Soviet Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church

Carnegie Samuel Calian

*Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*

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Soviet Armenia is the smallest of the fifteen republics that comprise the Soviet Union. Armenia is a land-locked area with Soviet Georgia and Turkey to the east, and Soviet Azerbaidzhan and Iran to the east. Not far away are the Black and Caspian Seas, which are on either side of the neck of land referred to as the Caucasus.

Armenia's small size is more than offset by the greatness of spirit found among the people, over two million in number. They are warm, friendly, and very hospitable to strangers. On the other hand, they are also cautious and guarded in their conversations. Having been subject to "outsiders" for centuries, Armenians have found that frankness can be dangerous, especially with foreigners. This caution is expressed in an ancient Armenian folk proverb: "You never know a man until you have eaten a barrel of salt with him." Another adage reads, "He who speaks the truth must have one foot in the stirrup."

But, once you are invited into a home and have broken bread with several families, a spirit of sharing and exchange can arise. Within this atmosphere of congeniality, a visitor can catch glimpses of Armenian life. I am reminded of a home filled with neighbors who came to see and to hear this visitor from America. One man was describing some conditions in the Republic. When additional guests entered the rather small living room, he stopped suddenly and changed the subject. Later the speaker nudged me and whispered that he was not free to continue with his previous remarks because, "I don't know where these new guests stand." This was not an isolated occurrence but a common one in the lives of these people. The visitor must penetrate the surface and begin to perceive what is really taking place. In general, there

*See biographical note at end of article.*
seems to be a relative absence of freedom as we know it in the United States, and the presence of fear.

Inevitably people, even Communist Party members, observe that things are much better than they were formerly, referring back to the rule of Stalin and Beria which terrorized their lives. A statue of Stalin once overlooked the capital city of Yerevan; the empty platform now symbolizes the end of an era.

With Stalin removed, greater attachment and respect are given to Lenin, the father of the Soviet Union and the architect of the Revolution of 1917. His presence is not only seen but felt everywhere—from the impressive statue of Lenin in the city's main square which is named after him, to smaller busts and resemblances of him in the schools, courtrooms, offices, and stores. Even in the resort area of Lake Sevan, a short distance from Yerevan, one finds on the patio where vacationers stroll a gold-colored figure of Lenin seated on a bench. This figure of "comrade" is placed almost everywhere either to exhort or to warn the populace. One day I asked a Communist guide if this presence of Lenin—the preservation of his body lying in majestic state in Moscow, his many portraits found in stores and homes—was perhaps a bit overdone and would someday be the source of a possible reaction as in the case of Stalin. The guide replied, "We know, of course, Lenin is not a god, but he was a great man, and we find ourselves indebted to him. It would be impossible for us to overdo our honor to one who has done so much for us."

Without a doubt, the Republic of Armenia, as well as the entire Soviet Union, has made immense strides since 1917, and especially since the close of World War II. Everywhere in Yerevan one sees buildings being erected, particularly apartment buildings since there is an acute housing shortage. Waiting time for a new apartment is at least one year. Most people live in one-or
two-room apartments, using the living room as a bedroom and dining room as well. A family of five or more often lives in a crowded apartment designed for two.

The streets of the city are wide and well swept. Most street cleaners seem to be women. Indeed, women make up a considerable portion of the work force. The recent decades have seen the women emancipated from many domestic chores in order to take on an increasingly important role in society. They have acquired equal status to their male counterparts in almost all respects. This is quite a change considering the Oriental environment that had conditioned these women in the past. The Communist Party has set for itself the task of transforming, through a program of secularization, the traditional Armenian folkways found in the home, village, and church.

If one is to evaluate the material progress of Armenia or any of the other fourteen republics of the Soviet Union, one must do so in a twofold manner. Appraisal must be made standing within their "system" and comparing it to their history prior to the revolution; then one must step outside the "system" and judge it in comparison with Western standards. The first viewpoint shows definite evidence that the vast majority of people have more material benefits now than earlier. But in comparison with the West, their condition looks bleak and depleted, as evidenced by the scarcity of consumer goods.

