

Modern “Believers” in an Ancient Church The Armenian Apostolic Church

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The Armenian Apostolic Church, the only institution that has existed continuously in Armenian history, celebrated the 1700th anniversary of its founding in 2001. Jubilant and elaborate ceremonies were held in Armenia and the diaspora. The glorious history of the Church was presented through large exhibitions, conferences, concerts, and publications. Hundreds of “pilgrims” visited sacred sites in Armenia and the diaspora. The celebrations concluded with the solemn consecration of a new cathedral in Yerevan, dubbed as the largest Armenian Church ever built. Yet, throughout the process of preparation, planning and celebration of the anniversary – which was hoped to be, as described by the late Catholicos Karekin I, a “new Pentecost,” an opportunity for a new spiritual revival, “re-Christianization” of Armenia after decades of Communism – fundamental questions facing the church and its hierarchy were not addressed.

What is the relevance of a 1700-year-old Church to Armenians living in a global society today? A “modern” world characterised by expectations of instant gratification, constant stimulation and entertainment; a world where, as some describe it, economy has become the “religion” of contemporary man; a world where a particularistic “religious language” has been replaced with a secular “global language.” What is the relevance of a Church in the “information age,” where a new social-economic “lexicon” dominates contemporary thinking? A world where “computer,” “internet,” “mobile phone,” “stock market” are more familiar concepts than “Holy Trinity,” “salvation,” “sin,” “repentance” or “obedience”.

Even as the glorious past of the Church is acknowledged and celebrated, the relevance of the Armenian Church to most contemporary Armenians remains a major issue. For instance, the war in Iraq, in April 2003, brought some critical questions to surface and highlighted the pastoral inadequacy of the Church – a function most fundamental to its mission. On the eve of the imminent war, the Armenian community in Iraq was without a “shepherd.” Members of the Armenian community in Baghdad expressed outrage that the Prelate of the Armenian Church in Iraq, the archbishop who was supposed to provide them guidance and comfort, had gone to the United States for a long stay. They complained that he was not

with his flock at the most critical moment in their collective and individual lives. "The Archbishop has abandoned us. The Arabs, the Moslems are taking care of us. Let the Prelate stay were he is; we do not need him," wrote an angry Armenian from Baghdad.¹ One newspaper in the diaspora characterised the archbishop's conflicting explanations from abroad as "tragi-comedy." Another angry commentator wrote: "In this Church, we are not sheep, but human beings [...]. If we are a Church, let us be a proper church, as clergy and laity."² Another example is the case of Armenians in Abkhazia, the former Soviet Autonomous Republic in Georgia that went through a devastating war in the early 1990s. The 80 000-100 000 strong Armenian community in Abkhazia does not have a single functioning church or a permanent priest. Community leaders were dismayed that the official Church had "forgotten them."³ In places where pastoral care and leadership is provided, it is mostly due to the charisma and personal initiative of an individual cleric or a hierarch, for instance in Karabagh, rather than the result of a well-thought and articulated Church policy or mission.

This essay presents a background discussion of the role of the Armenian Church and hierarchy in the past and highlights the problems of ecclesiastical mission and leadership in the present. It then suggests various typologies of "believers" in the Armenian Church to show the existing perceptual gaps between the church hierarchy and the "faithful." It should be noted that this essay does not exhaust all the issues and themes presented here, but attempts to identify and introduce critical issues that need further investigation and serious study.

The Historic Role of the Church

The history of the Armenian Church is intimately intertwined with the history of the Armenian people. Whenever Armenians faced political and social difficulties, and invasions by foreign rulers, the Armenian Church has been in the forefront of national life, at times serving as a "surrogate government." The Church has been a protective religious, political, educational and cultural institution and preserver of the religious-cultural heritage of Armenians, especially since the demise of the last Armenian Kingdom in 1375. The 1700-year history of the Church also reflects the diasporic realities of Armenians. Indeed, the center of the Armenian Church (the Holy See) has moved frequently as a result of constant political disorder and unrest in Armenia. Over the course of some eleven hundred years (between 314 and 1441), the Seat of the Catholicosate of the Armenian Church has moved from one place to another for ten times. The Church's moves follow the track of dispersion of the Armenian people. As a 13th century historian wrote, "the Catholicoi [of the Armenian Church] wandered here and there with the Armenian kings and people."⁴

As the largest national institution after the Armenian state, the Armenian Church remains the most institutionalized (and "bureaucratic" in a Weberian sense) Armenian esta-

1. "A new note from Iraqi-Armenian Sebouh," *Haratch* [Յունուշ] [Forward] 5 April 2003, Paris, p. 1.

2. See G. VARDANIAN, "New Comedy in the Armenian Church" and Arpi TOTOYAN, "When the Boundaries of Tragedy and Comedy Get Confused," *Haratch*, 12-13 April 2003, Paris, p. 2.

3. Interview in *Gagra*, 14 August 2003.

4. Cited in Tiran Archbishop NERSOYAN, "Problems and Exercise of Primacy in the Armenian Church," in Nerses VREJ NERSESSIAN (ed.), *Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, Armenian Church Historical Studies*, New York, St. Vartan Press, 1996, p. 216.

blishment anywhere in the world. In 2002, there were over 350 parishes and churches in some 40 countries around the world,⁵ and about 500 bishops and priests⁶ serving an estimated 7 to 7.5 million Armenians living in Armenia, Karabagh and the Diaspora.⁷ Currently, the Armenian Church is comprised of four Hierarchical Sees to which the overwhelming majority of Armenians belong, at least nominally.⁸ They are: the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin (established in the 4th century); the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (established in Antelias, Lebanon in 1930, but its roots go back to the 13th century); the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (established in the 14th century); and the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul and all Turkey, established in 1461). Each Hierarchical See has its own religious order (brotherhood), ecclesiastical jurisdiction over a region with dioceses and parish churches, and internal administrative by-laws. These Hierarchical Sees are not separate churches, but are part of the “One, Holy, Apostolic Church” and are one in dogma, theology, liturgy and rendered services.

For the Church and the Armenian nation, the last decade of the 20th century was marked by many unprecedented events in Armenia, Karabagh and the Diaspora, the most significant of which was the independence of Armenia in 1991. Indeed, the developments since the early 1990s have radically changed the way the Armenian Diaspora – where more Armenians live than in Armenia itself – perceives and understands itself. The reestablishment of Armenian statehood has introduced new sets of issues in the ongoing “identity crisis” in the Diaspora. The perennial discourse of preservation of identity (*hayababnoom*) in dispersion has been infused with a “new” discourse of mobilisation and “unity,” to face the colossal new challenges facing the “nation.”

