

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF RELIGION, MASS ATROCITY, AND GENOCIDE

Edited by
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RELIGION

A driving force but not a major cause of the Turkish Genocide of Armenians

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Armenians, an ancient people

Armenians have inhabited the Armenian plateau—a highland region in the northern part of the Middle East between the Black, Caspian, and Mediterranean Seas—for over 3,000 years. Persian cuneiforms and Greek historians of antiquity have mentioned Armenia as an organized state as early as the sixth century BC. This vast area is referred to as Historic Armenia, the homeland of Armenians and home of their national culture since antiquity until the time that the Ottoman government, the usurpers of a great part of this area, conceived and carried out the diabolical scheme of annihilating Christian Armenians, the Indigenous people of the land.

Armenians have created a unique national culture and civilization. They are situated on the crossroads of East and West, with a distinct socio-religious infrastructure as well as a patriotic affiliation to their homeland, even during periods of foreign domination. Armenia is often recognized historically as the cradle of civilization (Lang 1970). Because of geopolitical circumstances, however, Armenia has also been the stage of devastating battles from the first through the seventh centuries between the superpowers of the time, the Persian Empire in the east and the Roman (and later Byzantine) Empire in the west, each seeking total hegemony in the Middle East.

With the weakening of the Byzantine Empire and the rise of Arabs in pursuit of spreading Islam by the power of the sword, Armenians fell victim to brutal incursions in the seventh century, remaining under Arab domination until the middle of the ninth century. After a short period of respite—during which, according to Christopher J. Walker, “life was good, the economy flourishing and the arts prolific” (Walker 1980, 28)—Armenians suffered renewed assaults from the West and, consequently, Armenia was annexed into the Byzantine Empire in 1045. Armenia was left open and defenseless against the incursions of Turkic tribes from Central Asia starting in 1064, the year the last Armenian kingdom was abolished. Up until this time, Armenians sometimes achieved total independence, at other times only managed internal autonomy, and at other times were subjected to foreign rule. However, they always maintained institutions of Armenian life and culture. Characteristically, the *World Culture Encyclopedia* article on Armenia affirms that “The church has been a symbol of national culture. It has been seen as the home of Armenians and the bearer of

Armenian culture" (*World Culture Encyclopedia* n.d.). In fact, the heavy influence of religion on Armenian culture is reflected in the plethora of world-renowned religious or hagiographical literature and Architectural conceptions of churches and monasteries since early periods of Armenian Christianity.

As the Turkic tribes began to overrun Armenia and spread terror and destruction, many Armenians fled the country. In this first worldwide dispersion of Armenians, Cilicia, on the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea where Armenians had lived since the first century BC, was one of their destinations. Here, an Armenian kingdom was established that developed military and commercial ties with Europe. It became a Christian bastion for the Crusaders on their way to Jerusalem to reclaim the Holy Land. In a period of respite and European influence, the Cilician kingdom thrived commercially and culturally. It fell to the Muslim Mamluks of Egypt late in the fourteenth century and was, together with Armenia, conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the sixteenth century.

Armenians speak a language that is an independent branch in the family of Indo-European languages. They have a unique alphabet, created in 406 AD, and are the first nation to have adopted Christianity as their state religion in 301 AD. From then on, Christianity became the backbone of their culture and identity, and the Armenian Church played an important role in perpetuating Armenian national life. The majority of Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic (Orthodox) Church. Armenian communities following the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches are a more recent development.

As this short overview illustrates, throughout the turbulent history of the Middle East, Armenians have struggled for their national survival, suffering destruction through loss of life, lands, and sovereignty.

Under the Ottoman rule

Ottoman sultans governed their huge empire according to Islamic law, dividing the multiethnic, multireligious population into two categories: Muslims and non-Muslims. The latter were split into ethnoreligious communities called *millets*. Armenians, Jews, and Greeks were defined as second-class citizens and deprived of fundamental human rights. They were forced to pay special taxes, barred from giving legal testimony in government courts, and prohibited from bearing arms. Their relationship with the government was that of the ruler to the subordinate, conditioned by geopolitical givens, geography, demography, politics of power relations, and ideologies with religious and socio-cultural characteristics. The millets were given some administrative freedom in their internal affairs, and their religious leaders were responsible for their respective millet and liaised with the government. The Patriarch—the head of the Armenian Church in the Ottoman Empire—controlled the Armenian religious, educational, and judicial institutions.

Vahakn Dadrian, an authority in the study of the Armenian Genocide, discussing the Islamic sacred law as a matrix of Ottoman legal order and nationality conflict, maintains, "The Ottoman system was not merely a theocracy but a subjugative political organization based on the principle of fixed super-ordination and subordination governing the legal relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and entailing social and political disabilities for the latter" (Dadrian 1995, 4).

The millet system, for better or worse, worked for Armenians, giving them some degree of security and calm notwithstanding the exploitation of Armenian peasants. The confiscation of their property, crops, livestock, and the abduction of young women, etc., was carried

out by Turkish and Kurdish landlords and the extraction of illegal taxes by government officials.

Armenians were mostly concentrated in the eastern part of the empire, in their historic lands divided into six provinces, referred to as Armenian *vilayets*. There was also a sizeable Armenian community in Constantinople (today's Istanbul), the capital city, engaged in trading and playing the role of intermediaries between the Ottoman and European governments.

