

FATHER VAZKEN MOVSESIAN

# THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

AND

## THE PROBLEMS OF EVIL:

*A survey of Armenian Clergy*

THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AND THE PROBLEMS OF EVIL:



2015

Father Vazken Movsesian

# The Armenian Genocide and the Problems of Evil:

A survey of Armenian Clergy

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A survey of Armenian Clergy**

Written in partial requirement,  
Master of Arts in Social Ethics  
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United States of America

**Hovsep Movsesian**

1982

This publication is dedicated to  
**Mr. & Mrs. DAVID & MARGARET MGRUBLIAN**

For decades, you have exemplified your Christian spirit through your selfless service to the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America and the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church. Your generosity and enduring support of the mission of the Western Diocese is exemplary and commendable, indeed.

May the Almighty God shower you and your wonderful family with heavenly blessings.

“Serve the Lord with gladness!  
Come into his presence with singing!”

*Psalms 100:2*

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## Primate's Message

Rev. Fr. Vazken Movsesian's "*The Armenian Genocide and the Problem of Evil: A Survey of Armenian Clergy*," originally written thirty-three years ago for USC's School of Religion as a partial requirement for MA degree in Social Ethics, explores in depth the problem of evil from the orthodox perspective of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Theodicy, in its true sense of the word, often times is deliberately shunned by contemporary orthodox theologians, for questioning the omnipotence of God is tantamount to committing a sin. Hence, the problem of evil is shifted onto the human free will. On the other hand, the Western theologians and bereavement psychotherapists discern theodicy as a normal stage in the grieving process, which doesn't necessarily defy our Christian faith.

Rev. Fr. Movsesian approaches this sensitive issue from a pastoral point of view as he studies the trauma of the Armenian Genocide and its impact on the survivors and their descendants. In his case study, which includes the interviews of 18 clergymen of the Armenian Church, the common thread is quite noteworthy. When trying to explain the problem of evil in the context of the Armenian Genocide, the clergymen make frequent references to the mystery of the Resurrection of Christ.

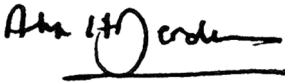
And indeed, 100 years after the Armenian Genocide, we should find healing, peace, and closure for our grief in the Passion of Christ, and especially the mystery of His glorious Resurrection, thus reconstructing our lives in the newness of the risen Christ.

As the Chair of the Diocesan Centennial Commemorative events, and as a pastor, Rev. Fr. Movsesian made the metaphor of

Resurrection a theme of jubilant celebration, which focuses on the spiritual rebirth and collective achievements of the Armenian nation. In the words of the author, *“Evil has never succeeded whether it manifested itself by the Turkish sword or in the form of an opponent of the Armenian people. Perhaps that will be the fate of the Problem of the Evil as well. Evil has been defeated in Armenian communities, and it will be defeated in the future, if the Armenian people continue to retain their consistent and unshakable faith in God and the Armenian Church.”*

We wholeheartedly thank Rev. Fr. Vazken Movsesian for his arduous and conscientious work as the Chair of the Armenian Genocide Centennial Commemorative events of the Western Diocese and congratulate him on this valuable publication.

Prayerfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hovnan Derderian", written over a horizontal line.

Archbishop Hovnan Derderian  
Primate



## Preface

This thesis was written in 1980, sixty-five years after the start of the Armenian Genocide. As a child I grew up with stories of the Genocide told to me by my grandmothers, both survivors of the Turkish atrocities, one from Sivri-hisar and the other from Palou. I was always amazed at how faithful they were to God and the Church despite enduring unthinkable and unimaginable tortures and pain. It was out of that amazement that the thought for this thesis came about. It was written as a requirement for an MA in Social Ethics at the University of Southern California. Dr. Donald E. Miller was the head of the thesis committee.

I'd like to thank Archbishop Hovnan Derderian for his perseverance and insistence to publish this thesis as a book. This is not a book of theological answers or discourse; rather it is about pastoral care. It looks at a question which plagues us today in the face of terrorism, challenged us during the Vietnam War, haunted us in 1915 and has been around since the first concepts of God evolved, namely, why would a good and just God allow evil to exist in a world He created?

In preparing the final text for publication I had a chance to re-read this document 35 years after I first wrote it. Needless to say I am at a far different place than I was back then, both emotionally and spiritually. However, herein is reflected the mindset of a generation of clergy who had the awesome responsibility of reconstructing and keeping the doors of the church open after something as horrific as genocide. This, then, presents a glimpse of the Armenian Church 60+ years removed from the Genocide.

I left most of the writing as it was when I submitted it to the Thesis editor at USC, with some minor changes, because this

writing also reflects the desires of an anxious young man who was ready to put the books away and begin his life and ministry.

My thanks to my wife Susan, who painstakingly and out of love as a partner in our ministry, read, re-read and proofed many drafts before we rented an IBM-Selectric to type the final version. My thanks to Dr. Miller stayed in contact with me through the years and introduced me to the Rwandan experience of genocide (1994) which has given me yet a broader picture of the problem of evil.