As a result of post-independence realities and processes, Armenian institutional life, both in Armenia and the Diaspora, have gone and continue to go through changes. But one institution which remains relatively stagnant is the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Church has neither found her “rightful place” (as it is so often characterised by the clergy) nor has contributed to the “national rebirth” that was anticipated by Armenia’s independence. In fact, the Church has had very little functional role in the transitional processes of the last decade in Armenia and the Diaspora. Meanwhile, decades-long schisms and wounds of the Church in the Diaspora remain unresolved and unhealed. Moreover, the consequences of

5. Based on figures in 2002: Argentina 7 churches, Armenia 43, Australia 2, Austria 1, Belgium 1, Brazil 3, Bulgaria 9, Canada 19, Cyprus 3, Egypt 3, England 2, Ethiopia 1, France 16, Georgia 3, Germany 1, Greece 4, India 4, Iran 30, Iraq 2, Israel 7, Italy 1, Jordan 1, Karabagh 19, Latvia 1, Lebanon 15, Moldova 2, Netherlands 2, Romania 2, Russia 9, Swaziland 1 (private chapel), Sweden 1, Switzerland 1, Sudan 1, Syria 6, Turkey 38, UAE 1, Ukraine 2, Uruguay 2, USA 105, Venezuela 1.

6. Based on figures in 2002, Bishops: 65 (Ejmiatsin 28, Cilicia 18, Jerusalem 14, Constantinople 4), celibate priests (vardapets): 122 (Ejmiatsin 65, Cilicia 26, Jerusalem 31, Constantinople 4), married priests: 300 (estimate); and 2 catholicoi.

7. The present number of churches and clergy represent a very small percentage of what the Armenian Church was at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. For instance, as documented by the scribe Teotig, 1 054 Armenian priests were the victims of the World War I genocide in the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of the 20th century, hundreds of churches were destroyed in the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union. Cf. ТЕՕՏԻԳ, *Golgotha of the Armenian Clergy* (in Armenian), 1921. For charts of victims and analysis, see *Window view of the Armenian Church*, 1 (3) (a quarterly published in San Jose), 1990, p. 12-13.

8. Some 200 000 Armenians around the world belong to the Armenian Catholic Church and less than 100 000 are Armenian Evangelicals. For a discussion of these communities, see Hratch TCHILINGIRIAN, “Catholics Elect New Patriarch. The Armenian Catholic Hierarchy and Community Face Daunting Challenges,” *Armenian International Magazine* (AIM) November 1999, p. 57 and “When Small is Big. Armenian Evangelicals Render a Century and a Half of Service,” *Armenian International Magazine* (AIM) January 2000, p. 35-38, 43.

state-sponsored atheism in Soviet Armenia and the effects of secularisation and globalisation have hardly been addressed by the Armenian Church and its hierarchy. For example, while over 90 percent of the population of the Republic of Armenia consider themselves Christians, only 8 percent of them attend church services at least once a week.⁹

As one priest in Armenia explained in 1991:

“Seventy years of communist rule has devastated the fundamental foundations of our national spiritual, religious and cultural life. The Armenian nation, which had preserved its existence through her church and culture, started to be foreign to its own holy convictions.

[...] Unfortunately, many of the clergy in Armenia see themselves as ritual performers. Such concepts have no place in the Church today. On the contrary, we should expand religious, pastoral, literary, cultural and educational activities.”¹⁰

Over a decade later, the authors of a survey conducted in 2003 (commissioned by “Armenia 2020”) state that:

“The situation in Armenia proper is still influenced by 70 years of anti-church propaganda. For many in Armenia, a well-educated Christian is a contradiction in terms. Religious faith is seen as incompatible with reason, knowledge, science and education.”¹¹

While, generally, the Armenian Church, as a national institution, enjoys wide respect and support among Armenians, the hierarchy and clergy remain on the periphery of the Armenian’s spiritual life. Interestingly, the “Armenia 2020” survey of 1875 people around Armenia found that 60 % of the respondents “did not know any clergy.” Of those who did know, 20 % had negative impression, 35 % positive impression, and 43 % were neutral.¹² The enormous “need” for moral, ethical and spiritual guidance expected from the Church since the reestablishment of Armenian statehood remains unfulfilled. In the wider global context, especially in the West, the Armenian Church has also been affected by the gradual decline of organised religion and institutionalised church life secularisation. (The implications of this for the Armenian Church has hardly been studied or investigated). So far, the Church hierarchy, like many other churches, has not been able to discern and articulate a role and function for the Church in an ever changing, globalised world. Rather than creating a new religious and spiritual discourse (and “mission”), Church leaders have found “comfort” in the reiteration of past glories and achievements in Armenian history. A vivid example of this was the celebrations of the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as state religion in Armenia, where the past was highlighted and glorified, but without clear connection or relevance to the present and the future.

The Armenian Church, like many others, is far behind tackling such local and global issues. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Church and its hierarchy face many challenges, from the desired “re-evangelisation” of Armenia after seventy years of communism,

9. Based on World Values 1995-1997 survey. “Study of worldwide rates of religiosity, church attendance,” 10 December 1997, University of Michigan; see: umich.edu/~newsinfo/Releases/1997/Dec97/r121097a.html (23 March 2003). In neighbouring Georgia it is 10 percent and Azerbaijan 6 percent.

10. Fr. Abraham MGRDTCHIAN, “Religious Reawakening in Armenia,” *Window View of the Armenian Church* 2 No. 2, San Jose, CA, 1991, p. 5.

11. *Armenia 2020, Church, State and Religion in Armenia*, Issue Paper prepared by Arak-29 Foundation, Yerevan, 2003, p. 1. See <www.armenia2020.org>.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

to the training of new cadres of priests and church workers, to the restoration of churches, the “fight” against new religious movements, and so on. These new challenges have been eclipsed by problems of leadership in the Church.

Church leadership

At least since Armenia’s independence, the internal and external relations of the Church have been marked by processes of legitimation and consolidation of authority. This is coupled with a leadership “contest” due to the fact that in the last decade major leadership changes took place in the Church: new leaders were elected in all four Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church. The Catholicosates of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia had their first native-born pontiffs (Armenia and Lebanon respectively). Each election was marked by its own political dynamics, with state and/or political party meddling.

More important and relevant to the “new world order,” virtually on all levels of Church hierarchy, but especially on the top level, leadership and authority in the Church is concentrated in one person or a few key figures.¹³ In contrast to the changing definitions and variables of leadership – where at least the personality cult of the Cold War era has gradually changed into *team* leadership – *discretionary* leadership remains the norm in the Armenian Church. Indeed, historically, the nature and boundaries of the authority of the Catholicos of the Armenian Church have never been defined, nor the extent of his jurisdiction clarified “in any clear and systematic manner.” It was only in the 19th century – when state-imposed church “constitutions” were established for the Armenian Church in Tsarist Russia (1836) and the Ottoman Empire (1863) respectively – that the administrative competencies of the head of the church were defined.¹⁴ However, with the end of both empires, these much controversial constitutions became defunct.