The relative calm was shaken in the second half of the nineteenth century, as Armenians, imbued with the ideas of the European Renaissance, began to seek their basic human rights and better living. In reference to the period before the massacres, Rev. Edwin M. Bliss writes:

To the Moslem, every Christian is either a slave or an enemy, to be taxed for service or to be destroyed. So long as the Armenians made no effort for political power, they were slaves; the moment they showed hostility to or impatience with Moslem rule, they became enemies.

(Bliss 1982, 482)

In the meantime, the economy of the empire had declined as the sultans had become more corrupt. They borrowed money from the Europeans to provide for their lascivious lifestyle, and in order to pay them back, levied extra taxes on the millets. To ward off any unrest, they treated the millets with increased intolerance and oppression. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the empire had lost its European and North African territories, and the Ottoman Empire was in danger of disintegration. In response to Armenian demands for equal rights and administrative reforms to guarantee the security of life and property, the Ottoman government, fearing Armenian cessation, resorted to persecutions and massacre, offering conversion to Islam and integration into the Muslim society as the only escape. According to Rev. Bliss, another alternative to murder was forced conversion. He calls it "religious persecution" and details the ferocious methods by which it was carried out (Bliss 1982, 483). By converting to Islam, victims avoided certain death but not discrimination and suspicion, unless they were totally assimilated and integrated into the Muslim society which meant complete loss of Armenian identity.

Despite all odds, Armenians clung to their Christian faith and suffered persecutions and massacres, culminating in the Genocide of 1915–1923 perpetrated by the government of the "Young Turks" and their Committee of Union and Progress (*Ittihad ve Terakki*). This last blow resulted in an end to the 3,000-year Armenian presence in what was called Historic Armenia, now swept clean of its Indigenous population. A small, ever-dwindling community remained in Istanbul, living in fear under restrictions.

This chapter will further explore the role of religion in this detrimental Turkish-Armenian relationship, how religion was used in the realization of the Ottoman-Turkish national agenda, and how Armenians—as a victimized people of faith—reacted to their traumatic experiences.

Throughout this time, Armenian literature was an insightful repository for historical developments, events, perceptions, and reactions. Armenian literature is a mirror of Armenian life that reflects the efforts of the Armenian people to comprehend, render meaning, and survive. It is the place where the making and remaking of social life are reflected. As Bernard de Voto suggests, literature "is the most dependable guide to ethics and morals, to the process of change and its implications" (Cohen 1972, 28–29). It is a reliable and veracious

source to examine the impact of the Genocide on the Turkish and Armenian peoples against the backdrop of Turkish-Armenian relationship.

The Hamidian massacres

Reacting against Armenian demands for reforms and isolated acts of defiance, Sultan Hamid II (1876–1909) ordered a general massacre. Between 1894 and 1896, 100,000–300,000 Armenians were murdered, hundreds of towns and villages were ransacked, tens of thousands fled the country, and many thousands acquiesced to forced conversion to Islam. In their magnitude of violence and casualties, the massacres marked the first near-genocidal act (Adalian Armenian National Institute) against Armenians. They generated an array of literature dominated by religious interpretations of the event. These interpretations reveal defiance of the traditional conventions in the context of the God-man relationship that has served as the central paradigm to respond to national disasters. There is a tendency to reject the notion to obey God's providence, to accept one's fate, and to comply with the situation. Avedis (Ave-tis)¹ Aharonian manifests this inclination in *El mi aghotir* [Don't Pray Anymore] and *Khaye* [The Armenian], both stories written in 1899 and first published in 1902. These stories and others by the same author are collected in *Azadutian chanabarhin* [On the Road to Freedom] (Aharonian 1956). Father Husik, in Arpiar Arpiarian's *Garmir zhamuts* [Red Offering] (Arpiarian 1937), is the embodiment of modern clergy rejecting the traditional interpretation of Christian obedience and conformity and advocating armed struggle. Still, the narrative stops short of the massacres of 1894–1896. The unexpectedness and scale of the widespread calamity overwhelm Arpiarian's ability to chronicle the event.

Siamanto (Adom Yarjalian) likewise shows ineptness to cope but breaks through with lamentation. The poem *Godorats* [Massacre], published later as *Mahvan desil* [Phantom of Death], (Siamanto 1989, 89) is a perfect example of the genre. Adopted from the Old Testament, it worked as a tool to cope with national disasters, making it possible to speak and search for a way out. In a later poem, *Tareru vrezhe* [The Revenge of Centuries] (Siamanto 1989, 41–42), Siamanto refuses to walk in his ancestors' footsteps, which led them "from defeat to enslavement and from supplication to lament." They dreaded fighting, and they were "happy in their tears." He puts forth his credo: "Justice must be created, and freedom fiercely seized." The poem ends in sanguine optimism toward the future and the revival of the nation.

The unresolved dilemma of coping with the massacres of 1894–1896 and the resulting psychological crisis persists in Taniel (Daniel) Varuzhan's mind. The long poem, *Charte* [The Carnage] (Varuzhan 1986, 141–149), more than providing a description of atrocities, is a cry of hatred toward and protest against the executioners. They are driven by animal instinct to kill and devour, and their only intellection is their inflamed religious fanaticism:

The command! There in the sermon in Bilal,
Rancor thrusts like the horns of a bull,
In the diligent courtyard of the mosque,
Sticks are shaped, whips are weaved
With venomous snakes.
Sabers are sharpened.

