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RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE ON THE CONFLICT IN NAGORNO KARABAKH

By Hratch Tchilingirian

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Nagorno Karabakh is a small territory of 4,388 square kilometers in the South Caucasus. With an Armenian population of about 150,000, it remains the oldest region with unresolved conflict in the former Soviet Union. The crux of this conflict is the right of self-determination of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh on the one hand and the territorial integrity of what is now the Republic of Azerbaijan (formerly Azerbaijan SSR) on the other.

What had started as a popular movement for self-determination in 1988 turned into a full-scale war in 1991, with far reaching political and military implications. Today the situation is further complicated by the fact that both parties in the conflict, the Armenians of Karabakh and the Republic of Azerbaijan, consider what used to be the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) an integral part of their respective territories. In September 1991 the Supreme Soviet of Nagorno Karabakh declared an independent Republic of Mountainous Karabakh (RMK), encompassing the territory of the former autonomous region, plus the Shahumian district in the north. This was confirmed by a referendum in December 1991 when elections were held for a new parliament (boycotted by the Azeri minority). No state has recognized the RMK's independence including the Republic of Armenia.

While the war is not officially over, May 12, 1998 marks the fourth anniversary of the cease-fire in Nagorno Karabakh, after six years of armed conflict and bloodshed. The war has claimed over 25,000 lives on both sides, created more than one million refugees (about 450,000 in Armenia and 750,000 in Azerbaijan), and has destroyed several hundred villages in the region.

In February 1992 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE at the time) called for a cease-fire, humanitarian aid, an arms embargo and a guarantee of human rights. Since then, OSCE has become actively involved in facilitating negotiations for the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict, since March 1992, OSCE's Minsk Group has become the main forum of negotiations between the parties to the conflict. The Minsk Group talks have attempted to formulate a political agreement to determine Nagorno Karabakh political and legal status, demilitarization of the region, international guarantees, and deployment of peacekeeping forces between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis. To date, however, the two-dozen plus OSCE-sponsored negotiations have not yielded any concrete results.

Not a religious war

Since the beginning of the "Karabakh Movement" in 1988, the Armenian-Azeri conflict has been portrayed, particularly by the Western media, as an ethnic rivalry between 'Christian Armenians'

and 'Moslem Azerbaijanis'. And through the years both sides have persistently rejected such characterizations. On several occasions Armenian and Azeri government and religious leaders have stated that the war in and for Karabakh is not a "religious war" at all. I would agree that the war is not a "religious war."

Despite official declarations, religious symbolism and sentiment seem to be more than peripheral aspects of the conflict. Both Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalism and irredentist passion have been heightened by a "new" religious consciousness. This essay will examine the religious dimension of the war with particular focus on the role of the Armenian Church and clergy and the language of religious discourse in Karabakh.

When limitations on religious freedom were lifted, beginning with *perestroika* in the mid-1980s, most countries that were under Soviet influence experienced a resurgence of religious faith and revival. The sudden return to religion and the subsequent ritual catharsis caught the established Church in Armenia by surprise. The late Catholicos Vazken I of All Armenians admitted, "We never anticipated that the freedom of religion that was granted would create such a situation for which we were certainly not prepared" (Tchilingirian 1992:7). The Church was ill prepared as it had neither the resources, the personnel, nor the leadership to respond to the growing spiritual needs of the people. As in the case of other churches in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the Armenian Church was also faced with the problem related to the anti-religious socialization and ignorance of the flock, and with accusations of collaboration with the communist regime.⁽²⁾

Beginning in 1988, the earthquake, the struggle for independence, the war in Karabakh, and the blockade of both Armenia and Karabakh all helped to shape the public and private lives of Armenians. Parallel to the political, economic and social factors of these events, a religious dimension had been added to Armenian public discourse.

Besides its rich cultural heritage, Karabakh, like Armenia, has an impressive religious history. For centuries, it had been a region with vibrant religious institutions, hundreds of churches, monasteries and church schools.