In recent years, a proposed new “Church Constitution” prepared by the official church, which is still under study, has caused further controversy over the sweeping authority accorded to the Catholicos of All Armenians. For example, Chapter XIII, Article 90 of the proposed constitution reads:

“The *basic task* of spiritual office-holders and of the faithful is to respect the Catholicos of All Armenians and the institutions and employees of the Armenian Apostolic Church that he heads, and to *execute their commands and determinations*, along with the requirements of this Constitution and of the Diocesan constitutions [emphasis added].”

13. The Catholicosate of All Armenians, the “Mother See” of Holy Ejmiatsin, is the supreme ecclesiastical center of the Armenian Church, established by the patron saint of the Armenian Church, Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240-325) in the city of Vagharshapat (Ejmiatsin). The Catholicosate of All Armenians is recognized as the “pre-eminent” See (Naxamecar Ator) among the four Hierarchical Sees of the Church. The Catholicos of Cilicia is equal in rank to the Catholicos of All Armenians but recognizes the primacy of honor of the Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin. Both are consecrated by the same rite of the Church and enjoy the same privileges of a catholicos, namely, the consecration of bishops and blessing of Holy Muron. The Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Constantinople have the rank of Archbishop. They are autonomous in the internal affairs of their Patriarchate and pledge canonical allegiance to the Catholicosate of All Armenians.

14. Nersoyan explains: “The presumption was and still is that a Catholicos would do whatever necessary to safeguard the unity and the cohesion of the Church and provide guidance and supervision in the conduct of its affairs as the chief of its bishops and the leader of its people. Thus by and large the authority of a Catholicos conforms to the general norms by which the head of a Church would exercise jurisdiction over his constituency,” Nerses VREJ NERSESSIAN, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 4), p. 217, 219.

Professor Hagop Nersoyan, who has written an extensive evaluation of the new Constitution, comments about the above provision:

“It is quite impossible to imagine anything uglier, more offensive to democratic sensitivities, more despotic and tsarist in tone than this provision. It reduces all of Christianity to obedience and legalism. One would think that a Christian’s basic obligation is to obey not any one person, but God’s will as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Is the proposed Constitution making of our catholicos a pope of popes? Are the writers of this constitution under the impression that whenever the catholicos says anything formally some divine infallibility is the case and then all we have to do is bow down?”¹⁵

Certainly, the relationship of the four hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church – and by extension their relationship with the church community and the faithful – has been marked by tension over the issue of “supreme” authority in the church, especially since the election of the first native Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin, in October 1999. As one Patriarch explained:

“There are obvious tendencies [by Ejmiatsin in Armenia] to marginalise the three Hierarchical Sees [in the Diaspora]. This is something that, if not prevented, could be detrimental to the church and her constituents.

[...] Let us admit that Holy Ejmiatsin, while being the spiritual birthplace of the Armenians, in the present realities of the Diaspora does not represent the totality of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. The Armenian Church is everywhere where there is an Armenian Christian. In order to pray and live a spiritual life one does not have to go to Ejmiatsin.”¹⁶

Externally, church and state relations since Armenia’s independence are underlined by mutual exploitation. While constitutionally church and state are separated, the lines of demarcation are not yet clear. This is most evident in issues concerning religious tolerance – or rather intolerance. As in other parts of the former Soviet Union, the appearance of foreign missionaries and new religious movements in Armenia has presented formidable challenges to the state and the national church. In an emerging democratic society, where pluralism and freedom of conscience are guaranteed by the constitution, the church has protected her eroding authority by seeking the patronage of the state. This has put the state in a precarious position vis-à-vis human rights guarantees. In turn, the state has used the church to boost its legitimacy and declining popularity, especially in the Diaspora. Indeed, state politics and the role of the laity in the life of the Church have had both positive and negative effects.

The Laity in the Church

The involvement of laymen in the affairs of the Armenian Church is one of her unique features. Unlike, for example, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition, which maintain monarchical and aristocratic structures respectively,

15. Hagop NERSOYAN, *Remarks on a Proposed Constitution for the Armenian Church, the Shorter*, English version of Կանոնադրութիւն Հայաստանեաց Եկեղեցու նախագիծին մասին դիտողութիւններ, Jerusalem, St James Press, 2001.

16. “His Beatitude Patriarch Mesrob of Istanbul and all Turkey: What’s Missing Is, perhaps, Fuller Cooperation,” *Haratch* 2 & 3 July 2001.

lay people actively participate in the administrative, legislative and economic affairs of the Armenian Church.¹⁷ Actually, the tradition of lay involvement in the election of bishops and catholicos goes back to ancient times.¹⁸ However, decisions concerning faith, dogma, liturgy or spirituality remain in the exclusive domain of the College of Bishops of the Church, through “conciliarity”, i.e., collective discernment and decision-making process.¹⁹

The laity elects almost all clerical leaders in the Armenian Church, the most significant of which is the position of the Catholicos, the supreme head of the Church.²⁰ The Catholicos is elected for life, by secret ballot, by the National Ecclesiastical Assembly – the highest legislative body of the Armenian Church, made up of two-thirds lay representatives of the Armenian nation and one-third clergymen.²¹ The representatives to the Assembly are elected by their respective communities.²²

17. The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is the exception, where the ordained members (monks) of the St. James Brotherhood elect the Patriarch and administer the affairs of the Patriarchate without any lay involvement.

18. For an extensive and excellent discussion of this issue, see Krikor MAKSODIAN, *Chosen of God: The Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians*, New York, St. Vartan Press, 1995. Nersoyan observes that “an exclusively clerical administration [is] not conducive to spiritual vitality in the Church”, cf. Tiran Archbishop NERSOYAN, “Laity in the Administration of the Armenian Church,” in Nerses VREJ NERSESSIAN, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 4), p. 266.

19. It should be noted, however, that history records instances where secular rulers have intervened in the life of the Church and imposed “their own candidate for primacy over the territory of their sovereignty.” Such instances go back as far as the 4th century, when, for example, Emperor Constantius deposed elected Patriarch Paul and installed Eusebius of Nicomedia in his seat; or Emperor Honorius installing Boniface I on the throne of Rome. “Interference by kings and princes has been frequent in the Armenian Church” as well, “not only by domestic rulers but also by external powers, who had political influence or domination over the country.” For example, in 1220 Cilician princes blocked the election of a Catholicos arguing that there was no king on the throne and therefore a Catholicos cannot be elected without a king’s consent. Cf. NERSOYAN in Nerses VREJ NERSESSIAN, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 4), p. 215.

20. The Catholicos is the chief administrator of religious, spiritual, ecclesiastical and administrative matters and oversees the decision-making processes over dogmatic, liturgical and canonical issues. Unlike a Patriarch – for example, in the Orthodox Churches of Byzantine tradition – a Catholicos is the Chief Bishop and Head of a national Church, whose authority is not necessarily confined to a geographical area. “The Catholicos is the ecclesiastical head of a people,” while a “Patriarch is an ecclesiastical head who occupies an apostolic see and claims jurisdiction over a geographical area. And, because the head of the Armenian Church has both of [these] qualifications, he is called Patriarch-Catholicos.” Cf. NERSOYAN in Nerses VREJ NERSESSIAN, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 4), p. 271.