(Varuzhan 1986, 141)

Among other reasons for Turkish atrocities, he addresses the perpetrator's nature begotten by "the spirit of Alp-Aslan." Female survivors gather to mourn their sons, fathers, brothers,

and husbands in an outcry against the Turk, Islam, and the Sultan. Varuzhan also blames Armenians for bringing the calamity upon themselves—an internalization of the event as a new twist in the concept of sin and punishment. “The Carnage” is an extraordinary fusion of traditional and modern responses to catastrophe. Armenia is personified in the fashion of fifth-century Movses Khorenatsi’s “Lamentation” (Peroomian 1993, 18–19), in which the wretched queen (Armenian Church personified) mourns because her children have sinned and induced God’s wrath. Varuzhan’s personified Armenia, the mournful wretched woman, refuses to resort to the concept of the man–God relationship. She laments because Armenians are unprepared and unarmed. “On their shoes instead of blood, they carry the yellow mud of the fields of wheat.” Then, a sudden turn to optimism, an unexpected vision of a splendid future, is unveiled. The poet/prophet promises, “the coming/Of a Dawn, a Dawn whose footsteps/(Believe me mothers)/I hear” (Varuzhan 1986, 143).

Suren Bartevian (Partevian) has no doubt that the massacres of 1894–1896 were motivated by the perpetrator’s religious convictions, as they offered spiritual gratification. *Bud me chur* [A Drop of Water], an episode in *Kaykayum* [Dissolution], portrays the Turkish atrocities (Bartevian 1910, 1–9). The religious ecstasy of shedding Armenian blood is expressed in the faces of the Turkish mob as joy and satisfaction, as if a holy sacrifice had been offered to the God of Islam; a solemn duty toward the Prophet had been triumphantly fulfilled.

In the words of Vahagn Dadrian, “When a deed is taken for granted by the actor, the issue of compunction is reduced to irrelevance. More than that, the resort to exterminatory massacres was viewed by the whole array of perpetrators as a problem-solving behavior” (Dadrian 1995, 160). Sultan Hamid’s radical solution to the Armenian problem was implemented without regret or compunction.

The Cilician massacres

The Turkish persecutions and massacres of Armenians continued. The Cilician massacres (1909) began in Adana and spread to all of the towns and villages of the province just a few months after the Armenians wholeheartedly and full of hope for future coexistence welcomed the Young Turk Constitutional Revolution. This shocking revelation translated into the utter rupture of the old paradigm of responding to catastrophe. However, responses mainly remained in the context of Armenian religious ideology. The victims were still considered martyrs, with a variation of the connotation of the Old Testament. In addition, following the old concept of sin and punishment, the victims still addressed God and questioned, “for what sins of ours you are putting us through this harsh punishment?” (Yesayan 1957, 74–114).

The 1909 Cilician massacres took a heavy toll, killing more than 30,000 Armenians and destroying numerous towns and villages (Hovannissian 1997, 230–231). It was a paralyzing shock for Siamanto and Varuzhan. The road taking them from silence to lamentation, to descriptive narratives, to the call for action to reverse the fate of the nation, finally reaching hope for a better future, had hit a dead end. Siamanto was in absolute defiance of humanity, its principles, and its values when portraying a despicable scene of Turkish atrocity in *Bare* [The Dance]; he helplessly but revoltingly declares, “Human justice/Let me spit on your face” (Siamanto 1989, 143–144). Varuzhan’s poem, *Giligian mokhirnerun* [To the Ashes of Cilicia] (Varuzhan 1986, 155–158), is a journey through the disaster-stricken land. The wounded were left dying, unburied corpses scattered in the smoldering ruins of their homes, and men crucified, blood running down their naked bodies; “Behold! The Turk ignited the pyres of his amusement/Sobbing skeletons are burning grandly.”

Siamanto and Varuzhan did not survive the Genocide of 1915 to immortalize in their greatness its horrific depth as it occurred.

Zabel Yesayan (Zapel Esayan) chronicled the Cilician massacres in nine episodes, collected in *Averagnerun mech* [Amid the Ruins] in 1911. She faithfully recorded the scenes of atrocities, ruins, suffering, moans and laments of the survivors, and the perpetrators arrogantly boasting, juxtaposing the contrasting reactions of both the victims and the victimizers. Confronted with the impossible task of describing the gruesome scenes and unimaginable aftermath, Yesayan too resorts to lamentation to symbolize the loss and to work its cathartic effect to help open the language to find new explanations. Yesayan describes scenes of helpless submissions in *Badarake* [The Mass]. Turks have surrounded the church where Armenians are praying for God's mercy and threaten to set it on fire if they do not surrender. With bitter irony, she records the old priest's verdict, "Our Lord, Jesus Christ, by his unquestionable will, has determined that once again the innocent blood of his flock should be shed... but now, as you still have time, bow your heads and ask redemption for your sins" (Yesayan 1957, 29–35; see also Peroomian 1993, 89–116).

In another episode, *Nbasdi or me* [On a Day of Handing Relief] still in the same framework of sins and redemption, nonetheless with a twist of protesting God's will, a woman cries out, "What is this wrath of yours against us which does not die away with so much blood and tears... with all this suffering you have heaped upon us, please give us at least the patience of Job" (Yesayan 1957, 75–115). In her inability to find an explanation, Yesayan joins in with the victims, "For the atonement of what sins of ours has God remained deaf and mute as if he were absent from the holy place" (Yesayan 1957, 32). She has found a consolation: God did not see the magnitude of the disaster to stop it, subconsciously repeating the Jewish prophets' explanation of the destruction of the Temple and slaughter of His chosen people. Although she negates the typical Christian medieval martyrological literature eulogizing and fetishizing the victims as martyrs "of Jesus Christ joining the angels of justice in heaven," she uses the term martyrdom with its original pagan Armenian connotation: a supreme devotion to freedom and justice.