The historic roots of the Church

Soon after Armenia's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century,⁽³⁾ the Kingdom of Albania (not to be confused with Albania in the Balkans), which included the provinces of Artsakh (later Karabakh) and Utik, converted to Christianity through the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the evangelist of Armenia (cf. Akopian 1987: 124-7). Grigoris, the grandson of St. Gregory, was appointed head of the Albanian Church around 330 A.D. He was martyred in 338 while evangelizing in the northeast region of the country near Derbend (currently Dagestan). His body was brought to Artsakh and buried in a church in Amaras (Martuni region). In 489 King Vachakan the Pious renovated the church and built a special chapel dedicated to Grigoris (Mkertchian 1985: 140-142). Even today the monastery of Amaras is one of the most important shrines in Karabakh and is considered a holy site for pilgrims. Karabakhtzis are also proud of the fact that Mesrop Mashtotz, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, established the first Armenian school in Amaras (cf. ArmEncy. Vol. 1, 1974: 277; Leo 1947: 152).

The Albanian Church was established by the Armenian missionaries and pledged canonical allegiance to the Armenian Church. In the wake of the controversy over the 'dyophysite' Christology of the Council of Chalcedon, the three churches jointly convened the Council of Dwin in the sixth century and refuted the decision of Chalcedon.

In 552 the seat of the Albanian Church was moved from Derbend to Partav and an Albanian Catholicosate was established. The patriarch of the Albanian Church was given the title "Catholicos of Aghuank" (Artsakh and Utik) and received his ordination and canonical authority from the Catholicos of Armenia (Ulubabian 1981: 201-4).

From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, more than forty monasteries and major religious centers were built in Karabakh through the patronage and efforts of the Armenian princes of Artsakh. In time these monasteries became

...chimneys of enlightenment and a warm hearth of Christianity, incense-full houses of worship, protectors of faith, hope and love, defenders of nationality, language, literature, and holy places that unwaveringly defended the unique and orthodox doctrines of the Armenian Church (Parkhoudaryants 1902: 193-5).

One of the most famous clans to have contributed to the revival of the Church and piety in Artsakh is the Hassan Jalal princely family who, besides building the famous monastery of Gandzasar, gave several Catholicoses and bishops for the service of the church in Karabakh. The last clergyman in the Jalal clan, who is buried in the courtyard of the monastery of Gandzasar, has the following engraved on his epitaph: "This is the tombstone of Metropolitan Baghdassar, an Armenian Albanian, from the family of Jalal the great Prince of the land of Artsakh, dated 3 July 1854." Prince Hassan Jalal was also buried in the same monastery in 1261.

Beginning with the fifteenth century, the monastery of Gandzasar became the seat of the native Catholicos of the Albanian Church. The existence of a separate Catholicosate in Karabakh, with its own autonomous religious institutions, attests to the importance of the region as a religious center.

In the 19th century, the status of the native Catholicosate suffered a great deal. In 1815 when Tsarist Russia liberated Karabakh from Persian domination, Catholicos Sarkis of Karabakh, was demoted to the rank of Metropolitan by a decision of the imperial authorities. Metropolitan Sarkis headed the see until his death in 1828. After his death, the Meliks (princes) and the people of Karabakh, requested that Catholicos Yeprem of Etchmiadzin ordain Baghdassar, a nephew of Sarkis, Primate of the Diocese of Karabakh. He was ordained in the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin (Ter Danielian 1948: 62-67). Thus, the Catholicosate of Karabakh was reduced, first to a Metropolitan seat and then to a diocese of the Armenian Church.

Between 1820 and 1930, Karabakh was a hub of vibrant religious and cultural life. The Diocese of Karabakh and Swiss missionaries (the Basel Evangelical Association) operated ten schools in Shushi alone⁽⁴⁾ and founded the first printing press in the region in 1928. Church and privately owned printing houses published over 150 titles on biblical, theological, philosophical, scientific and literary subjects. More than a dozen newspapers and journals were also published in Shushi, such as ethnographer Yervant Lalayan's *Ethnographic Journal* (the first volume). A remnant of this religious-cultural renaissance is the famous Cathedral of Our Savior (1868-1887) in the Kazanchetsots neighborhood of Shushi (Lalayan 1988 and Ter Gasbarian 1993).

Prominent scholars and teachers taught at the diocesan school in Shushi, among them, the well-known monk-teacher Hovsep Artsakhetsi. He was the first Armenian philosopher on Synthetic logic after the German school of philosophers and wrote on logic and epistemology. His first work was *First Element of Philosophy: Logic* published in 1840 (cf. ArmEncy. Vol. 6, 1980: 579).