The Catholicos has exclusive authority to bless the Holy Muron (chrism), consecrate bishops, approve the election of diocesan prelates, discipline clergymen, and other related matters. In the Middle Ages, the Catholicos also anointed the kings of Cilician Armenia.

21. The most recent official guidelines for “Procedures for Convening the National Ecclesiastical Assembly” is the one prepared by the 1945 National Ecclesiastical Assembly and ratified by Catholicos Gevorg VI of All Armenians, who was elected Catholicos by the same Assembly. The 1945 “Procedures” define the principle responsibilities of the Assembly as follows: a) Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians; b) Election of the members of the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council; c) Establishment of the national ecclesiastical constitution; d) Examination and resolution of ecclesiastical and canonical issues; e) Stewardship of the church’s financial affairs. It also specifies the categories and procedures for representation in the Assembly and the process by which the Catholicos should be elected. For further details, see *Ejmiatsin* [Էջմիածին] [*Journal of the Catholicosate of All Armenians*] January 1944, p. 3; October-December 1944, p. 1-6; June-July 1945; August-October 1945, p. 17-18; November-December 1945, p. 38-39; December 1955, p. 9-15; October-November 1955, p. 9, 14-24, 40-67, 68-77.

22. For example, in 1995 Catholicos Karekin I of All Armenians was elected by an Assembly made of 430 delegates from 32 countries (74 % lay and 26 % clergy), representing over 8.5 million Armenians living in Armenia, Karabagh and around the world. (The population figure is provided by *Ejmiatsin*.) In 1999, the same Assembly, made of 455 delegates from 43 countries, elected Catholicos Karekin II of All Armenians. For more details on the 1995 National Ecclesiastical Assembly, see *Window view of the Armenian Church* 5 (1&2), 1995, p. 10-11. For a discussion of the 1999 pontifical election, see Hratch TCHILINGIRIAN, “A New Beginning,” *Armenian International Magazine* 10 (11), November 1999, p. 24-25.

Nevertheless, the involvement of the laity in the affairs of the Church has not been without troubles. In fact, it has contributed to the politicisation of the Church and its relationship with communities in the Diaspora.²³ A long-lasting division – which continues to have a divisive impact on church communities in the Diaspora, especially in North America – developed in 1441, when a Church Assembly decided to return the Catholicosate of All Armenians from Cilicia to Ejmiatsin, its original place of foundation.²⁴ But the incumbent of the see in Sis, Cilicia, Catholicos Grigor Moussapegiants (1439-1446), refused to accept the decision of the Church Assembly and travel to Ejmiatsin. Thus, the Assembly elected and installed Kirakos Virapetsi as the new Catholicos in Ejmiatsin. Moussapegiants and his successors perpetuated the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Sis until World War I, when it was transferred to Lebanon in the 1920s.

In 1921, following the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the Catholicos of Cilicia, along with his clergy and 130 000 surviving Armenians, were evacuated from Cilicia by the French forces and brought to Syria and Lebanon. Armenians in Cilicia had become the victims of a wave of massacres in Kemalist Turkey. Some 300 000 people lost their lives. The last Catholicos of Sis, Sahak II Khabayan (1902-1939), relocated and restored the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, a suburb of Beirut, Lebanon in 1930.²⁵ Since then cordial relations were maintained between the Catholicosates of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia. They also participated in the elections of the Catholicoi of each respective See, through two representatives – a practice that continues until today.

However, at the height of the Cold War, the administrative schism between the Catholicosate of Cilicia and Ejmiatsin took a political slant: the Catholicos in Ejmiatsin became known as “pro-Soviet” and the one in Antelias “anti-Soviet.” In the late 1950s, the Cilician See, under the influence of a political party in the Diaspora, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), stepped out of its historical area of influence and established “dissident” dioceses in the United States, Iran and Greece, thus putting the “division” in the church on diocesan and jurisdictional levels.

Catholicos Karekin I, the late incumbent of Ejmiatsin (1995-1999) and former Catholicos of Cilicia (1977-1995) explained this painful period in the life of the Church:

“In 1956, there were attempts by the Soviet state to control the See of Cilicia and to exploit it for ideological propaganda; to that end, the Communists used the name and prestige of the

23. The first division took place in the 590 when bishops of Armenia, by the order of Emperor Maurice, elected a Catholicos for the part of the country that was under Byzantine rule. However, the church was reunited two decades later when Persia defeated the Byzantines. Another long-lasting rival See developed in 1113 when a schismatic bishop declared himself the Catholicos of the Armenian Church on the island of Aghtamar in the province of Van. The See became known as the Catholicosate of Akhtamar. However, the schismatic Catholicosate ended in 1895 when the incumbent died without a successor and the jurisdictional authority of the See was transferred to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

24. The Holy See was moved to Cilicia in 1116 as a result of Seljuk invasion of Armenia beginning in the 11th century. In 1292, it was moved to Sis, the capital of Cilicia, as an Armenian Kingdom (1198-1375) was established there on the shores of the Mediterranean. (Currently in South-Central Turkey, the Adana region.) The decision to transfer the Holy See back to Ejmiatsin was due to the fact that the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia had already been conquered by the Mameluks of Egypt in 1375 and there was no plausible reason to keep the headquarters of the Church in Cilicia.

25. The property was purchased from the American Near East Relief, which run an Armenian orphanage there from 1922-1928. Eventually, a large cathedral, a theological seminary, a printing house and administrative buildings were built, enhancing the mission and functioning of the Catholicosate. The re-established Catholicosate of Cilicia received a number of churches in Lebanon and Syria from the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, with the consent of the Catholicos of All Armenians. But its jurisdiction extended only over Syria, Lebanon and Cyprus.

Mother See of Ejmiatsin. The Catholicosate of Cilicia opposed those attempts, and, as a young priest, I defended the administrative independence of that See [...]. Faced with this conflict, some communities of the diaspora, not wanting to stay under the jurisdiction of an ecclesiastical see that was being used by the Soviets to promote political objectives, asked the Catholicosate of Cilicia to be taken under its jurisdiction. That was the case for Iran and Greece.