I trust the topic, the times and reflections will interest you as you read through the pages.

- Fr. Vazken Movsesian, 2015

100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide

*Cover photo: "Lament" by Gregory Beylerian*

## Introduction

This thesis examines the Armenian Church's response to evil.

The Armenian Church has been the dominant social and religious institution in the life of the Armenian people for at least the past 1,700 years. The Armenian people have encountered evil in many forms throughout their history. In spite of massacres, famine, rape, pillage and even Genocide, the Armenian Church teaches that there is a good and omnipotent God. Following the catastrophic events of 1915, where evil manifested itself on the Armenian Nation in the form of Genocide, the Church was left as the defender of a seemingly powerless God. In a series of interviews conducted with clergy of the Armenian Church, we search for a working theodicy<sup>1</sup> for the Armenian Church.

### **History of the Armenian People up to the 1915 Genocide**

For the last 2,500 to 3,000 year the Armenian people have inhabited the land at the base of Mt. Ararat which is currently the Republic of Armenia and Eastern Turkey. The people have always felt a strong affinity to the land as is underscored in epics, myths, poems, and songs.

From 1517 to 1924, the Ottoman Empire ruled this area. The Armenians maintained an existence along with other minority groups. Sultans ruled the Empire. The Sultans traditionally enacted laws and instituted regulations. They also enacted legislative

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<sup>1</sup> Theodicy is the defense of God's goodness and omnipotence – a vindication of God – in view of the existence of evil.

measures.<sup>2</sup> In 1876 Hamid II, a twenty-four year old Sultan assumed the throne. The government, strongly influenced by European educated Turks, enacted the Constitution of 1876. This plan was to boomerang, causing the sultanate to lose its authority over the Ottoman Empire.

The Constitution declared the Sultan as the sovereign, that is, “the supreme caliphate of Islam.” He was omnipotent and sacred. Thus, the entire Constitution depended upon his good will. His rights included commanding the armed forces, declaring war and peace, concluding treaties, banishing people he considered dangerous to the state or to himself, having his name mentioned at Friday prayers, and coining money.

The Constitution of 1876 also declared Ottomanism to be the official policy of the Empire. The doctrine stated that all subjects of the Empire were to be declared Ottoman. They were to be equal before the law. Although Islam was to remain the official religion of the state, every subject was guaranteed the right to pursue the religion of his choice with the same rights, liberties and duties.

Up to 1876, Armenians existed as a “protected” or “tolerated” minority in the Empire. They had their own community, their *millet*, maintaining religious and cultural autonomy under the Armenian Patriarch in Constantinople (Istanbul). Armenians continued to play an important role in Ottoman trade and industry.

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<sup>2</sup> Halil Inalcik, Ottoman Empire: the Classical Ages, trans. Itzkowitz and Imber (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1957), p. 73.

Along with Armenians, many other minorities strived to maintain national identity in the Ottoman Empire. This hindered the Sultan's plan for Ottoman unity and expansion. Sultan Hamid, determined to implement his plan, decided to change his policy. He stated, "I made a mistake when I wished to imitate my father, Abdul Mecit, who sought to reform by persuasion and by liberal institutions. I shall follow in the footsteps of my grandfather, Sultan Mahmut. Like him, I now understand that it is only by force that one can move the people with whose protection God has entrusted me."<sup>3</sup>

He ordered the movement to use "force" to commit brutal crimes against Armenians. During 1885 and the following year, this affected the lives of fifty-thousand to three-hundred-thousand Armenians.<sup>4</sup>

The Sultan fostered a movement to stress Turkish traditions to strengthen the Empire against internal and external dangers. He reprimanded the minorities for betraying the "common fatherland" by striving for their identity, and he offered them the "bleak alternative of becoming Ottoman."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Karal Shaw, History of the Ottomoan Empire and Modern Turkey, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Edwin Bliss, a missionary in Turkey at the time of the Genocide, gives a detailed account of the massacres at Sassun, Constantinople, Trebezond, Erzurum, Harput, Aintab, Marash, and Urfa in the Armenian Atrocities (New York: Edgewood Publishing Company, 1896).

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Edmondson, The Young Turks: Prelude to the Revolution (New Jersey: Princeton Univarsity Press, 1957), p. 41.

The Armenians countered his order by retaining their national identity. On April 24, 1915, Taalat Pasha, the Ottoman Empire's Minister of War, ordered the Turks to begin a program of systematic deportation and massacre of the Christian minorities of the Empire. By 1923, 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 Armenians had been massacred. This came to be called the first Genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

During the Genocide the Armenian people were subject to barbarism and torture. People were decapitated, fetuses were torn from mothers' wombs and displayed on the tips of Turkish swords, while other women were raped. The word evil became synonymous with the Armenian Genocide.

Today, the Armenian survivors live in reconstructed communities all over the globe. Their population is million: four million in Armenia and two million throughout the diaspora.<sup>6</sup> Their international dispersion gives credence to many sayings, such as, "Split a watermelon and you are sure to find an Armenian."