In her realistic narrative, in *Chambun vra* [On the Road], Yesayan contrasts scenes of ignominious submission with heroic acts of self-defense—those "who smelled more like gunpowder than incense, and from whose mouth flowed words of encouragement to fight rather than prayers and calls for submission" (Yesayan 1957, 148). In her search for motives behind the catastrophic events, she examines Turkish ethnic, religious, and psychological characteristics. Yesayan looks at the victimizer—men and women alike—through the eyes of frightened orphans, widowed women, and peasants having lost their crops. She attributes the atrocities to the Turkish ethnic construct, "nurturing bloody aspirations and destroying," but she admits that the role of religious fanaticism instilling hatred against non-Muslims was the major factor in the carnage: "[The Turks'] hatred is like the fire of hell... they denied our humanness... they killed us saying, "You don't have a God! Just as your Christ died by torture, so will each one of you die by torture" (Yesayan 1957, 169).

Bartevian's response to the Cilician massacres in *Giligian arhavirke* [The Cilician Catastrophe] has a more secular context. In one of the essays, *Bot ev ahazank* [Sad News and Alarm], he writes about the "Freedom, Liberty, and Brotherhood," promised by the Young Turk Revolution, being abolished in Cilicia and concludes, "The truth is that it is the Armeno-Turkish brotherhood that is being strangled, murdered and buried in ashes in Cilicia" (Bartevian 1909, 34; see also Peroomian 1993, 117–150). His interpretation of the event is political and more introspective, with only some religious overtones in the context of renouncing God. Father Hayrabed, in *Hayrabed* [Hayrabed], the village priest, cries out,

“If my God is also the God of these [Turkish] unbelievers, these ferocious beasts, I don’t believe in God... I don’t believe in God” (Bartevian 1909, 169). In *Khorann u badneshe* [The Altar and the Rampart], in *Ariuni madiane* [The Book of Blood], under the spell of Armenian armed defense during the 1894–1896 massacres, he rationalizes the destruction of the altar of an old monastery to use the material for building a bulwark to defend against Turkish assaults. Shocked from this sacrilegious deed, the old priest suffers a heart attack, and his dead body lies on the floor of the abandoned monastery. Bartevian calls it “the cadaver of religious submissiveness” (Bartevian 1915, 77). What persists though is the religious parlance, as he uses loaded words with biblical references like holocaust,² Golgotha [of liberty], and faith, or the ravage of it.

And the Genocide—the final solution

The Turkish Genocide of Armenians was the final solution (Dadrian 1999) to the “Armenian Question” which is explained by Richard G. Hovannisian as being the question of “the plight of the Armenian population and its struggle for civil rights and administrative reforms” (Hovannisian 1997, 203). This ultimately brought about the total destruction and dispossession of Ottoman Armenians and was a turning point in the history of the Turkish-Armenian relationship. The government used all the “ammunition” accumulated, or rather disseminated and ingrained in the Turkish psyche by consecutive governments and policies of sultanic regime through the long history of that relationship. They promoted the perception of Armenians being not complete human beings, second-class citizens or *rayas*, unequal to the free Muslim sons of Turkey, *kafirs* or *gavurs* (unbelievers), enemies of Islam who got rich at the expense of Muslim peasants, unworthy beings, vermin, dirty dogs (dogs were considered *haram*, unclean, and forbidden by the Koran), and all other monikers that could stigmatize and dehumanize the victims and marshal a large number of victimizers. Rev. Edwin Bliss speaks of the way Armenians were treated with absolute disregard toward their customs and religion, abusing and degrading them way before the massacres of 1894 (Bliss 1982, 349–352). Analyzing the responses of the Genocide survivors, Miller and Miller assert that “The dehumanization, degradation, and humiliation that occurred... established the experiential basepoint from which some survivors have never recovered” (Miller and Miller 1986, 187–202).

To top all this, at the outset of WWI, a Jihad or “holy war” was declared by *Fetva Emini* on November 14, 1914 against the enemies of the Ottoman Empire, namely the Entente Powers. However, since it was insinuated that the enemies of the Ottoman Empire are the enemies of Islam, the campaign turned inward and targeted the non-Muslims of the empire, particularly the Armenians. The Muslim masses were ready to pitch in. And, indeed, it was the participation of the Muslim masses, men, women, and even children, that helped Genocide go more smoothly and farther. It is estimated that during the years between 1915 and 1923 (from 1915 to 1918 by the Young Turks, and from 1920 to 1923 by the Kemalist nationalists), over one-and-a-half million Armenians perished through outright murder, mass-killings, or otherwise died on the perilous roads of deportation and exile into desolate wastelands. The few survivors were not allowed to return to their towns and villages and were driven out of the country.

The 1920s saw the permanent diasporization of Armenians. The aftermath of the Genocide was irremediably bleak. The survivors, scattered around the world, struggled to build their lives anew (Dekmejian 1997, 415–416). Increasing cultural activities attest to a gradual revival but also reveal the profound impact of the Genocide. Responses to the shattering

breach of Armenian life consisted of nostalgic expressions, recourse to the past, lamentation over the loss, and pathetic descriptions of Turkish barbarities in scenes of slaughter, rape, and looting. In this comprehensive and complex range of manifestations—a search for meaning, a subconscious effort to transcend trauma and make survival possible—faith or the Christian tenets of the man-God relationship helped determine the relationship between the victim and the victimizer, a source of hope for deliverance. Vahan Tekeyan epitomizes the situation in his poem, *Spiurk* [Diaspora], likening Armenian Genocide survivors scattered in the world to grass pulled from their ancient fields and drying. He addresses God as the “God of growing things” and asks for a way out pessimistically, without expecting an answer (Tekeyan 1982, 8). Tekeyan’s response to Genocide is further discussed in *The Armenian Genocide in Literature* (Peroomian 2014, 47–48, 61–66).