It was a little different in America. During the Cold War between the two great powers, and in particular after the odious assassination of the Armenian archbishop of New York in 1933, a part of the Armenian community of America formed an autonomous prelacy that was not recognized by any of the patriarchal sees. But in 1957, those American communities joined the See of Cilicia.”²⁶

This highly politicised schism is the longest unresolved problem in the Church. Hopes to resolve the jurisdictional conflict were raised when Karekin I was elected Catholicos of All Armenians in April 1995. He was the first Catholicos of Cilicia to be elected Catholicos of All Armenians in Ejmiatsin. Indeed, the entire process of his nomination and eventual election was eclipsed by the issue of church unity. Many thought – including the government of independent Armenia – that Karekin I’s move to Ejmiatsin would bring a *de facto* unity in the Armenian Church. But that did not happen. In June 1995, Aram I was elected Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias. While both hierarchs considered church unity a most pressing national issue and pledged their commitment to resolve the long-lasting problem, particularly in North America, the jurisdictional schism remains unresolved.²⁷

The “self-absorption” of the Church hierarchy, inter-See disputes and disagreements, the lack of clarity of mission on the part of the official Church are compounded by a lack of learned understanding of who the “believers” in the Armenian Church are – the very community that ostensibly *is* the church, the ecclesia.

Types of Armenian “believers”

The relationship of the Church and her hierarchy with the adherents (nominal or committed) of the Armenian Apostolic Church is one of the least studied aspects of the Armenian Church and religious life in contemporary times. A closer look at the relation-

26. Giovanni GUATA, *Between Heaven and Earth*, New York, St Vartan Press, p. 107.

27. Church unity in the Armenian church is not likely to involve the merging of the Sees of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia. The Catholicosate of Cilicia has existed for 700 years. Since 1441, the activities and mission of the Catholicosate of Cilicia have been intertwined with the history of the Armenian nation in dispersion. In the last 50 years, the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Lebanon has significantly contributed to the development of the post-Genocide Diaspora. It has graduated four Catholicoi from its theological seminary, hundreds of clergymen, teachers, intellectuals, and community leaders. It is difficult to imagine that such a national institution will dissolve any time soon or, as some circles suggest, be demoted to a Patriarchate, as the ones in Jerusalem and Istanbul. The Catholicosate of Cilicia has also been very active in the ecumenical movement and is a founding member of the Middle East Council of Churches. The current incumbent of the See, Catholicos Aram I, is serving his second seven-year term as the Moderator of the World Council of Churches. In essence, “church unity” means going back to the pre-1956 diocesan boundaries – when Antelias’s “historical areas of jurisdiction” included Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus and, more recently, the Arab states of the Gulf – and the forging of a new dynamic relationship between the Sees of Cilicia and Ejmiatsin. One of the major issues facing the Catholicosate of Cilicia and the Christian Churches in the Middle East is the growing emigration of Christians from Lebanon and other Arab countries. Already, due to the 17-year Civil War in Lebanon, the Armenian community has been reduced to less than 100 000 from the pre-war number of over 250 000.

ship from the perspective of the variety of perceptions of what the Church *is* and *does* provides a deeper insight into both the Church and the people who claim to belong to it. There are qualitatively different types of “Armenian believers,” which are, at least sociologically, significant to understanding the Church’s relationship with her generally undefined flock.

While a quantitative survey (a wider research project) on the types of believers in the Armenian Church could have provided concrete figures, I would like to propose four ideal types of believers based on qualitative research I have conducted in Armenia, Karabagh and the Diaspora.²⁸ The four *ideal types*²⁹ of Armenian believers that represent a wide range of beliefs and religious understandings are: *theist believers*, *deist believers*, *agnostic believers* and *atheist believers*. (I should note that the latter two types may appear substantively contradictory, in this context I use the terms functionally to demonstrate the varieties.) These types are substantially different from the one portrayed and understood by the Church hierarchy, which tends to be a more simplistic and monolithic view of the “faithful.” The four types could be described as follows:

– A *theist believer* is someone who believes in the existence of God as creator of the universe, who has revealed himself to mankind, through the Bible. S/he has a personal relationship with God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the mediator and saviour of those who abide his word. A theist believer participates in church or collective religious services, (e.g. liturgy and/or Bible study or other prayer gatherings in homes). S/he is devoted to living a “Christian life” and considers “witnessing” an important part of living her/his faith. A theist believer is likely to be critical of the Church hierarchy and clergy for their “failure” to lead people to “salvation.”

– A *deist believer* is someone who believes in the existence of Divine Being or Power and has a rational approach to belief. S/he is not sure about Jesus Christ’s divinity but respects him as a model human being or someone who has led a God-like life. S/he respects the Armenian Church and attends services occasionally, but is very critical of the clergy. S/he considers faith as a personal matter and does not like to be told by the church or other religious groups what to believe or how to practice his/her faith.

– An *agnostic believer* is someone who does not refute the existence of God or a Divine Power but has a sceptical view of religion. S/he considers belief in an ideology or a goal in life as very important. While perhaps critical of the clergy, s/he respects the Arme-

28. The research is based on fieldwork and interviews in Armenia and Karabagh, and over dozen communities in the diaspora (such as the US, UK, France, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon, UAE, Egypt, Thailand and Abkhazia). I visited Armenia for a total of four months between 1992 and 2003; Karabagh from July to September 1995 and August of 2003, and to various diaspora communities from 1995-2002. I interviewed government officials, doctors, soldiers, clergy, teachers, journalists, intellectuals, students, social workers, senior citizens, diaspora Armenians working in Armenia and Karabagh, community activists, and others. These interviews (mostly tape recorded) – 27 in Armenia, 36 in Karabagh, 56 in the Diaspora – provide the bulk of the qualitative data for this paper. The interviews were complemented by conversations with tens of other individuals during fieldwork, field notes, and participant observations. I have also drawn on my experience and interactions with church hierarchs, parish priests and lay people while working in the Armenian Church from 1987 to 1994.

29. Ideal types, as Max Weber used it, are both abstract and general. Ideal types “do not describe a concrete course of action, but a normatively ideal course, assuming certain ends and modes of normative orientation as ‘binding’ on the actors. They do not describe an individual course of action, but a ‘typical’ one – a general rubric within which an indefinite number of particular cases may be classified. Ideal types contain no particular statements of fact. But they do, logically, involve a fixed relation between the values of the various variable elements involved.” Cf. Max WEBER, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, edited with an introduction by Talcott Parsons, London, Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1964, p. 13ff.

nian Church as an important national institution that preserves (and has preserved) Armenian national identity throughout the centuries. Though sceptical about religion, s/he may be baptized and attend church services on major holidays or on special occasions. An agnostic believer, who is most likely politically and culturally active in the Armenian community, is a defender of the Armenian Church and her national role in the life of the nation.

– An *atheist believer* is someone who does not believe in the existence of God or any other supernatural being or power. S/he has a “materialist” approach to religion but respects others who disagree with his/her interpretation of the phenomenon. S/he believes in self-reliance, personal achievement and better future for society. S/he respects the Armenian Church and considers it the sole representative of Armenian national beliefs, customs, traditions and history. Though not believing in God, s/he may be baptized in the Armenian Church and may occasionally attend church services as an expression of solidarity with the nation. An atheist believer is most likely a politically active person, a strong defender of the Armenian Church and her legitimacy in the life of the nation.