Traditionally, most Armenians look to their church, the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, as their spiritual and national protector. That is to say, the church inspires and spiritualizes the nationalistic aspirations of Armenians throughout many parts of the world. The Holy See or head of the
Armenian Church is located in Etchmiadzin, a few miles from Yerevan. Countless pilgrims around the world come and honor regularly His Holiness, Vasken I, Catholicos of all Armenians.

Vasken I is an impressive man to behold, particularly as he approaches the cathedral from his residence at the stroke of twelve noon each Sunday in his vestments. Onlookers crowd both sides of the walk, pressing for a glimpse of him and hopefully for a blessing from him. The cathedral itself is filled with worshipers and the curious. The latter are in a state of wonder, roaming around as if in a museum instead of a church. Christian education as we know it is forbidden in the Soviet Union; many curiosity seekers are actually would-be worshipers—if only they could be taught. In the present situation, the curious are drawn to the pageantry of the worship. They sense that something important is taking place, yet they are not able to comprehend the meaning of the event.

The lack of Christian education leaves the door open for superstition to be mixed with true doctrine. Clergymen in Armenia are aware of the difficulties they face. The most that a visitor can contribute is appreciation of the situation, and empathy.

*The existence of the two catholicoates—Etchmiadzin and Antelias (the latter better known as the See of Cilicia)—does not indicate that there are in essence two Armenian churches, but rather that they are two parts of one church. The two Catholicoates actually have their respective jurisdictions, with independent status, and with the primacy of honour being recognized by the Catholicoate of Cilicia for the Catholicoate of Etchmiadzin. The Supreme Catholico-Patriarch Vasken I is the first among equals in primacy of honor. His position is rather similar to that of the ecumenical patriarch in Istanbul. The Holy See of Cilicia is in Antelias, Lebanon, five miles from Beirut. The present incumbents at the See of Cilicia are Catholicos Khoren I and Catholicos Karekin II as Coadjutor. Etchmiadzin commands a larger following than does Cilicia, but the latter is not without its influence, especially in the Middle East and as far as North America. These two centers are parts of the same church.
Endurance, suffering, and even martyrdom are well-known experiences of these Eastern Christians. They appreciate and understand their faith enough to be willing to die for it. In the churchyard outside the cathedral stands a reminder of martyrdom associated with Armenian history. This monument in particular commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the martyrdom of more than one and a half million Armenians in 1915. The very fact that a national monument such as this is placed on the church grounds is a significant admission. In spite of the years of Communist indoctrination, there still persists among the people a close identification of their national culture with Christianity.

One of my Communist guides expressed this identification by claiming that he was "both an atheist and a Christian." "But how can this be?" I asked. He explained that as an Armenian he did not consider himself a Moslem, Hindu, or Buddhist, but a Christian by heritage. Thus, he acknowledges the claim of Armenians that through their monarch, King Tiridates (probably in 301 or 303 B.C.), theirs was the first nation to accept Christianity, more than a decade before the conversion of Constantine to Christianity. Armenia as a result became the eastern-most border of Christendom, one of the primary reasons for her history of unmatched suffering and martyrdom at the hands of her oppressors.

The Armenian Church has been classed among the so-called Eastern or Oriental Churches which are characterized as monophysite, i.e., holding that there was but a single nature in Christ—a description which incidentally is inaccurate in the case of the Armenian Church—as opposed to the Orthodox dyophysite (affirming a two-nature Christ). The rupture between the Eastern and Orthodox churches occurred at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The Eastern churches rejected the procedure in which the discussions were carried
on and therefore regarded the council as illegitimate, while the Orthodox looked upon this withdrawal as heretical. Today there is growing rapprochement, between these "monophysites" and "dyophysites," and it is my conviction that the smaller Oriental churches will begin to share the ecumenical scene, which in the past has been monopolized by their larger sister Orthodox churches.

