of Armenia

The fall of communism and independence of Armenia in 1991 marked the beginning of many unprecedented events in the life of the Armenian nation, in both the Republic of Armenia and the diaspora. Independence has not only radically changed the way the Armenian diaspora — where more Armenians live than in Armenia itself — perceives and understands itself, but has created a 'new' discourse of mobilisation and 'unity', to face the colossal new challenges facing the 'nation'. As a result of post-independence developments, institutional life, both in Armenia and the diaspora, has changed and continues to unfold. While the Armenian Apostolic Church has flourished internally — with the building of new churches, seminaries, charitable institutions and so on — the church has virtually had no functional role in the transitional processes in Armenia and the diaspora concerning how the country and state have been shaped over the last 25 years.

Rampant corruption, social and economic inequalities, a lack of basic legal protection and other state-induced difficulties in post-Soviet Armenia continue to plague society. The 'moral guidance' and 'spiritual anchor' that society expected from the church was not provided. Although the church is respected as a historically significant national institution, its establishment and the clergy remain on the periphery of the country's spiritual life. Decades of state-sponsored atheism in Soviet Armenia and the processes of secularisation and globalisation have had their impact on society.

Since independence, other denominations and religious movements have challenged the primary position of the church and introduced 'competition' in the religious sphere. In addition to Christian denominations, alternative

religious movements have appeared in Armenia, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Transcendental Meditation and pagans. Nevertheless, the Armenian Church remains the largest national religious institution, with around 500 parishes and churches in over 30 countries around the world and about 700 bishops and priests serving an estimated 8 million Armenians living in Armenia, Karabakh and the diaspora.

A significant event in Armenian Christianity in the twenty-first century was the canonisation of the victims of the genocide in the Ottoman Empire. In November 2014, the Synod of Bishops, headed by the two catholicos of the Armenian Church, announced that over 1 million 'martyrs' of the atrocities committed during the First World War would be sainted collectively. Previously, the last person who was declared a saint in Armenia was in the fifteenth century. On 23 April 2015, during a solemn ceremony in Holy Ejmiatsin on the centenary of the genocide, the newest saints of the Armenian Church were announced and venerated in the presence of international dignitaries, high-level government officials and thousands of people. This major event provided a symbolic meaning for Armenian society: through sainthood the victims were no longer victims, but victors in the Christian faith, saints who 'live in the glory of God'.

Religion is one of the subjects mandated by the curriculum of state schools in Armenia. To the dismay of non-Apostolic churches, the law grants special privileges to the Apostolic Church, including the right to train teachers of religion for state schools throughout the country. The 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations states that 'within the boundaries of the procedure provided by the Law', the Armenian Church is 'to promote the spiritual education of the Armenian people, including in the educational institutions where the teaching of religion is permitted solely on the basis of the belief professed by the Armenian Apostolic Church and by teachers who have adequate qualification and authorisation from the Armenian Apostolic Church' (Article 17, 2.5). Hundreds of teachers have been trained by the Apostolic Church to teach the 'Armenian brand' of religion in state schools.

The Armenian Brand of Christianity

The overwhelming majority of Armenia's population of 3 million adheres, at least nominally, to the Christian faith. The Armenian Church or the 'National Church', belongs to the Orthodox family of churches, known as the Oriental Orthodox or 'Non-Chalcedonian' Churches. It shares many commonalities with the Byzantine and Slavic Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, especially in the liturgy, but differs over certain theological issues.

The Armenian Church has been actively involved in the ecumenical movement since the 1930s and especially through the World Council of Churches since the 1960s. It also has bilateral commissions and dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church, the Byzantine Orthodox Churches, especially the Russian and Greek Churches, the Anglican Church and others. It maintains close working relations with the Oriental Orthodox family of churches with which it is in communion – the Coptic, Syrian Orthodox, Ethiopian and Indian Malabar Churches.