These varieties of “believers” are significant not only sociologically, but have an impact on the Church’s “evangelical mission.” Preaching to atheists or agnostics requires different approaches and methodologies than preaching to theists, the already “converted.” To my knowledge, there are no reliable quantitative surveys on the subject among the Armenians to determine the number of adherents to each of the four categories mentioned above. However, a study prepared by Carles Vilar, based on the International Social Survey (Religion), provides a useful approximation.³⁰ Based on this survey, we could put the combined numbers of *theists* and *deists* in Armenia at 49 %, *agnostics* 8 %, and *atheists* 13 %.³¹ Sociologist Anny Bakalian suggests, based on her extensive study of the Armenian-American community, “that more people come to Armenian churches to attend secular activities than they do to worship or pray.”³² In a 1985 survey of 344 Armenians in the United States, 50 % of the respondents “did not know that the Armenian Apostolic Church considers Jesus Christ to be truly God and truly Man” and 48 % did not understand the *Badarak*, the Divine Liturgy.³³ Nearly 9 % of Armenian-Americans in Bakalian’s survey belonged to “no religion.” Highly rated reasons for “attending the Armenian Church” by respondents belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church were: “Enjoy singing” (86.1 %) and “Teach my children about Armenians” (85.5 %).³⁴ More telling, 65 % of the respondents in the “Armenia 2020” survey said that “baptism and church-going are not essential for being a Christian.”³⁵

30. I say “approximation” because his categories are based on the definitions he uses for his survey results. The questionnaire was administrated in countries around the world.

31. See <<http://religionstatistics.bravehost.com/statofrel1.htm>> (30 April 2004): “Adhesion, Believers and Beliefs” by Carles Vilar; extracted from the International Social Survey (Religion), 1991. ISSP 1994: The Family and Changing Gender Roles II. Extract of the World Values Survey ‘97. Gallup International ‘97. Poll by Roger Russell Research, Szonda Ipsos, Pentor, Latvian Facts, and other institutes in 1991-93. Extract of the Eurobarometer 42 (1994); ICPSR #6518. Extract from the book *Human Values and Beliefs: A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook. Political, Religious, Sexual and Economic Norms in 43 Societies: Findings from the 1990-93 World Values Survey*, by Ronald INGLEHART, Miguel BASAÑEZ & Alejandro MORENO (The University of Michigan Press, 1998). ICPSR #2790 (World Values Survey and European Values Survey 1995 - 1998). ZA #3190 (International Social Survey Program, Religion 1998).

32. Anny BAKALIAN, *Armenian-Americans. From Being to Feeling Armenian*, New Brunswick & London, Transaction Publishers, 1993, p. 108.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

35. *Armenia 2020, op. cit. (supra, n. 11)*, p. 3.

Despite these qualitative differences among the four ideal types of “believers” there is, nevertheless, a shared “meaning system,” which provides a common point of reference to virtually all types of “believers.” This could be loosely called “Armenian religion.”

An Armenian “meaning system”

Unlike the discourse promoted by the Church and its hierarchy, not all Armenians have a common understanding of the role and function of religion in general and the Armenian Church in particular. There is a wide range of perceptions (even contradictory) of what religion *is* to the individual or the collectivity. Given the anomic history of Armenians,³⁶ one of the sociological challenges of studying Armenian “religiosity” and church-affiliation is the virtual undifferentiation of religion (Christianity) and culture (“Armenianness”) in the construction of Armenian identity. Religion, culture, national identity, and collective memory converge into what could be called “Armenian Religion,” which is very eclectic. While based on the teachings of Christianity, it does not have the rigid dogmatism of a typically Christian church. It incorporates extra-church rituals, superstitions, myths, popular beliefs, cultural and social traditions, and other pietistic forms of religiosity. “Armenian religion” is a fusion of beliefs, language, land and history. As such, religion – and by extension the Church – is viewed as a source of affirmation and validation of Armenian collective identity – regardless of the personal views of individuals.

This constructed understanding of religion is passed down to generations through two main social institutions: the family and the church. Indeed, despite the upheavals in the past (even the present) in Armenian collective life, there is a certain stability in these institutions that have served and continue to serve as a buffer between what is considered “sacred” in life and what is “profane,” between “order” and “chaos.” The family and the church are particularly significant institutions in maintaining the “plausibility structures” for the Armenian’s “universe of meaning.”³⁷ Through the family and the church, the particular worldview of the Armenian is legitimated by socialising the individual in and through the collective memory that transfigures current reality and locates it in the historically constructed world of their ancestors – a shared world that is “*the real world known and knowable*” by Armenians.³⁸ As such, we could propose that “Armenian religion” is primarily an “Armenian meaning system” – that is, a part of a constructed Armenian collective reality – which is not reducible to a particular religious creed or ideology. Religion for most Armenians is not a coherent set of beliefs or dogmas and practices, but an eclectic phenomenon. For Armenians, like the Jews, religion is incorporated into their national ethos.³⁹ Here, a brief discussion of some of the main components of this “meaning system” would provide further insight.

36. Here I use the term anomic to mean the breakdown of social standards caused by turmoil, which threaten social cohesion.

37. Cf. Peter BERGER, Thomas LUCKMANN, *The Social Construction of Reality*, London, Penguin Books, 1966.

38. Cf. Émile DURKHEIM, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, New York and London, The Free Press, 1995.

39. For example, ethnographic studies of Karabagh society from the late 19th century provide ample evidence of the diverse religious practices in Karabagh – many of which are still practised today. See, for instance, Yervant LALAYAN, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 1983 and Vol. 3, 1988, Yerevan, Armenian Academy of Sciences (in Armenian).

Belief and rituals

Armenians preserve and transmit an “Armenian belief system” primarily through the family and its extended network of relationships. Rituals connected with baptism, marriage and funerals are among the most common. One of the most widely practiced “religious” customs, especially in Armenia and the Middle East, is the offering of *madagh* (sacrifice). It is a traditional ceremony in the Armenian Church with roots in pre-Christian Armenian history. The ritual entails the slaughter of doves, chicken or lamb at a church or a special “holy place.” People offer a *madagh* for a number of reasons – on the occasion of a wedding or baptism, on a birthday or to honor a special guest, or as a memorial to a loved one on the anniversary of his death, or for thanksgiving when “prayers are answered.”⁴⁰ Almost every Armenian knows about *madagh* and has participated in or offered one at least once in his or her lifetime.⁴¹

The memory and practice of rituals and traditions, besides being a link to history, provide a collective “morality” and an Armenian “cosmology,”⁴² wherein the individual – beyond the religious dimension of the ritual act – reaffirms his/her Armenian identity through the practice. Far from being a neatly organised sets of “teachings” and practices, these beliefs constantly interact with various social institutions and forces and, as such, remain a dynamic process rather than a static corpus of dogmas.