Two contrasting religious beliefs juxtaposed – In *Vrezhi avedaran* (Natalie 1918), descriptive poems of blood, tears, mourning, and lamentation, Shahar Natalie emphasizes the Islamic religious beliefs generating hatred and intolerance toward the non-Muslim and sees this phenomenon as the primary cause of the genocide.

The role of religious ideologies in a genocidal atmosphere is best illustrated in Hagop Oshagan’s *Vrtovvats khghchmdanke* [The Agitated Conscience] (Oshagan 1983, 19–33; see also Peroomian 1993, 173–215). In his attempt to create an unbiased approach and see the act both from the victim’s and from the victimizer’s points of view, Oshagan describes the spring that runs between the two neighboring Armenian and Turkish villages as the spectator watching the slaughter of the Armenian village. Nevertheless, the spring identifies itself with Armenians, the Indigenous people of the land. It tries to understand the “newcomers” in the depths of whose souls it discovers “the pitiless, bloodthirsty beast hiding under the stony innocence of their white gowns and turbans” (Oshagan 1983, 23). The slaughter is presented as a mysterious religious ritual, a sacred sacrifice offered to God by pious Muslims and their holy leader. The devout call God’s name a hundred times a day with a particular intimacy and reverence; they beseech God to bestow power on their arms and peace to their conscience. God’s name is ultimately sanctified by shedding the blood of the infidels, burning and looting their belongings, and celebrating the holocaust.

Yervant Derentz, an eight-year-old orphaned boy trying to escape from Deir-El-Zor, was captured by a Turkish ox-cart driver. He remembers the Turk brandishing his knife and praying to the Prophet Mohammad, “I wasn’t able to go to Chanakkale to kill *gavurs*. This boy is an offspring of a *gavur*, a serpent. Accept this as my sacrifice” (Derentz 1984, 4).

At the same time, as we see in Oshagan’s “The Agitated Conscience” (Oshagan 1983, 19–33), another nation is offering its last prayer to the same God, “whose injustice that nation forgets after every carnage, and is ready to be slaughtered once again for the sake of His love” (Oshagan 1983, 24). In this exemplary episode, the religious beliefs of the two nations (Muslim and Christian) are juxtaposed. The first is taught to sacrifice others (the infidels) as the ultimate glorification of God’s name; the other has learned to self-sacrifice and to accept martyrdom as an ultimate sign of piety and devotion to God. The old religious leader dressed in white, the embodiment of God himself, gives the first example of the ritual sacrifice and stands back to watch his followers carry out the slaughter. For Armenians, the massacres are an unsurmountable catastrophe, Oshagan concludes, but for Turks it can be a source of mystical gratification and the fulfillment of a sacred ritual.

Political aims camouflaged - The motivators of the massacres in Oshagan’s “The Agitated Conscience” appear to be religious intolerance and fanaticism. Nonetheless, he believes and shows in other episodes that religious intolerance was a stratagem used by the government to ensure the participation of the Muslim mobs and states that the final solution could not have

been achieved without the large-scale involvement of these masses. Ironically, if religious gratification on Earth was not enough, another enticement was put to work: if you kill a Christian, you will be awarded a *houri* (one of the beautiful virgins of the Koranic paradise) (Bonapart 1975).

Religious motives camouflaged the government's political aspirations driven by the ideology of Turkism—Turkish nationalism based on the Turkish race, which, however, could not guarantee the wholehearted endorsement and cooperation of the Muslim populace. Islam was the key ideology, although most of the Young Turk leaders were atheists. "Islam to them was little more than a vehicle through which they might mobilize the masses" (Walker 1997, 242). And they did.

The word went out that, as Alice Muggerditchian Shipley cites in her memoir, *We Walked, Then Ran* (1983), "The Turkish government does not want these *gavur* pagans to remain on its holy soil" (Shipley 1983, 61; see also Shipley 1985). Muslims exulted. Yervant Derentz remembers that when the Armenian population of Aintab was put on the road to exile, their Turkish neighbors cheered with joy, "La-illa-Allah, illa-Allah Mohammad! The mutt is taking its road" (Derentz 1984, 10).

More than once in her memoir, Shipley mentions Assyrians helping the Armenian refugees and giving them shelter. This corroborates with the fact that Assyrians and other Christians of the empire were still untouched, the Armenians being government's only target of annihilation. This itself speaks of hidden motives other than eliminating religious minorities. Other memoirists too speak of the help they received from the Assyrians or the Greeks. Nargiz Zhamgochian's grandmother entrusted her and her little brother to Greek Nikos, a loyal and hardworking tailor in the family's shop (Ianko 2004; see also Peroomian 2014, 282–292). Levon Zaven Surmelian speaks of the same compassion in *I Ask you Ladies and Gentlemen* (1945), with Greek families hiding Armenians while they could.

Internalization, self-criticism – A passage in Oshagan's famous novel, *Mnatsortats* [Remnants], provides evidence of the author's view of the role of the Armenian Church in perpetuating the Armenian nation. Surprisingly, he puts his criticism of the tenets propagated by the Armenian Church and the means it employs to ensure the rejuvenation of the Armenian people in the mouth of a high-ranking, well-educated Turkish officer:

Yours is a pure retreat into the past; in other words, retreat from your present. You should not descend into the abyss of centuries to obtain strength... You pursue the psychology of your ancestors which is to reach maturity for death.