It is interesting to note that there were also women monastics and deaconesses in Shushi, a rare phenomenon in the Armenian Church, who were involved with social and pastoral work under the aegis of the diocese.

The Church in the early Soviet period

In 1918 the Bolshevik Revolution gained force in the Transcaucasus, the Russian army disintegrated. The Ottoman Turks marched over the region, threatening the Armenians and Azeris, as well as other small ethnic groups. Faced with the possibility of a complete Turkish take-over, the representatives of the Armenians, Azeris and Georgians formed a Transcaucasian Federation. However, within a few months, by May 1918, the Federation had failed. Armenia Azerbaijan and Georgia proclaimed independence and became new republics. Since there were no true ethnic administrative boundaries, the new states became embroiled in a series of border conflicts, the most protracted and crucial of which centered on Mountainous Karabakh (Hovhannisian 1971: 4). Having been left to face their own uncertain future, Karabakhtzis formed the First Assembly of Karabakh Armenians and elected a People's Government in August 1918.

In February 1919 the Assembly dispatched Bishop Vahan of Shushi and Hrant Bagaturian, a member of the Executive Council, to Tiflis. He was to present the case of the freedom of Karabakh Armenians directly to the representative of Great Britain, General Thomson. However, their case fell on deaf ears. As political tension grew, 600 Armenians were massacred by Azerbaijani forces in a village near Shushi. Eventually the Armenians were forced to sign an agreement to provisionally put Karabakh under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan until the Paris Peace Conference (Hovhannisian 1971: 21; 33-35). This also signaled the beginning of the end for the Armenian Church in

Karabakh.

In 1923, when Soviet rule was established in Mountainous Karabakh, the Armenian Church was the first national institution to face monumental obstacles. In a letter dated November 3, 1924 the Armenian prelate of Baku, Bishop Mateos, addressed the Supreme Religious Council in Etchmiadzin, and reported that despite the State's decree on freedom of conscience and religious services, local communist leaders were taking violent and extreme measures against the priests and the church. Ignorantly thinking that these were state laws, the people and the priests dared not complain to higher authorities. They had neither protection nor a chief-prelate and were left in doubt. At the end of the letter Bishop Mateos urged the Supreme Religious Council to send a prelate to Karabakh without delay and, in the meantime, requested them to formally write the central authorities in Karabakh to bring to their attention the illegal acts of the regional officials (*Documents* 1994: 55-56).

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

The new prelate visited the churches and monasteries in Karabakh and sent several reports to Etchmiadzin about the worsening conditions of the church as well as the pressure on his own activities (*Documents* 1994: 171-2; 241-2). His activities were closely monitored by the Commissar for Internal Affairs of Mountainous Karabakh.⁽⁵⁾

In a letter to the Catholicos, Kevork V (1911-1930) in Etchmiadzin, Bishop Vertanes lamented the situation of the church in Karabakh. "Everyday dozens of churches and monasteries are being closed, clergymen are being imprisoned and exiled. Please help us in this dire situation. All we are left with is 112 functioning churches, 18 monasteries, and 276 priests" (*Etchmiadzin Archives and Documents* 1994: 172, 242). Meanwhile, the efforts of Etchmiadzin to negotiate with the authorities over the plight of the church in Karabakh yielded no results. On February 7, 1930, Bishop Vertanes was arrested and jailed. After nearly two years in prison, he was released as "the Supreme Court did not find [him] guilty of any crime." Upon his release, he returned to Etchmiadzin "to recuperate" and was never allowed to return to Karabakh (*Documents* 1994: 242-3). Thus ended the activities and formal existence of the Armenian Church in Karabakh.

There were 250-300 priests serving in Karabakh and its regions until the early twentieth century.⁽⁶⁾ Today there are only six clergymen in Karabakh, including the prelate, Bishop Barkev Martirosian. For more than fifty years there were no functioning churches or clergy in Karabakh.

The return of the Church to Karabakh

A month after a popular uprising and demonstrations in Yerevan and Stepanakert, in March, 1988 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Council of Ministers of the USSR, issued a decree on social-economic developments in Nagorno Karabakh. This also encouraged a climate for cultural and religious revival.