Many Armenians fled to America. The Literary Digest reported in 1919, "Now there is an estimated Armenian population here of seventy five to one hundred thousand . . . The greater part of our Armenian population is established on the Pacific seaboard. About twenty thousand dwell and work in the inland sections."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Committee for Cultural Relations with Armenian Abroad, in Yerevan, Armenia provide these statistics.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Wertsman, The Armenians in America 1618-1976 (New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1978), p. 53.

Outlook, in 1920 reported further, “The Armenian ‘exiles’ began to arrive in greater numbers in the true sense of the word. The Armenians are not immigrants, but, like the Pilgrims of 1620, they came to America for religious liberty. After each massacre, the Armenians arrived in greater numbers.”<sup>8</sup>

One survey located one-half million Armenians in the United States by 1976.<sup>9</sup> In the five years which followed, many Armenians migrated from the unstable Middle East to seek freedom and opportunity in America.

### **The Armenian Church**

The Armenian Church is central to the Diaspora communities. The Church has followed Armenians to where they have migrated. Eighty to ninety percent of Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The other 10-20% of the population are Catholic, Protestant, of other religions or of no religion.

Throughout history the Armenian Church has been the dominant religious, political, and social institution within the Armenian community. The Church preserved the identity of the community. Even the creation of the Armenian alphabet (404 A.D.) was commissioned by the Church for the sole purpose of translating the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 57

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. ix

Scriptures. Thus the language was codified for the sake of the Church.

The Armenian Church is apostolic. Its origin dates back to the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. They were martyred in Armenia. The Armenian Christian Church survived underground until 301 A.D. when St. Gregory the Illuminator converted King Tirdat of Armenia to Christianity. King Tirdat proclaimed Christianity as the official religion of Armenia making it the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion.

The Armenian Church is among the Eastern Oriental-Orthodox Churches in relation to the world church. It accepts the decisions of the first three Ecumenical Councils. Of the words, “apostolic,” “orthodox,” “eastern,” the name which best describes this institution is, simply, “The Church of Armenia.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Problem of Evil and the Armenian Church**

A question often asked is: Why do the Armenians continue to support the Armenian Church and the concept of a good and omnipotent God especially considering the terrible atrocities witnessed during the Genocide? In essence, this question is an *Armenified* version of the Problem of Evil.

The Problem of Evil entails three basic propositions:

(1) God is omnipotent;

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<sup>10</sup> Catholicos Papken Gulesarian, The Armenian Church, trans. Rev. Poladian (New York: Gotchnag Press, 1939), p. 61.



(2) God is wholly good;

(3) Evil exists.<sup>11</sup>

The problem consists of examining the rationality of the theist's beliefs. Natural theologians<sup>12</sup> have argued:

(1) If God is wholly good, then he opposes evil,

(2) If God is omnipotent, then he has the ability to eliminate evil, and;

(3) Why, then, does evil exist in the world?

The possible answers to this question are:

(1) Either God is not omnipotent,

(2) God is wholly good

(3) Or the evil which we experience is not truly evil.

The Problem of Evil is a pastoral issue in the Armenian Church and not necessarily a theological one. If anyone can define evil surely the Armenians can. Their national and religious history is rife with persecution, atrocities and evil. Siamanto, an Armenian poet, reflected national sentiments in a poem which he wrote at the time of the massacres:

Who is responsible for this murderous thought?

To put, of all places in the vast world,

Ararat the white,

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<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom and Evil (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

Ararat the unspotted,  
In a place where for years, for centuries,  
It will bleed  
Even to its tip.

Who thought it up?  
To make a hell  
Where Eden was or wasn't  
In Mt. Ararat's shade  
Instead of a land,  
Giving us an old beaten-down read,  
Instead of earth, dry stones,  
Instead of water, blood...  
Who thought it up?  
Even at our history's first light  
To place the head of this life giving  
Ancient people  
Under a neighbor's bloody sword  
Demanding he sell his soul  
If he chooses to save his body.

And if the past centuries  
Haven't been able to save him yet.  
And if the coming ones  
Are unable to save him,

And an improbable miracle  
Is the only probable answer--

Lord give me, like the prophet Moses,  
The power to uproot and remove  
My persecuted race  
From this place, Armenia  
No, this place of death,  
No, this place of rocks  
To another safe shore.  
(Is there such a place?)  
My indestructible race,  
Its new seed  
Without ancient roots  
Of story, song and monument.

Give to this wordmaker  
His magic impediment,  
And his rod  
To split rocks until they gush water,  
And his staff  
To divide  
The red sea of our luck  
(Our tears and our blood)  
Even if, like the prophet Moses,

I find my death  
And I am buried in alien earth  
Before reaching the promised shore  
At the beloved threshold of its closed door.

Lord,  
Don't you hear  
The red news of massacre and blood?<sup>13</sup>

Siamanto clearly battles with the problem of evil. His words, "Lord, don't you hear the red news of massacre and blood?" echoes the sentiment of thousands of survivors of the Genocide and presumably the cries of millions on the road to martyrdom. Ironically, the Armenian Church – the one central authority of the Armenian people, defends by virtue of its worship practices this Divine force which apparently did not save its people.