(Oshagan 1933, 289)

In line with the Turkish officer's views, Oshagan criticizes Armenian religious leaders for preaching obedience to fate and to God's will and eulogizing martyrdom for the sake of Christianity.

Bartevian's response to the Genocide continues in the realm of self-criticism and internalization of the event. In *Annah potse* [The Undying Flame 1916], he vigorously attacks Armenian religious and social traditions and attempts to inject into the Armenian armed struggle a new spiritualism that is not inspired by religious beliefs.

Aram Andonian's response to the Genocide, *Ayn sev orerun* [In those Dark Days] (Andonian 1919), is a perfect example of the internalization of the tragedy. It is a realistic description of Hell on Earth, with suffering and predominance of death. Men and women caught in these catastrophic events resort to self-serving acts, turning into vicious executioners to compensate their own unbearable pain only to stay alive. The perpetrator and his crime are exposed but not given importance to play a central role in

the tragedy, which is presented as an internal drama of the nation. Andonian was perhaps subconsciously following the traditional Armenian responses, in which the enemy was regarded as an instrument of divine judgment and whose identity did not matter. The victimizers are physically absent in Andonian's narrative, but evidence of their violence is felt in every image. Moral and religious order has collapsed; the victim is dehumanized, fulfilling the perpetrator's intent. After all, it is easier to kill a creature that has lost all human attributes. This much emphasis on the ugly facets of the victim's psyche is a nihilistic psychology for Oshagan and is unacceptable (Oshagan 1968, 378–379). In psychological terms, as Jack Danielian puts it, "Through accumulative violent exploitation of the victim, the victim begins to take on the shameful responsibility of the perpetrator" (Danielian 2014, 247).

The Armenian God versus Allah – Oshagan pictures two images of God in "The Agitated Conscience" and argues that these two images cannot belong to one God. The oneness of God is thus challenged. The God to whom Armenians pray cannot be the same God who accepts the sacrifice and does not object when

the victims were forced to keep their eyes open to the very end to see the shame rising from the pile of beheaded bodies and to hear for the last time the insults addressed to their powerless God and their religion.

(Oshagan 1983, 26)

This notion echoes Aharonian's *El mi aghotir* [Don't Pray Anymore] in *Azadutian chanabarin* [On the Road to Freedom], when the village priest begs the Kurdish Bey to spare his life in the name of God, and the Kurdish executioner answers, "Our God and yours are not the same" (Aharonian 1956, 35). Henry Morgenthau, American Ambassador to Turkey (1913–1916), describing Turkish methods of torture, writes in his memoirs, "In some cases, the gendarmes would nail hands and feet to pieces of wood—evidently in imitation of the Crucifixion, and then, while the sufferer writhed in his agony, they would cry: "Now, let your Christ come and help you" (Morgenthau 1975, 306).

In his protest against God, Shahan Natalie too insinuates the duality of God when he scornfully states in *Hay vorputium* [Armenian Orphanhood], "God does not know... Allah knows" (Natalie 1918, 13–15; see also Peroomian 2014, 60–68). In fact, Allah, the God of Islam, is present in all six poems of Natalie's *Vrezhi avedaran* [The Gospel of Revenge], commanding and encouraging the carnage. Allah himself devises all the diabolical means of bloodshed. "Allah's eyes have always burned red, from the day/when the Armenian God went blind" (Natalie 1918, 30). Similar images showing this duality repeat in all the poems of *Vrezhi avedaran*.

John (Hovhannes) Minassian's elderly father came to see him in the Turkish jail, as the male population of Gurun was rounded up to be murdered before the rest were deported and asked him to pray and not lose faith in God. But Hovhannes was in no mood to pray. He writes in his memoir *Many Hills Yet to Climb*, "I felt as though God had indeed surrendered his powers to Allah and that it was too late for prayers or anything else" (Minassian 1986, 52; see also Peroomian 2014, 242–252, 349–350). This thought remained with him as he walked along the formidable road of deportation. Coming across the remnants of the massacre of the earlier caravan, where corpses of plundered and murdered deportees lay strewn on the mountain pass, he noticed a small Bible open to the page that read "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow and Death... I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." The verse is in ironic contradiction of the reality, he thought (Minassian 1986, 65).

In a parallel construct with Yesayan's and Bartevian's testimony, Aram Andonian records wretched deportees in the Meskene concentration camp calling on God, "O God... Where is God?" Their interpretation of Genocide is still in the context of the man-God relationship, deeply rooted in religion. Only this time, God is blamed for remaining silent, for not acting to save his suffering flock.

Blaming God, even holding a grudge against Him, is a prominent theme in Vahan Tekeyan's poetic conceptualization of the Genocide and its aftermath. In *Bidi esenk Asdutso* [We Shall Say to God], he writes:

[...] let us swear that when we find
God in his paradise offering comfort
to make amends for our pain,
let us swear that we will refuse
saying No, send us to Hell again.
We chose Hell. You made us know it well.
Keep your paradise for the Turk.

(Tekeyan 1982, 10)

In another poem, *Piti mornank* [We Shall Forget], Tekeyan addresses God as an accomplice to Turkish executioners, stating, "The evil done to us by man and by you, God" (Tekeyan 1982, 43; see also Peroomian 2014, 64–66).