Prior to the formal opening of the church, a renewed interest in religion and the church was created by the visits of preachers belonging to the Brotherhood of the Armenian Church. By 1987 they had attracted a following who later converted and became devout Christians.⁽⁷⁾ This coincided with the beginning of the "national liberation movement," when protest signatures were collected in secret in Karabakh.

In early 1988 these new converts began collecting signatures secretly to have churches reopened in Karabakh. The signatures were presented to the authorities and a copy was given to the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin. One of the converts described the conditions of the time:

The KGB was chasing us for doing this. They were threatening us and all sorts of things. But we didn't pay much attention to it. We collected the signatures and went to see the Catholicos with a delegation from Karabakh.⁽⁸⁾

This campaign of the "believers in Karabakh" provided Catholicos Vazken I additional leverage with the authorities to reestablish the long-defunct Diocese. In November 1988 he appointed Barkev Martirossian as Prelate of Karabakh. However, prior to the announcement, he had sent a young native-born priest, Fr. Vertanes Aprahamian, to Karabakh with the returning delegation that had visited Etchmiadzin. Fr. Vertanes, (renamed after the last Bishop of Karabakh) was the first clergyman to visit the enclave in decades. He stayed with believers and "secretly baptised people in homes, because the OMON forces [Special Forces of the Soviet Interior Ministry] were spread throughout the regions and were chasing the youth who were active [in the movement] and arresting them."⁽⁹⁾ About seventy people were baptised and they created the core of workers who would later help in the reopening of the churches.

Soon after, four priests and the newly appointed Prelate came to Karabakh to establish the Diocese. After six months of preparation and reconstruction, the first church was formally reopened on October 1, 1989 at the Monastery of Gandzasar. In his sermon on that day the Bishop declared: "Today is the beginning of our victories." The head of RMK Radio and Television Broadcasting, who was present at the opening and the inaugural Divine Liturgy, described the significance of the event:

[This] was the first Divine Liturgy in Gandzasar, celebrated for the first time in sixty years. I remember there was a Russian reporter who was filming the event and I approached him and asked what was his impression of this event. He captured our sentiment when he said, "A people whose faith is impossible to kill, murder, or destroy, is invincible. You are such people."⁽¹⁰⁾

From the very beginning they were trying to take away not our land, but our faith. And they thought they were successful because for sixty years there were no functioning churches in Karabakh. They had turned them into animal barns. Today people go to any given church in Karabakh every Saturday and Sunday--not only to light candles or pray for the sake of praying--but they go there as believers, even if they don't know what exactly that entails.⁽¹¹⁾

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

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

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

A significant project of the Diocese of Karabakh was the establishment in Yerevan in 1990 of the Gandzasar Theological Center, which produced literature in great quantities for both Karabakh and Armenia. Today the Center employs more than forty scholars, theologians, experts and support personnel and is the publisher of the first *Theological Journal* in Armenia and Karabakh.

Within three years of its reestablishment, the Armenian Church had regained its legitimacy not only as religious institution, but also as a national institution that fought alongside the people of Karabakh. Freedom of religion, ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union, coincided with the struggle for liberation. Evangelistic efforts of the church were eclipsed by the national aspirations of the people and the mass mobilization process for Karabakh's independence. The Church was one of the first national institutions that was "reclaimed" by the people, even by those who were unbelievers, as a historically significant source of their religious and national identity. The functioning of their mountain-protecting monasteries and churches provided hope for Karabaktzis who were facing questions in their struggle, while the prospect of war with Azerbaijan was increasing.

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

people of Karabakh to the outside world.⁽¹²⁾

The role of the clergy

The young and charismatic Bishop, Barkev Martirosian,⁽¹³⁾ and his five priests, despite their small number, established a theological context to the war and rendered vital pastoral service to the people, especially the soldiers. The Bishop explains:

[The Azeris] are forcing us to go to war. They are forcing us to use our weapons. Their desire is to destroy Karabakh by force, to occupy our land by force. That is evil. This is the work of the evil one. This is very clear. When you are unable to stop the evil through prayer and by words, and he is coming to devour your body, by raping and perpetrating immoral acts to your sister and mother, to your daughter and children, it is your duty to protect and safeguard their lives. When you are defending [the innocent], it does not mean that you are killing [your enemy] and doing evil. That's your moral obligation. Secondly, when there is evil, evil must be uprooted. Morally, we are obligated to do this, all of us (Tchilingirian 1994: 6).