The prevailing question is: If the Problem of Evil constitutes those difficulties for the theist, why, then, did the Armenians remain loyal to an all-powerful God over the centuries?

This thesis examines the Problem of Evil at a fundamental pastoral level. It seeks to answer these questions: How does the pastor in the Armenian Church deal with evil? How does he reconcile the proclamation of a good, omnipotent God with the fact

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<sup>13</sup> Siamanto, "The Prayer of an Armenian Poet," trans. Martin Robbins in *Ararat* 7 (Autumn, 1976).

that evil exists, and specifically, the evil which has been experienced firsthand by members of his community?

Henry Morgenthau, the United States Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, recalled many horrendous incidents such as the following, “In some cases, the gendarmes would nail his (an Armenian victim’s) hand and feet to a piece of wood, evidently in imitation of the crucifixion, and then, while the sufferer writhed in agony, they would cry, “Now let your Christ come and help you.”<sup>14</sup>

The Turks in 1915 presented the Problem of Evil by saying, “Now let your Christ come and help you.” This thesis looks at that response from the functionaries of the Church themselves— the pastors.

## **Methodology**

The researcher interviewed eighteen clergymen of the Armenian Church. Sixteen are affiliated with the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America (covering a territory California, Arizona and Washington), including the Primate of the Diocese. As for the other two interviewees, one is the former Patriarch of Jerusalem and the other the Locum Tenens of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Alexandria, Egypt. All the participants are currently pastoring or have been pastors. The

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story (New York: New Age Publishers, 1976), p. 306

“Sources Consulted” section contains a list of the participants who were interviewed in this study.

The interviewing procedures were as follows: The researcher interviewed each clergyman, tape-recording the content for later transcription. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to two hours. The average duration of an interview was 45 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher defined the Problem of Evil. He then asked, “How does the Armenian Church justify its belief in God in light of all of the evil which is evident in the world?” More specifically, “How can a good and omnipotent God be justified and defended by the Armenian Church in view of the atrocities 1915?”

The questioning intended to supersede the mere exercise in the philosophy of religion which initiated most of the responses. After the respondents reacted initially, the researcher asked questions related specifically to pastoral counselling. He asked the clergymen how they deal with related questions, for example, how would a pastor counsel a survivor of the Genocide and explain that the Armenian Church can believe in a good and all-powerful God?

The participants’ responses were grounded in the framework of Armenian Church theology. From them, inferences and conclusions were made. Do the teachings of the Armenian Church support the claims made by the individual pastors? Ultimately, the quest was for a general Armenian Church theodicy.

The researcher conducted the interviews according to the guidelines of John Lofland's book, *Analyzing Social Settings*.<sup>15</sup> The "unstructured interview"<sup>16</sup> was selected as the best technique because it allowed flexibility in interrogating a diverse field of concentration. The researcher prepared an interview guide and used it only to introduce certain ideas and questions. The following areas of further interrogation emanated from their answers: the concept of God, eschatological beliefs of the Armenian Church, causes of the massacres, Armenian theological positions, free will, The Armenian Church as an institution in the Armenian community, and pastoral counseling.

### **Myths, Symbols, and Rituals in the Armenian Church**

Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, a noted Armenian Church historian and theologian, stated in his interview, "The theology of the Armenian Church is found in its liturgies, hymns, and rituals." The Problem of Evil, as a philosophical argument is not addressed by the Church in a formal manner, that is, the Armenian Church does not have a standardized theodicy. The actual problem the researcher encountered in analyzing the interviewees' responses was not in justifying a good and omnipotent God in view of evil, but in

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<sup>15</sup> John Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76

engaging in philosophical discourse with a non-philosophical Church.

The Armenian Church is a fountain overflowing with myths, symbols and rituals. These elements serve three basic functions: (1) value genesis, (2) value maintenance, and (3) value communication. Thus, they set the framework within which the Problem of Evil can be answered.

By definition, mainstream theology and philosophy rely on some system of rational deduction. However, as theologian Paul Tillich claims, it is impossible to give conceptual explanations of God. Thus, the direct object of theology is not God, but the “direct manifestation is religious symbol.”<sup>17</sup> The symbols of the Armenian Church allow the participant to appreciate and enjoy the divine rather than to try to define it.

When the Armenian clergy analyzed the Problem of Evil, they made many references to symbols, myths, and rituals. The clergy represented in this sample were receptive to the line of questioning, and appealed to philosophical means to justify their claims. However, they revealed a deep-seated understanding of mystery i.e., the concept of God and His relationship to the world can only be experienced through the mystery they evoke. The clergy’s attitude toward mystery in the Church will be described and discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Tillich, “Theology and Symbolism,” Religious Symbolism, ed. F.E. Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), p. 108.



## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

This chapter explores the Armenian clergymen's description of the Problem of Evil in relation to the philosophy and characteristics of the Armenian Church. The goal is to establish a working theodicy to provide a frame of reference for the next three chapters.