Language

The Armenian language is considered a normative and definitive expression of “Armenianness.” The Armenian alphabet, created in 406 A.D., is believed to be divinely inspired. For most Armenians, their language is as “sacred” as the Ten Commandments of Moses. Beyond its role as a means of communication and literary creativity, language has been a significant identity marker for Armenians. A centuries-old hymn of the Armenian Church, dedicated to the inventor of the alphabet, St. Mesrob Mashtots,⁴³ explains the theological and national significance of the language:

“Like Moses, O lord teacher-priest, you brought the letter of the law to the land of Armenia, through which the children of Torgom’s tribe were illuminated.

He [Moses] became worthy to see the glory at Sinai, and receiving the life-giving commandments he gave it to the army of Israelites, through which the children of Jacob’s tribe were illuminated.

40. It should be noted here that the purpose of the *madagh* is not atonement for sins – as sometimes observers link the ritual with the Biblical sacrifice of animals – but it is for thanksgiving, healing and charity – feeding the less fortunate.

41. For instance, during more than sixty years of Soviet rule in Armenia and Karabagh, the offering of *madagh* was among the few rituals that provided the Armenians a link with their history, religion and identity.

42. Cf. É. DURKHEIM, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 38), p. 379.

43. Mesrob Mashtots (ca 355-439), a saint in the Armenian Church, was born in the village of Hatzegyats in Taron, Armenia. He studied in Antioch, where he learned Greek, Syriac and Persian. Upon his return, he worked as a clerk in the Royal Court. In 394, he left the palace and became a monk and was eventually ordained a priest. Mashtots is also credited for assisting in the formulation of the Georgian and Caucasian Albanian alphabets.

And now, O teacher-priest, we beseech through your humility, intercede on our behalf, your celebrants, to the Father in heaven, because through you the children of the holy church were illuminated.”⁴⁴

The reference to “Torgom’s tribe” in the hymn alludes to the ancestors of the Armenians, who are believed to be the descendants of Noah,⁴⁵ whose arc rested on Mt. Ararat – the holy mount of the Armenians. Indeed, literature – poems, prose, essays, songs – dedicated to the Armenian language, the *mother* tongue, is abundant. The renowned poet Hamo Sahian wrote:

“Our language is our conscience, our compassion.
It is our table’s holy bread.
It is the just voice of our spirit;
flavoring every thought that’s said.
(..) It is our first and last love.
What more in this world is so much ours;
What else belongs to us alone?”⁴⁶

The Armenian language is also a sacred symbol. It is believed that each letter of the alphabet represents a concept or a virtue. The first letter *ayp* stands for “Asdvadz” (God) and the last letter *ke* for “Kristos” (Christ).⁴⁷ In fact, it is very common to see the Armenian alphabet framed as pictures, “icons,” in Armenian homes in the Diaspora, along with key rings, coffee mugs and a range of household decorations.⁴⁸ In extreme cases, the language is “divinised” and made an “object” of worship.

“Our deep Eternity, the Language is beyond the emptiness and commotion of time, and especially beyond its maids and disciples. It demands worship day and night from its servants and lowly [followers].

[...] And we, the sowers of our Lord Language [Ter Lezu] [...]. Let us not sin against our Lord God, against our unmatched Language.”⁴⁹

Both the secular and religious significance of the Armenian language are intertwined. Armenians consider their language as the most unique characteristic of their identity par excellence. The language has temporal and eternal attributes. Stories are told how in the

44. Չպնգաղ Ծարակնց [*Armenian Church Hymnal*], Jerusalem, St. James Press, 1914, p. 381-382. See also Catholicos KAREKIN II, Հող, մարդ և գիր [*Land, Man and Letter*], Antelias, Lebanon, 1991, p. 165-177 for a contemporary use of the Moses-Mesrop comparison.

45. Cf. Movses KHORENATZI, *History of Armenia*, trans. by Robert W. Thomson, Cambridge, 1978, p. 73-75.

46. Hamo SAHIAN, “Our Language”, trans. Diana Der Hovanessian, *The Armenian Church* March-April 1996.

47. A poster published by the Gandzasar Theological Centre of the Diocese of Karabagh explains and shows the concepts or virtues associated with each letter of the alphabet.

48. The letters of the alphabet cast in gold and adorned with diamonds are preserved in a vault in Ejmiatsin as an “eternal” monument of the Armenian language. It is occasionally shown to visitors. The alphabet “monument” was commissioned during the tenure of Catholicos Vazken I and is the work of architect-painter Baghdasar Arzoumanian and goldsmith Jirair Chouloyan. Other two monuments in the “series,” made with gold and diamonds, are a *Khachkar* [cross-stone] and the emblem of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR).

49. Armen HOVANISSIAN, *Reflections for Page Two*, Yerevan, 1993, p. 3 (in Armenian). In fairness to authors such as Hovanissian, it could be argued that the “language” is used as a literary hyperbola and “out of context” citations do not necessarily express their religious views.

absence of textbooks and in extreme difficult circumstances, parents (especially mothers) made an effort to teach their children by other creative means. An informer in Karabagh explained: "My mother taught us the alphabet on a large white tray. She used to write with black coal and teach us each letter."⁵⁰ There are stories about how during the Genocide, on the "road to death," mothers taught the alphabet to children on the sands of the Syrian desert.

Similar to Jews in Israel, language has a "strategic" significance for Armenians as well. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres wrote:

"The Jewish People's challenge in today's world is to defend its unique heritage [...] Preserving the Hebrew language in the world of today and tomorrow is as much a strategic undertaking as guarding the borders has been until now. The test is how to ensure that our children remain Jewish – Jewish not merely by their ethnic origin, but by their self-identity and sense of mission."⁵¹

The late Catholicos Karekin I of All Armenians, during a visit to the tomb of St. Mesrob Mashtots, said:

"It is our prayer that our people always visit to this holy place, by means of which the faith, the spirit and the character of our people had been created. Let the sacred language of St. Mesrob Mashtots always be on our lips, let us preserve it in our souls and let us create our ecclesiastical-national life in the spirit of St. Mashtots."⁵²

Land

The Church represents a "territory," an Armenian "space," especially in the Diaspora, where entering an Armenian Church is like stepping into "Armenian soil" – a familiar and uniquely Armenian place. Thousands of church buildings, ruins of "holy places" and *khachkars* (cross stones) spread throughout Armenia and Karabagh represent "territorial markers" and are perceived as witnesses of history. Inscriptions on church walls, *khachkars* and tombs tell the story of their time – sometimes they are the sole record of an event. In some regions, churches and monasteries or their remnants are the only "record" that testify that Armenians lived on that land for centuries.