The Catholicosate of All Armenians, also known as the ‘Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin’, is the supreme ecclesiastical centre of the church. It is recognised as ‘pre-eminent’ among the four hierarchical sees of the church, the other three being: the Catholicosate of Cilicia, located in Antelias, Lebanon, founded in 1930, but with roots going back to the thirteenth century; the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, from the early fourteenth century, which is one of the three custodians of Christian holy places in the Holy Land; and the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul, established in 1461 by the Ottoman Sultan and once the administrator of the entire Armenian ‘nation’ (*millet*) in the Ottoman Empire.

One of the unique features of the Armenian Church is the involvement of lay people in its administrative, legislative and financial affairs, unlike in the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition. However, decisions concerning faith, dogma and liturgy remain the exclusive domain of the College of Bishops and the catholicos.

Armenian Catholic and Evangelical Churches

There are an estimated 150,000 Armenians around the world who are members of the Armenian Catholic Church and almost 100,000 Armenian Protestants. Both denominations have small communities in Armenia.

Catholicism in Armenia can be traced back to the twelfth century, when Armenians came into contact with the Church of Rome through their ties with the Crusaders in Cilicia. Later in the fourteenth century, through the missionary activities of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, a ‘Latinising movement’ gained ground among liberal elements in the Apostolic Church. However, it was only in the nineteenth century that the Armenian Catholic Church was formally organised as a separate church. In 1831, the Catholics were legally recognised as a separate *millet* – an autonomous church affiliated with Roman Catholicism – in the Ottoman Empire, with their own hierarchy and catholicos (patriarch). ‘Armenian rite’ communities are found in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Jerusalem and the USA.

The roots of Armenian Protestants go back to the nineteenth-century missionary activities of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which expanded an aggressive mission throughout Asia Minor.

After 'painful clashes' with the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Protestants were formally recognised in 1846 by the Ottoman government as a separate community. Subsequently, as a result of their continued affiliation with American missionary organisations, Armenian Evangelicals established many schools and colleges during the second half of the nineteenth century, which benefited thousands of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. In 1996, the late Catholicos Karekin I of All Armenians, during a ceremony in Yerevan on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Evangelical Church, praised the Evangelicals for their valuable ministry.

Christianity in Karabakh

Soon after Armenia's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century, the Kingdom of Albania in the Caucasus (not to be confused with Albania in the Balkans), which included the provinces of Artsakh (the future Karabakh) and Utik, converted to Christianity through the efforts of St Gregory the Illuminator. Grigoris, the grandson of Gregory, was appointed the head of the Albanian Church around 330. He was martyred in 338 while evangelising in the north-east region of the country, near Derbend (currently Dagestan). His body was brought to Artsakh and buried in a church in Amaras (in the Martuni region). The Albanian Church, having been established by the Armenian missionaries, pledged canonical allegiance to the Armenian Church. An Albanian Catholicosate or holy see was established in 552, when the seat of the head of the church moved from Derbend to Partav. 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. From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, more than 40 monasteries and religious centres were built in Karabakh through the patronage and efforts of the Armenian princes of Artsakh. Starting in the fifteenth century, the monastery of Gandzasar became the seat of the native catholicos. The existence of a separate catholicosate in Karabakh, with its own autonomous religious institutions, attests to the importance of the region as a religious centre.

In the nineteenth century, the status of the native catholicosate was drastically reduced. When tsarist Russia liberated Karabakh from Persian domination, Catholicos Sarkis of Karabakh, upon his return from exile, was demoted to the rank of metropolitan by the imperial authorities in 1815. After his death in 1828, upon the request of the meliks (princes) of Karabakh, Catholicos Yeprem of All Armenians, in 1830, ordained Baghdassar, a nephew of Sarkis, Primate of the Diocese of Karabakh. He was ordained in the Cathedral of Ejmiatsin in Armenia. Thus, the Catholicosate of Karabakh was reduced first to a metropolitan seat and then to a diocese of the Armenian Church.

Between 1820 and 1930, Karabakh was a hub of vibrant religious and cultural life. The diocese of Karabakh and Swiss missionaries – sent by the Basel Evangelical Association – operated 10 schools in the city of Shushi alone 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, as well as a dozen newspapers and journals. A remnant of this religious-cultural renaissance is the famous Cathedral of Our Saviour (built 1868–87) and an order of women monastics and deaconesses, a rare phenomenon in the Armenian Church, who were involved with social and pastoral work under the aegis of the Karabakh diocese.