Each interview began with a discussion of the Problem of Evil, and continued to its relationship to the Armenian Church's teachings, and the presence of evil throughout the centuries of oppression, martyrdom, and persecution.

#### **The Origins of Evil**

The Armenian Church conceives three seemingly incompatible statements to be expressions of truth: (1) God is good; (2) God is omnipotent; (3) evil does exist.

The priests in the sample unanimously stated that evil was not God's fault and therefore, God could not be blamed for evil. Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan sums up this sentiment, "When you go into a jungle, you do not blame God if a tiger attacks you. The existence of tigers and that tigers attack are the law of the jungle." His statement characterizes the general formula for an Armenian Church theodicy.

One of the priests interviewed described his application of that conception. A parishioner who was recuperating from open heart surgery complained, “Why has God done this?” The priest replied, “It is not too different from what Job was asking. There is a tendency at the human level to attribute all our successes to ourselves and when it goes in the other direction, there is a tendency to throw it on God. ‘Why has God done this?’ In this particular case, one reason was that he had not eaten properly for a number of years, gets no exercise, has smoked cigars to excess and has not taken care of his physical health as he approaches 60. Sooner or later, the question of God notwithstanding, the physical make-up of the body can only endure so much. Either those habits have to change or the body is going to break down. It is almost like begging the question by saying, ‘Why did this happen to me? Why did God do this to us?’ In a very real sense, the individual has done it to himself.”

Herein the priest shifted the responsibility from the divine to the human. While he believes God to be good, he feels that God gives man the freedom to do good or evil. Instead of asking the question of whether God can prevent evil and be responsible for it, he asked, “Why question God?”

Fr. Nareg Marfazelian, applied the Armenian Church’s concept of evil to the Passion of Christ, “We must remember the story of Christ in this instance. Christ was the son of God. Why did he suffer and get crucified? So that we may be saved. If God is

omnipotent and omniscient, then we shouldn't ask this question. In our sufferings, today, we do not turn to God and say, 'Why did You crucify Christ? You could have told the world that, you are saved through the Bible, but instead, You had Your son crucified.' You have to ask yourself, what is the meaning or purpose of my questioning? When we ask Him of such things, then, it is a sin. If we have a question about our own son, then, we must ask Him about His son. In other words, you always have to ask the question from two sides. When your child has been taken and has died, you have to keep in mind that He gave His child, too."

In addition to the Armenian concept of evil, Fr. Nareg also describes the Church's fundamental conception of mystery. His statement, "When we ask Him of such things, then it is a sin," describes God and His relationship to the world as mysteries beyond human understanding which should not be probed.

Evil has always been an integral part of Armenian history. The priests who were interviewed asserted that the people have always supported the Armenian Church's stance in never questioning God. Archbishop Vatché Hovsepian, the Primate of the Armenian Church of North America, Western Diocese, gave an example "Yesterday, we buried a man who was thirty-three years old. He left two your children. The mother was still alive; the wife was there screaming. It is not easy. Absolutely, it is not easy to say, 'Do this or that.' She lost her husband; the mother lost her son. But I am not going to use the casket and the deceased to rebel against God."

Three closely-related questions are brought to forum. First, why won't the Armenian clergy, or the Armenian people who support them, rebel against a God who permits the presence of evil in the world? Why won't God take responsibility for evil? Where, then, has evil come from?

## **Evil as the Product of Human, Free Will**

The majority of the Armenian clergy who were interviewed believed that evil was a product of man's free will. Fr. Vartan Kasparian, defines evil as a negative reality which "exists when man goes against and ignores the will of God. In this sense, the creator of evil is man himself."

The clergy defined the concept of evil to be somehow linked to man's actions and man is morally responsible for the actions of his free will.

Fr. Krikor Hairabedian, summarizes the consensus of opinion. He describes free will as the originator of evil, "God has given free will to his creatures. If there was no free will, then, there would be no evil because God would dictate to us. But, God created man in such a way that man is able to be in touch with the good as well as with the bad, or has a choice between the two. This is where evil comes forth. God did not create evil. God created only the good. But, man, using all the gifts of God, did things that were pleasing to his own senses, his only reason, his own interest.... We believe

according to the Bible that there is Satan who is the source of all evil actions and Satan is influencing our desire.”

Another priest sums it up, “Evil is inherent in creation.” This response implied that man freely opts for evil by virtue of the free will which God bestows upon him. At the time of creation, God opened the door to evil in the Garden of Eden.

Another clergyman summarized that concept, “...By eating the fruit, we became conscious of the existence of good and evil. We can differentiate between good and evil. Then, we began to be inclined toward evil and the fight between good and evil, not only in the outside world, but also in our souls. So, we are in a constant fight between good and evil.”