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

People compare the role of the clergy in Karabakh with the role of the clergy during the Battle of Vartanantz in the fifth century. That is, providing spiritual counsel, encouragement and offering prayers for the soldiers.

People remember especially those times when the priests were with the soldiers during the fiercest and most crucial battles. Scores of soldiers would come to the priests before heading to the battlefield to be baptised. One priest describes:

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

The priest and the soldiers were together. Those days, those experiences created a bond between the church, the soldiers and the authorities. It was a unifying bond. It was like Vartanantz.⁽¹⁴⁾

There were instances, especially when churches were bombed or attacked, when priests were caught in the fire. But they continued to provide pastoral care to the people and the soldiers. The priests' presence and witness in the battlefield, where they faced the same dangers and consequences as the soldiers, have accorded them the same honor as those who defended the land.

The language of religious discourse

The language of religious discourse in Karabakh is quite different than in Armenia. In Armenia one barely hears about "miracles". But in Karabakh a great many miracles purportedly are taking place.⁽¹⁵⁾ The perception that God is "present" and "visible" in Karabakh constitutes the basis of religious discourse. The war has a definite theological meaning. The Bishop articulates this theology: "Our movement is holy and just. God has created us as Armenians and we have been baptized as Christians. He has given us this land and we are obligated to preserve it in the best way we can." This perception is accentuated by the use of symbolic religious language. Hence, there are no victims, but *martyrs*. And death is considered a *sacrifice* for the welfare and "regeneration" of the people. *Sinners* are defeated by the determination of *saints* who are willing to be killed for the greater "glory of God." Soldiers "realize that in order to attain victory, they need great spiritual power. "They need God's power" (Tchilingirian 1994: 4-8).

In June 1995, during his first pontifical visit to Karabakh, Catholicos Karekin I reaffirmed this theological stance:

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

Karekin I stressed that the Armenian people face an "invisible enemy," that is "the temptation to be soft, to be weak and to retreat from our principles."⁽¹⁶⁾

Religious discourse in Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijanis have not called the war in Karabakh a *jihad*, but nevertheless, their nationalism has primarily been anti-Armenian in content and Islamic in context (cf. Martin, 1990: 8). For example, the party program of several Azerbaijani political parties contain Islamic elements in their objectives.⁽¹⁷⁾

Concerning Karabakh, in October 1988, the head of shi'ite Islam in the Transcaucasus, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allah-Shukur Pasha-Zadeh, strongly attacked the "enemies of Islam" and called for "mobilization and vigilance of the faithful."

This was not quite the call for holy war that the more militant Muslims wanted, but it was sufficiently strong to convince many hesitating Azaris [sic] that the nation had to close its ranks and put itself on a war footing. Ayatollah Pasha-Zadeh's move coincided with the onset of the shi'ites' months of mourning (Muharram and Safar). On Tassu'a, the ninth day of Muharram that marks the start of the final cycle of martyrdom in the shi'ite calendar, a series of mass demonstrations took place in Baku, Kirov-Abad, Sumgait, Shemakhi, Sheki and Lenkoran. Tens of thousands of men, all dressed in black, followed by women wearing the Islamic *hijab* [the black shroud covering face and body] marched through the streets for the first time in decades.

They carried flags and banners associated with the rite of mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali, the third imam of shi'ism. At regular intervals the crowds stopped to listen to the mullah's sermons recalling the tragic events of Karbala in the eighth century. In parts of Baku portraits of the Iranian shi'ite leaders Grand Ayatollah Abol-Qassem Mussavi-Kho'i and the late Grand Ayatollah Muhammad-Kazem Shariatmadari and the flag of 'Lion and Sun', were carried by the demonstrators (Taheri 1989: 171-2).

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

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

Sabra analyzes the Armenian-Islamic cause and blames all Armenians for cooperating with the Zionists.⁽¹⁸⁾ The *Al-Kifah* weekly reported: "Reliable sources in East Beirut reveal that the 'Lebanese Forces' [Christian Maronite militiamen] have moved their struggle to the Caucasus, this time not against federalism, but with separatist intentions."