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. But 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 complex of these conflicts concerned mountainous Karabakh.

Having been left to face their own uncertain future, Karabakh Armenians elected a People's Government in August 1918. In February 1919, they dispatched Bishop Vahan of Shushi and Hrant Bagaturian, a member of the Executive Council, to Tiflis to present the case of Karabakh Armenians – the issue of their security and freedom – directly to the representative of Britain, General William Thomson, the military commander in the region during the short-lived period of British control of the region. However, not only were their concerns not addressed, within six months Karabkhis were forced to sign an agreement with Azerbaijan putting Karabakh under the jurisdiction of the latter provisionally until the final outcome of the Paris Peace Conference. This signalled the beginning of the end for the Armenian Church in Karabakh.

In 1923, when under Soviet rule, Mountainous Karabakh became an autonomous *oblast*, the Armenian Church was the first national institution to face the growing Soviet pressure. In 1925, since the city of Shushi was out of bounds for the clergy – the Armenian neighbourhoods had been burnt down and the diocesan headquarters closed – the new prelate sent from Ejmiatsin chose the monastery of Gandzasar as his diocesan centre.

His activities were closely monitored by the Commissar for Internal Affairs of Mountainous Karabakh. In 1929, in a letter to the catholicos in Ejmiatsin, Bishop Vertanes wrote: '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'. Soon after, Vertanes was arrested and jailed. He was released in January 1932, as the Soviet court 'did not find [him] guilty of any crime' but was never allowed return to Karabakh. Thus ended the activities and formal existence of the Armenian Church in Karabakh.

The return of the church to Karabakh

In March 1988, in response to the popular uprising and demonstrations in Yerevan and Stepanakert during the previous month, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a decree on social-economic developments in Karabakh. This created a climate for cultural and religious revival in the region. Prior to the formal reopening of the church, a renewed interest in Christianity and the church was created by visits of preachers from Armenia belonging to the church-loving Brotherhood of the Armenian Church (*Yeghpayragtsutiun*), who, starting in 1987, attracted a group of people who later 'converted' and became 'committed Christians'.

This coincided with the beginning of the 'national liberation movement', when, secretly, protest signatures were being collected in Karabakh. In early 1988, these new converts started to collect signatures secretly for a petition to have churches reopened in Karabakh. The petition was presented to the authorities and a copy was given to the catholicos in Ejmiatsin. This campaign of the 'believers in Karabakh' provided Catholicos Vazken I with additional leverage with the authorities to re-establish the long-defunct diocese. In November 1988, he appointed Barkev Martirossian as Prelate of Karabakh. The newly appointed prelate, together with four priests, came to Karabakh to establish the diocese. The first church was formally reopened on 1 October 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 first task of the church leadership in Karabakh was to renovate churches and provide places of worship.

Between 1989 and 1991, the clergy were involved in active evangelisation throughout Karabakh. Sunday schools were established, and teachers were trained to instruct the children and prepare them for baptism. Weekly lectures on Christianity were presented by the bishop at schools where several hundred students would gather to hear the lectures. A significant project of the diocese of Karabakh was the establishment in Yerevan in

1990 of the Gandzasar Theological Centre, which produced literature and religious publications for both Karabakh and Armenia.

Within a few years of its re-establishment, the Armenian Church had regained its legitimacy not only as a religious institution but also as a national institution to fight alongside the people of Karabakh. 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 people and mass mobilisation for Karabakh's independence. The church was one of the first national institutions to be 'reclaimed' by the people, even those who were unbelievers, as a historically significant source of their religious and national identity. In the early days of the Karabakh 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 recognised political leadership, the church became the unofficial representative of the people of Karabakh to the outside world.

The church in Karabakh has assumed responsibility for setting 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 independence, which is not recognised by any country, 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'. Nevertheless, it is still considered by many to be an important moral and spiritual source, as both a national and a religious institution.

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