Thus, the Garden of Eden myth accounts for human free will according to this answer. Another clergyman explains, “The real problem is the degree of free will we have. Perhaps, the most profound and most confusing aspect of human existence is the area of free will. When we choose to ignore God, then, evil results. For example, the starvation that is in the world today: We have the technology, today, to eliminate hunger in every corner of the world. But, the one thing that prevents it is the profit motive. ‘I cannot give food over there, or I will go hungry. I am not going to have my profit margin.’ While the technological means are there, it is human nature which comes into play, saying, ‘No, my well-being comes first’....the old original sin coming in again. When we say that then, somebody else goes hungry. And, we will see pictures of

starving children, of starving people, and we will ask, 'How can a just God allow that?' Well, in a very real sense, that is not God's fault. He gave us everything we need. But, it is our own greed, our own hoarding of His gifts that make these things happen.

Another clergyman amplified that answer, "We have been given free will and free will is our most human aspect, yet, at times, our most satanic. Because there are all kinds of strange things that happen in the name of free will. I have the right, for example, to kill my unborn child while it is still in my womb because I have a right over my body: a devious reason, but it is acceptable today. I have a right to get high on drugs whenever I want because it is my body. Moral considerations aside, how are you going to get the money? What is the effect on you? What is the effect on your family? That is not important: It is my body. To which the only retort is nonsense. We have been given free will. Yes! We are told and shown repeatedly that we should use it according to God's will. When we do not, there is always some kind of evil that results. They come to me and say, 'Geez, Father, I've been fooling around with my girlfriend, and she got pregnant. Why did God let this happen?' Well, God did not sleep with her, you did.... God gave you the means, gave you the free will. This is your bed of roses."

On the other side of the free-will coin, many who are critical of God seek a deterministic stance. They ask, "If God is all powerful and good, why, then, won't he interfere in the workings of the world and put an end to evil?"

One priest answered, "If God got involved, where would our freedom go? If I cannot decide when to hate you and when to love you, then, He does not have to judge me after my death because, then, He would be telling me, and I would be doing it. He is dictating it to me. Why should he judge me? It is similar to American law. When I drive a car, they tell me, 'Do not go here or there.' If they dictate the way I drive would they then judge me? They wouldn't. Therefore, I am judged in my freedom according to what I do with that freedom.

Another priest responded, "It is we who have the free will to so choose to do as we want. Individually, if I decide to sin, God does not come down to stop me. Why? Because, I have the opportunity to do and not to do. In a sense, that is part of the full plan of the world. God knows what we are going to do, when we are going to do it, but He does not stop us from that. We don't know we have that choice. That does not mean that we are determined, you know, freedom vs. determinism. It is like a film maker. He knows what is going to happen on the screen. We do not. Of course, that the movie has a plot; that is something else."

When questioned whether evil was part of God's overall plan, one priest replied, "No. I think that gives evil a positive connotation. But God has a plan (that is your term) that he is going to work out or have worked out, no matter what man does. Evil being man's efforts to thwart God's will or to ignore God's will....

There is a divine plan (for want of a better word), and by that, I do not mean God uses us as puppets....”

## **Evil as God’s Will**

Although the Armenian clergy did not claim God to be the author of evil, their answers seem to imply that conclusion. Fr. Moushegh Tashjian described evil as a prevailing part of history. “Different people, different cultures have always been a part of this world. The same is true in the good life. There cannot be a uniform style of life. Just as good has an existence, likewise, evil has its existence.”

Abp. Tiran Nersoyan pointed to a line from the dominical prayer as proof, “And deliver us from evil.” He asserted that this line proves that evil exists. Other clergymen pointed to the plight of the Armenians and their violent encounters with death as proof of the presence of evil.

Fr. Arshag Khatchadourian explained the origination of evil by pointing to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden where God “ushered in the idea of evil into the minds of the first man and woman.” He concluded that evil is, in a sense, God’s will although the function of evil remains a mystery.



## God's Use of Evil

Some clergy contend that God uses evil to test man. One priest summed it up, "God uses evil, in the sense of suffering, in the sense of deprivation, to bring his 'Chosen Ones,' so to speak, back into line." Thus, evil becomes a tool which God uses against man.

But Abp. Tiran Nersoyan explained God's role as follows, "We must get away from the idea that God sits up on His throne and sends suffering and evil down to the world in order to test us. There are many passages in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, in some catholic epistles, making suggestions that God gives us evil; he punishes us in order to test us. We must not understand those passages in that manner. Rather, while encountering evil – while we are suffering – God looks at us, saying, 'Let us see if the power and faith I have given them is working in them or are they being defeated and are they weak.' That is the test, not that He gives us evil. He does not give suffering."

Another priest explained God's role since the creation, "Since the creation, evil has existed. Adam and Eve were tempted by evil and they found themselves in the sin of disobedience. Coming, then, to how we justify God who is the creator of good and how He permits evil, evil has existed so that man can always be tested to show his loyalty to God. In a sense, evil has existed to show people, that before them, they have two options. If you choose the good, then this. The choice is man's. The clergy who

were interviewed made a conscious attempt to absolve God from responsibility for evil. The general consensus among the clergy was that human free will, not God, was the cause of evil.