The Armenian Apostolic Church (the official church name) traces its history back to St. Bartholomew and St. Thaddaeus. The conversion of the area took place under the leadership of Gregory the Parthian, surnamed by the Armenians Loosavorich (the Illuminator), who led their King Tiridates II to the Christian faith and with him the nation.

The theological position of the Armenian Church is expressed in its acceptance, along with that of the other Eastern churches, of only the first three ecumenical councils, i.e., those of Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus, which took place between 325 and 431 A.D. These three councils set forth respectively the divinity of Jesus Christ, the nature of the trinity and the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. For the Armenians they form the chief basis of authority since they alone were unanimously adopted by the whole of Christendom. The Armenians believe any further spelling out of theological dogma beyond these three councils is essentially unnecessary.

Such a stand, which might at first seem theologically weak and naive, has positive theological merit. These first three ecumenical councils covered the essential Christian beliefs concerning a triune God who became incarnate for our salvation. Herein lies the essence of the Christian message. To go beyond this dogmatic limit is to become involved in unnecessary speculation and attempts to reduce the fundamental mysteries to a level of human comprehension. It essentially loses the biblical tension between mystery and meaning
in the Christian faith. We in the West tend to be too rational, whereas Eastern spirituality reminds us that there is always an element of mystery in our faith. Armenian Churchmen believe that theologians and believers have in the first three ecumenical councils all they need upon which to respond and to reflect until the awaited parousia.

To sum up, then, the chief characteristics of the Armenians' historic and theological witness is to maintain simplicity in the midst of profundity and to avoid encumbering the church and her people with an unending line of dogma.

The church in Armenia is free to function, but limitations are placed upon any social or educational activities, since these are areas regulated solely by the state. Consequently, the institution is weaker in its impact upon the whole of society. The regular worshipers at church are mostly elderly people, sprinkled with a few younger parents who bring their infants for baptism, usually at the urging of the grandparents. The Communists concede that the elderly usually can't be changed from their folkways, so they are allowed to "dabble in religion." The Communists concentrate their energies upon saving the youth from an "unenlightened way of life" as espoused by the church. It is difficult to estimate to what extent the state is succeeding. The Communists regard the church as one of the key factors (and obvious scapegoat) in preventing progress. As a result, many churches have been legally closed for one reason or another.

For example, I visited a small community of ten thousand persons. There I noticed a church standing behind the school yard. The church was locked. A grandmother was passing by with a child at her side, so I asked where the priest was. She answered that there was no priest; the church had been closed
for years. I asked her if she believed in Christianity, and she replied she did, but the bedoutune (government), nevertheless, had locked the church. This scene could be repeated through Armenia. In Yerevan, there are three Apostolic Orthodox churches and one Protestant church--four churches serving a population of over a million inhabitants!

There is a shortage of priests throughout Armenia. It was reported to me at the time that there were approximately fifty-two priests in Armenia, twenty-five of whom reside in the monastery in Etchmiadzin. Many of the priests in Etchmiadzin are teachers in the theological seminary there, which has approximately thirty students recruited at the age of fifteen or sixteen for some six years of study. The study period of many is interrupted by compulsory military service. As a consequence, some do not return to the seminary to complete their studies following military service.

In spite of these difficulties and limitations, the church continues to live. It is difficult to measure the success of her witness, especially since external indications are strictly limited. Nevertheless, it appears that the Armenians still have sufficient instruction in the faith to become martyrs. Perhaps this is the most significant sign for us in the West to bear in mind.

Dr. Carnegie Samuel Calian (United Presbyterian) is currently President and Professor of Theology at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He studied at Occidental College, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the University of Basel, where he received his doctorate in theology. He taught for many years at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. He has written seven books, including Berdyaev's Philosophy of Hope and Icon and Pulpit, as well as numerous articles, many of which concern Eastern Orthodox churches and history.