In January 1990 the Assembly of Islamic Religious Leaders declared the following:

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

The Assembly found "certain Armenians" guilty of provoking and instigating unjust demands for Karabakh and called upon all Armenians to stop the demand for unification of Karabakh with Armenia.⁽¹⁹⁾

The government of Azerbaijan tries to "downplay [the] religious dimension of the Republic's popular movement"

(Hunter 1993: 238-390). In June 1995 President Aliyev visited the central Taza Pir mosque in Baku to offer prayers for Mohammed's grandson, imam Hussein and seventy-two of his companions who were martyred in the seventh century. He addressed the crowd:

Today the Islamic world celebrates the day of execution of holy imams who have sacrificed themselves in the name of the Motherland, nation and the faith...the selflessness of imam Hussein serves as an example for hundreds and hundreds of Azeri citizens who resisted the Armenian aggression with credit, who did not spare their lives for the sake of the freedom and independence of the Motherland...Today the whole Azeri nation bows its head before the memory of the heroes. Our nation will remain loyal to its traditions, and to its belief.⁽²⁰⁾

President Aliyev expressed hope for an immediate end to the war, liberation of all seized Azeri Lands and the homecoming of refugees.

An important difference between the Armenian and Azerbaijani religious discourse is that the former is not directed towards the Azeri people, but against a regime and a nationalism that calls for the expulsion of Armenians (Helsinki Watch, 1991:6) from Karabakh. The Armenian religious discourse is "introspective." There is an awareness of "the evil" within and without, and the notion that without extricating the evil found within, the evil without cannot be overcome. "Disloyalty to God" would bring God's wrath upon the nation. The principal tenets of this religious discourse are: the eradication of evil (both within and without) and the protection of the land that "God gave" to Karabakhtzis. Based on this doctrine it is hoped that ultimately "Karabakh will become a unique country, where people will live piously and according to high moral standards" (Tchilingirian 1994:18).

Preventing moral anomie

The theological dimension of this religious discourse is further explained in a booklet by Bishop Barkev Martirosian entitled *Divine Help for the Christian Soldier*,⁽²¹⁾ where he presents a "theology of liberation" and deals with the issue of "just war." He provides a meaning system and a basis for distinguishing between "right" and "wrong" ways of behaving under war conditions. In this pocket-size booklet prepared especially for the soldiers of Karabakh, religion is presented as a means to prevent the occurrence of moral anomie.

War, like other catastrophic phenomena in life, creates not only physical and material destruction but also a moral crisis in the life of a society. The seven-year military confrontation and struggle--and the uncertain prospects of the future--have affected the moral and social orders in Karabakh.

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

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

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

He then goes on to explain the "spiritual fortification of the soldier." In order to "take up the armor of God," the

soldier is asked to be mindful of, (a) prayer and thanksgiving, which should accompany the Christian soldier, just as "all military training and combat exercises;" (b) honoring the Holy Cross, as "an enemy-chasing power in the war;" and (c) bravery, because "God is the Lord only of the brave." Martirosian concludes his exhortation by urging the soldier to "remember [his] glorious ancestors and the achievements of today's heroes" and assures him that "the nation is praying for [him]" so that [he] may be a loyal fighter and a true soldier of Christ."

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim argues that every religion provides a means to enable men to face the world with greater confidence (Durkheim 1972: 227). In *Divine Help*, Martirosian uses Armenian Christian religion to give the Karabakhtzi soldiers this "greater confidence" to face the world--their world--under war conditions. The "sacred cosmos" that Martirosian draws in *Divine Help* includes the soldier in its ordering of reality, thus providing him an "ultimate shield against the terror of anomie" (Berger 1967: 27). Martirosian provides a clear reference to a meaning system that is particular, as well as universal, in its scope.

The Church in Karabakh has assumed the responsibility to set a certain moral and ethical context to the war on the one hand, and the nation-building process on the other, by establishing a balance between the national aspirations of the Armenians and their religious values. However, since the declaration of independent statehood in Karabakh, the role of the Church has changed. A priest surmised that between 1989 and 1991, "the church was much more significant, was much more valuable than perhaps it is today."⁽²²⁾ Nevertheless, it is still an important moral and spiritual source for the people of Karabakh both as a national and religious institution.

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