## **Eschatological Theodicy**

In *The Philosophy of Religion*, Alvin Plantinga differentiated between two types of evil: (1) moral evil and (2) physical evil: “. . . the former, roughly, is the evil which results from human choice and volition; the latter is that which does not. Suffering caused by an earthquake, for example, would be a case of physical evil; suffering resulting from human cruelty would be a case of moral evil.”<sup>18</sup>

The clergy addressed the Genocide of 1915 with a fine line of distinction between the moral and physical types of evil. In respect to the Genocide, most categorized the massacres as physical evil because they occurred independent of the will of Armenian people. However, they also considered massacres as moral evil because evil resulted from human cruelty. One of the clergy summarized that contention: “The Turks willfully chose to ignore Gods command to love and the commandment against murder. In other words, it was by their willful act and the essence

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<sup>18</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defense," in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), p. 218

of the act which, in my mind, is the ignoring of God's will and going against God's will with a natural result of evil."

The free will of the Turks caused the persecution and suffering of the Armenians people in 1915. Moral responsibility accompanies acts of free will and justice is granted accordingly.

Archbishop Hovsepien described Divine justice as follows, "In the story of trespassing in the Garden of Eden, He is saying, 'Use it, but do not abuse it.' While He lets us free in this world, He is holding the reign in His hand. The story of Adam and Eve may be a simple story for some people, but, in actuality, it is the relationship of God with man. God says, here it is; go ahead; you are free... but I hold the reign in My hand. The minute you start usurping authority and disobeying and trespassing, you must be accountable for your deeds. God has given us the freedom of will to use this world and not to abuse it. If there are some individuals, collectively or individually... or, like in the case of the Turks... there is no difference between collective cruelty and individual cruelty. But, eventually, collectively or individually, you are going to face God."

Thus, the moral evil which Armenians experienced was the effect of Turkish free will according to many of the clergy. Therefore, it followed that the next question to the clergy was, "Isn't the punishment dealt out to the wrong party?"

One clergyman succinctly stated the prevailing feeling, "That is the way it always is, unfortunately. In the immediate context yes. Ultimately no. Two million Armenians were killed, but,

in the long run, sixty-five to seventy years later, there are more Armenians today, than there ever were although half of the three million we had were killed.”

The Armenian Church has a very distinct understanding of the administration of justice at some future date, which may be seen as the underlying strength in an Armenian Church theodicy. Armenian eschatological theodicy reconciles the belief that a good and omnipotent God can exist in a world with evil, and that evil will be defeated at a future time. Almost all of the clergy emphasized a future time when justice will be administered.

The Nicene Creed<sup>19</sup> summarizes the Armenian Church’s eschatological beliefs as follows: “We believe... in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies in the kingdom of heaven and in the life eternal.” If the Armenians will be rewarded for their years of loyalty and faith toward God, it will be at the final judgment.

One respondent summed it up, “The ultimate conviction with the Christian faith, and one which our own Church, our own background proclaims is that whatever the immediate deprivation – the suffering/evil happens to be – that is not the sum total, or that is not the end of everything. That beyond this is God’s truth... victory of good over evil; although, that particular victory at any

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<sup>19</sup> The Nicene Creed, adopted in the city of Nicaea, by the first ecumenical council in 325, is the profession of faith or creed that is most widely used in Christian liturgy.

given point in time might not be experienced by a particular individual.”

Another respondent supplemented the topic of a final judgment with a summary of the timing. When will this happen? “At the end of the world, upon the second coming. It is very clear. In the Nicene Creed and in all the rest of the creeds, they put it in the simple form, that He will judge the quick and the dead. In the creeds, upon the second coming, we the living and the dead, will be facing God. So, you see what I mean. Eventually we will be accountable for our actions during our physical existence... God did not set a time limit for our accountability. In the American system, at the end of the year, you have to give an account of your income and expenses. But, in the life of the creation, as far as God is concerned, He did not tell us when the end of the world will be, but eventually, we will have to face it.” He concluded that the Armenians may find justice in the context of the last judgment: “The Turks, or Persians, or whoever they may be, will eventually have to face God.”

Accordingly, history takes place in God’s plan, that is, justice is served by a means that is on a divine timetable. This theme is consistent within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Fr. Krikor Hairabedian explained God’s plan in relation to the Armenians’ 1915 massacre, “God has a decision, a verdict that those who do wrong will be punished; they will be condemned. God has His own day and His own way of judging people... I believe strongly that nothing will

escape God's plan. People can do the wrong things but God always has a way of bringing the good into existence to further His plan. His plan is not for a limited time, but for an unlimited, infinite time. Whatever is happening in our life is for a limited purpose. Therefore, I believe, seventy years ago, the Armenians who were killed, they willingly challenged that great crisis. They had the choice to become Muslim and not to be killed, but they preferred to be martyred rather than to lose what was important and precious to them. So, I believe they also looked for the infinite plan of God; that is why they faced the massacres."

Fr. Vartan Kasparian described how history finds form and meaning within "God's time," that is, according to a divine plan for mankind, "This is what the whole book of Revelations is about (Hal Lindsey notwithstanding): in spite of all these persecutions that are going to be coming upon the Christian community in the first century in Asia Minor, hang in there because ultimately, God's truth will be victorious. And, certainly, within the context of first century Christianity and within the Roman Empire that happened. Christianity is still a growing concern, while the Roman Empire has not been around since the first century, fifth century at the latest. Even within that context, there was an ultimate vindication. I think, as human beings, we all want to see everything resolved to our satisfaction now. It is like the guy who prays to God, 'Oh Lord, grant me patience and do it now!' Rather than seeing ourselves in the

context of what we may call God's time, or heavenly time or whatever."