Many Armenians believe that their land is sacred, consecrated by hundreds of churches, monasteries and "holy places" and by the "blood of the martyrs" who were killed in recent wars and throughout the centuries in defense of the "fatherland" (*Hayreni hogh*). Besides churches, there are thousands of rocks and old trees in Armenia and Karabagh that serve as places of "pilgrimage" where people visit to offer their prayers and *madagh*. Land is a sacred space where "God performs miracles."⁵³ But not all "holy places" have a religious background. Some places are associated with local legends or "miracles" and the story

50. Interview in *Stepanakert* August 1995.

51. Shimon PERES, *Battling for Peace*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995, p. 356.

52. Press Release, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Information Services, posted on www.groong.com (electronic bulletin) 24 June 2000.

53. For example, Karabagh is "heaven on earth." Cf. Zori BALAYAN, *Hell and Heaven*, Yerevan, 1995, p. 568, 572-576 (in Armenian).

is passed down from generation to generation. At times the stories are forgotten, but the place is remembered as somewhere special.⁵⁴

In his inaugural Encyclical from the Diaspora, Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia wrote:

“Each Armenian individual must be firmly connected to the fatherland that belongs to all of us – eternal Armenia. We dreamed of a free and independent Armenia; we suffered for it, we struggled for it. And today, we offer a myriad of glories to God, who graced us to have our free and independent fatherland again. We must keep it like the apple of our eyes, we must strengthen the independence of Armenia and its state structures, we must restore her economy. In other words, each individual Armenian – wherever he or she may be, under whatever circumstance he or she may be – must actively participate in the sacred task of nation building. Let us never forget that the fatherland belongs to all of us and all of us belong to the fatherland, with mutual responsibilities and rights.”⁵⁵

History

History is an extension of territory for Armenians, “to be claimed and defended with fortresses of facts. Who did what, when, means nothing unless you know... who did it first.”⁵⁶ Especially since the beginning of the Karabagh Movement in 1988, history has acquired an added importance as the continuum of Armenian struggle for independence through the ages. References and accounts of national crisis and heroic acts dating back to the fifth century (the Armenians’ struggle against the Persians), the Meliks of Karabagh and their efforts to preserve Karabagh’s independence and the turn-of-the-century freedom fighters are widely recounted in public speeches and private conversations.

Fidelity to the past and preservation of the Armenian heritage is an essential aspect of being Armenian. In this context, recording the contemporary history of Armenia and Karabagh (especially of the Movement) is also a part of the unfinished and ongoing national history of Armenians. As such, history is also being constructed (and reconstructed) and is being objectified as part of the “Armenian meaning system.” Zori Balayan suggests that the writing of the history of the contemporary struggle of Karabagh is “instructed by God himself.”⁵⁷ Historians, chroniclers, poets, artists and others have written and continue to record the “history of the modern struggle” for the generations yet to come.⁵⁸ Most often

54. For instance, in almost every village in Karabagh there is a “holy place” which is usually a rock or an old tree (e.g., a two-thousand year old tree in the village of S’khdorashen). In those villages where there are no holy places, the tonir in the house – an oven or a pit dug about one meter into the ground – is used as a substitute. On major occasions, especially weddings, people visit these holy places to take an oath and “bless” the marriage, or at times of danger and disaster, people offer prayers and madagh. These practices are at least two centuries old. Cf. Y. LALAYAN, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 39), 1988, 98ff.

55. Pontifical Encyclical, Catholicos Aram I, Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 14 October 1995, Antelias, Lebanon.

56. Philip MARSDEN, *The Crossing Place: A Journey among the Armenians*, London, Harper Collins Publishers, 1993, p. 109.

57. Z. BALAYAN, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 53), p. 571.

58. See, for example, B. ULUBABYAN, *The Struggle for Artsakh*, Yerevan, 1994; Z. Balayan, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 53); V. KHOCHABEKYAN, *Artsakh at the Time of Crisis*, Yerevan, 1991; V. BAGHRIAN, *Avo* (about Monte Melkonian), Stepanakert, 1993; H. BEGLARIAN, *The Road of Immortality*, Stepanakert, 1995; Smela SAROUKHANIAN, *My Faith is Light* (poetry), Stepanakert, 1995; all in Armenian.

leaders are evaluated based on their sense of responsibility to and for history – a common Armenian standard of judgment.

As these key elements in the Armenian “meaning system” indicate, there are varying views of religion among Armenians and “believers” constantly interact with other social forces. “Armenian religion” – transmitted through the family and the church – is a “bridge” that restores a connection with past identity and culture, and in turn, establishes a basis for the reconstruction of plausibility structures of current social reality. While the Church is the main “symbol” and functionary of “Armenian religion,” it remains to occupy a peripheral role in the life of individual Armenians.

Conclusion

What makes the Armenian Church different from any other institution is its primary *raison d'être*: “the salvation of people’s souls,” as articulated by Catholicos Karekin II of All Armenians; or what Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia describes as a “community of faith sustained by the Holy Spirit.” Still, when people speak about the Armenian Church and its history, very little is said about its “religious” or “spiritual” dimension. It is the church’s cultural, ethnic and political role that is easier to understand and explain. It may be that it is the Armenian Church’s “spiritual liberalism” that makes it harder to grasp its religious function. Unlike, for example, the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrines, theology and canons of the Armenian Church are guidelines, rather than legal documents by which a believer is judged. Pastoral theology, rather than dogmatic theology, has been the basis of the relationship between the Church and its faithful. Issues of a private nature, such as abortion or homosexuality that pertain to one’s personal relationship with God are left to the individual believer to discern what is right and what is wrong. The explanation given by Catholicos Karekin II of Cilicia is instructive: “We don’t impose on our followers dogmatic principles on practical issues such as abortion or homosexuality. We have not come up with any official declaration or statement on this or that social issue, although, conceivably, we might give certain “directives” or recommendations.”⁵⁹

It could be argued that the Church’s Gospel-mandated mission has always been clear since it’s founding – i.e., to ultimately lead people to salvation. Yet, at best, this has been articulated as a theological objective and preached in general terms – with little relevance to the lives of most Armenians who identify themselves as “Armenian Christians.” If fact, most clergy would argue that the Church is not only a religious institution, but an important national and “cultural” institution as well. Yet, it is not clear what this “national” and “cultural” role is supposed to be and how it should be carried out.

With the 1700th anniversary celebrations, the Armenian Church’s hierarchy entered the 21st century with a hazy view of what is ahead, both in terms of their mission in the coming years and decades and in terms of what should be the fundamental basis of church-community relations. Internal and external challenges presented to the Church and its hierarchy require *visionary leadership* and not mere *management* of existing affairs. Continuous study, discernment and learned understanding of the “flock” and their needs are the most important requirements for the articulation and implementation of a clear mission and

59. *Armenian International Magazine* (AIM) March 1994, p. 23.

direction in the 21st century. Catholicos Aram I said it more succinctly: “Today we cannot serve our people by the titles, thrones, ranks we have, but with our moral character and spirit of servitude.”⁶⁰

In the absence of serious internal reforms, transparency, courage and clear understanding of mission, it is possible that the gap between the hierarchy and the “faithful” will grow further apart in the coming decades.

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