Natalie's *Vrezhi avedaran* epitomizes protest against God. Calling the carnage the nation's Golgotha, in *Verchin aghotk* [Last Prayer], he evokes the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and reminds God that He granted immortality in heaven to His son who was crucified only once, while "my nation was crucified for the sake of the crucifix seven times seven, but the crucified Jesus did not even smile upon them" (Natalie 1918, 19–24).

Hagop Asadourian, a young boy on the deportation route, remembers in *Hovakimi tornere* [Joachim's Grandchildren] (Asadourian 1965), their caravan from his village Chomakhlu (Çomaklı), people moving slowly, walking with difficulty, praying all along as if in a religious procession. Suddenly, the shocking outcry of a woman disrupts this religious fervor. She is desperate, shouting like crazy:

After fooling us and lulling us with a blunt quill and scroll, you pulled the *Koran* out of a belligerent bull's horn and gave it to Mohammad. Instead of the quill you put sword in his hand. Then you went up, and now you laugh at us, resting comfortably on your throne..." The other women, bewildered, tell her to ask for mercy and forgiveness, but she carries on.

(Asadourian 1965, 224; see also Peroomian 2014, 103–107)

In their struggle to find an answer to the great loss, many turned to the past and blamed the Armenian ancestors and the Christian Armenian tradition. Antranig Dzarugian (Andranik Tsarukian) writes in *Hogh ev ariun* [Soil and Blood]:

For the sake of a very old and blood-soaked bit of soil,
We turned a whole nation into a mother in mourning.
For the sake of a cross and a frail crucified,
We turned a glorious epic story into a miserable tale [...]

(Peroomian 2014, 177–178)

He accuses ancient Armenians of abandoning the glorious pagan faith and adhering to Christianity, which only brought the nation pain and suffering.

In those days of total mayhem, what kept the deportees going, in many cases, was their strong faith. Kerop Bedoukian writes in his memoir *Some of Us Survived* (1979),

My mother had found a way to get under the cloak of St. Peter when her physical strength seemed to fail her. As to her spiritual strength, she seemed to have an unlimited supply, drawn from her faith in Jesus Christ.

(Bedoukian 1979, 68; see also Peroomian 2014, 232–237)

Alice Shipley remembers that her mother's faith was so strong that, "Never a day passed during which Mother did not find something for which to thank [God]." In the hardest of times during the family's escape, she surmised "The Lord is giving us another test to strengthen us to face more difficulties awaiting. So, we'd better thank him again" (Shipley 1983, 132–136). Haiastan Terzian, whose brother-in law was the bodyguard of Leslie Davis, the American consul in Kharbert, attests that while the congregation witnessed the bloodshed near Lake Goljuk (today's Lake Hazar) and the thousands of naked corpses of men, women, and children, they held prayer meetings and sang Christian songs. But Haiastan also attests that under the heavy impression of the scenes of murder, her brother-in-law lost faith in God, and it took months until he set foot again in a church (Terzian 1991). Another example is Rev. Abraham Hartunian's memoir and his "dialog" with God in *An Odyssey of Faith: Neither Laugh Nor to Weep* (1999). It is quite evident that religious fervor and resorting to God's mercy in extreme situations is more frequent in survivors with Protestant upbringing compared to those belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church (Miller and Miller 1993, 177–181).

The concept of sin and punishment continued to serve as an answer, especially among elderly women constantly praying and talking to God throughout their tragic journey to death. Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas' grandmother kept praying and asking God for an explanation: "God! Was it our sins? What sins did we commit that you allow us to be tortured like this? What are the sins of these innocent children? Release us from these horrors. I beseech you" (Highgas 1985, 66; see also Peroomian 2014, 253–259). Nargiz's grandmother's words of prayer were similar, but she did not question God. "God All-Mighty, forgive our grave sins! I have lived too long; my sins should be the most numerous and heaviest among all of us. Punish me and show them [the rest of the family] your mercy" (Ianko 2004, 160). Decades later, as Nargiz relived that moment, she elaborated on God's involvement, writing that,

God had taken a map of Turkey and a red pencil and marked all those death-march routes for the Armenians, ending them in the desert or in the depths of the sea. Of course, He did not like that some victims disobeyed his plans.

(Ianko 2004, 181)

Forced conversion – If the Nazi Holocaust involved racial issues and conversion was not an option, in the Armenian case, conversion to Islam was encouraged. It was the only way out of the massacres and deportations, especially at the beginning stages of Genocide, until it was exposed that Armenians were not sincere in their adoption of Islam. Arch. Zaven Der Yeghiayan, Patriarch of Constantinople (1913–1922), attests that requests to convert to Islam were not readily accepted, as they were during previous massacres. The government put conditions on those who applied to prevent the subjects' recourse to their old faith, such as delivering their children up to the age of 12 to Turkish orphanages, leaving their native areas, and settling in places indicated by the government. He writes,

when a woman applied to convert to Islam, it was required that a Muslim be available to take her as his wife... Those converting to Islam in the coastal cities.... have immediately been moved to purely Muslim inhabited areas in the interior.

(Der Yeghiyan 2002, 89)

As Fethiye Çetin notes in her memoir *Anneannem* [My Grandmother] (Çetin 2008; see also Peroomian 2012, 141), the new converts were labeled and noted in registration papers as *muhtedi*. That label served as a major obstacle, hindering the Armenian minority and anyone with a trace of Armenian blood from getting ahead in Turkish society. I discuss the dire experience of Islamized Armenians and the testimony of Kemal Yalçın (2007) elsewhere (Peroomian 2012).

To further force conversion, the government established orphanages for young children to grow up oblivious of their lineage. Karnig Panian's *Goodbye Antoura* (2015) best describes the inhuman methods used in the orphanage to Islamize and Turkify Armenian Children. Hampartzoum Chitjian too describes in his memoirs his and his three younger brothers' ordeal in the Turkish *mektab* (religious school), a purgatory of Islamization (Chitjian 2003; see also Peroomian 2014, 293–303). The government also gave assistance to Muslim families who took in small children or young Armenian women to bear children in Muslim households. Henry Morgenthau writes, "These Armenian girls represent a high type of womanhood and the Young Turks, in their crude, intuitive way, recognized that the mingling of their blood with the Turkish population would exert a eugenic influence upon the whole" (Morgenthau, reprint 1975, 291). Osman Köker, publisher and journalist, too, attests that improving the race was a hidden motive of the government for this operation (Peroomian 2012, 103–105).

Conversion to Islam was especially forced upon young women. Otherwise, it was an immediate death for those who refused to relinquish their Christian faith and convert to Islam. Arshaluys Mardigian's memoir, *Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl who Lived Through the Massacres* (1918), tells the story of hundreds of Armenian maidens tortured to the point of making the difficult choice between converting to Islam and going on living in Turkish harems, accepting torturous death, or committing suicide (Mardiganian 1918, 1980, 1984; see also Peroomian 2014, 314–328).

The Genocide continues

The genocidal atmosphere continues to prevail in the Republic of Turkey. Armenians live in the post-violence stage of the Genocide, the stage of denial by the perpetrator. This stage encompasses not only the revision and distortion of history, and changing toponyms, but also expunction of all physical evidence of centuries of Armenian presence in Turkey. This expunction especially includes the destruction of religious and cultural edifices. Since the beginning of the Genocide, many Armenian churches throughout the country were destroyed by fire, artillery, and explosives. Others were converted to mosques and museums with Armenian inscriptions and other Christian signs effaced. According to a study, the Turks managed to destroy 2,500 churches and 450 monasteries (Kouymjian 2010).

The secularism intended by Mustafa Kemal has alarmingly given way to the steadily increasing importance of religion in the Turkish identity, dividing Turkish citizens once again into two distinct categories: Muslims and non-Muslims. Prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance are still rampant. The old monikers continue to identify Armenians and

“leftovers of the sword” is added in reference to those undeservedly left alive after the massacres. Nothing has changed. Ahmet Altan’s poem, “1915–2007,” on the occasion of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink’s murder, describes the situation. “Nothing much has changed, it seems./They were murdered in 1915 as well/[...]/They are being murdered in 2007 too” (Peroomian 2012, 41).

In their push to create an ethnically and religiously homogeneous state, Republican governments and especially President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have kept tightening their grip and creating a suffocating atmosphere for religious minorities. Governmental policy is buttressed by educational tools and textbooks generating hate toward Armenians labeled as traitors and terrorists who stab Turkey in the back. The textbooks characterize Armenians as people “who are incited by foreigners, who aim to break apart the state and the country, and who murdered Turks and Muslims” (Akçam 2014, para 3). Turkey refuses to accept responsibility for its past, burdening its people, as Vigen Guroyan illustrates, with “an uneasy conscience,” leading to “a deformation of character,” “likely to be afflicted by inner disharmony and outwardly erratic and irrational behavior” (Guroyan 1986, 135–152).

The Turkish anti-Armenian temperament has infiltrated Armenia’s easterly neighbors, the “brotherly” Azerbaijanis who, encouraged and assisted by Turkey, are continuing today where Sultan Hamid and the Young Turk government left off. During the Soviet era and the forcibly imposed artificial peace and cooperation among the peoples of the multinational Soviet Union, neighboring Armenians and Azerbaijanis maintained a brotherly relationship on the surface, despite conflicts and mutual intolerances. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the artificially imposed relationship also collapsed, and the enmity culminated in wars and violations of human rights. There have been systematic attempts of ethnic cleansing and historical revisionism, presenting the medieval Armenian cultural and religious monuments as expressions of Azerbaijani ancestral heritage, destroying churches and cross-stones, and denying the presence of Armenians in Historic Armenia’s eastern regions. In the words of Arif Yanus, an Azerbaijani historian and human rights defender living in the Netherlands, “Ilham Aliyev upgraded Armenophobia to the level of Fascist Germany’s anti-Semitism” (Maghakian and Pickman 2019). The result of this ingrained hatred is the recent Azerbaijani aggression with direct Turkish participation, and the atrocities committed: use of banned weapons and ISIS mercenaries, thousands of casualties and displaces civilians, prisoners of war tortured and beheaded, civilians imprisoned and killed, and religious monuments desecrated.

Nothing much has changed. Armenians still face similar genocidal challenges and threats of further usurpation of the small homeland they live in today.

Notes

- 1 For the transliteration of all Armenian names of authors and their works, Western Armenian pronunciation is used.
- 2 The term *voghchagez*, literally meaning burnt alive, was used in the translation of the Old Testament from Greek into Armenian for the Greek word “holokaustos,” the equivalent of “burnt offering” (*Korban Olah* in Hebrew). During the Turkish massacres of Armenians, it was a common practice to lock the Armenian victims in a church or a building and set the building on fire. The term *voghchagez* or *voghchagizum* (the act of burning alive) was commonly used to describe this atrocity. The word had a strong religious connotation and referred to the Armenian sacrifice to the God of Christianity, exemplified in the Jewish tradition. The term holocaust was, thus, typically used in the Armenian Genocide literature.

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