Many of the clergy expressed the sentiment that the Armenian Church will be vindicated and even rewarded at some future date for centuries of dedication to their faith and to God. Fr. Vartan Tatevossian applied this concept to refute communistic atheism. Currently, the pastor of St. John Armenian Church in Hollywood, California, Fr. Tatevossian was assigned to pastoral duties in the Soviet Union for fifteen years, in the Diocese of Yerevan, Armenia and was in fact punished for his Christian beliefs by the Soviet State. He gave these reasons for refuting communistic atheism, "In Armenia, I have been asked, 'What has the Church of God done?' I answer, 'Let us say that God does not exist, but when gods did exist, at least, they had a control on the people and offered a moral way of life.' To the communists, I say, 'You have taken out God and replaced it with what? With the devil, who you do not believe anyway. At least we say, work, suffer, and toil, and, in the end, you will have eternal life.' The communists say, "Work, suffer, and toil, and, in the end, all it will do is produce more communist," Both preach basically the same thing but the ends are different.

And that differing "end" has given the Armenian people a sense of hope for centuries.

The concept of final vindication is accented by the Armenian Church's view of death. As the clergy explain it, death is not evil. Fr.

Datev Tatoulian summed up the Church's belief as such, "Early or later, it is going to occur. Our Church believes that death is not the end of it all. With death, this life has ended, but, with all the deaths that have taken place, the continuity of life has not ended. Life has always continued. Our predecessors have died, have been martyred; yet generations have not ceased."

Here, Fr. Datev spoke of the continuity of life in terms of the national survival: the Church's fundamental position on death as a gateway to something greater has instilled hope in the people.

The Armenian Church takes this theological position on death: The Armenian Church's counterpart of a Western funeral is called *hooghargavorootiun*. The closest English equivalent to the nomenclature is "sending" or "leading a procession in a certain direction." During the *hooghargavorootiun* service the priest asks of God to, "have pity, in Thy love as our creator upon the souls of Thy servants that are at rest.... Reckon them and glorify them with the company of Thy saints at Thy right hand..."<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, the Armenian Church is considered to be a Church of the living and the dead. The members of the Church "fall asleep" in Christ rather than die, as St. Paul writes in his First Letter to the Thessalonians (4:30). In the Armenian language, in particular in the nomenclature of the Church, the departed members are referred to as *nunchetzyal* which translates as "who is asleep."

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<sup>20</sup> Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *The Divine Liturgy*, (New York: Delphic Press, 1958), pp. 19-120



Because the Church is comprised of the living and the dead, the names of those who have fallen asleep are remembered in its services. In his commentary on the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church, Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan stated: “The souls of those who have died in Christ and the souls of the saints belong to the corporate body of Christ, i.e., the Church, and therefore, they cannot be left out of any vital act of the Church...thus, the Diptychs signify and emphasize the fact that the souls of the dead are part of the living body of Christ and they also rise with Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

As in all of Christianity, so too in the Armenian Church, death marks the end of physical existence but life continues in a different form. This theme is codified over and over again in the creeds of the Church, and therefore it is attesting to its installation in the Armenian people. In addition to the Nicene Creed, it appears in creeds unique to the Armenian Church, such as that of the saint Gregory of Datev, “We also believe in the recompense of deeds in the everlasting life of the righteous, and in the everlasting suffering of the wicked.”<sup>22</sup>

Another early Church Father professed, “Let death come when it will. It can do the Christian no harm for it will be but a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 307

<sup>22</sup> Bishop Terenig Poladian, *The Profession of Faith of the Armenian church* (Boston: Baikar Press, 1941), p.60

passage out of prison into a palace, out of a sea of troubles into a haven of rest.”<sup>23</sup>

In an expose on death, Abp. Shnork Kaloustian, presently the Patriarch of the Armenian Church in Istanbul, Turkey, teaches that the Armenian Christian must think of death as saving rather than destroying, a beginning, a gaining and a meeting, rather than an end, a loss or a parting.<sup>24</sup>

Abp. Vatché Hovsepian explained the Armenian concept of death further, “Beyond the rain there has always been sunshine. St. Paul set the tone for our Christian mission and our Christian existence. He told the Roman Emperor...that God has bestowed graces upon him and each one of us has different graces. All that the Emperor could do was to destroy the physical existence but not the spirit. The spirit is given by God and it belongs to God.”

Why Armenians have managed – as a people and a nation – to remain loyal to their Church lies within the understanding of death the eschatological views of the Church. Fr. Shahé Altounian, the pastor of the St. Paul Armenian Church in Fresno, California, explained the prevailing viewpoint, “The reason why the Armenians continue to believe in a good God is the strength with which the Armenians think of the future and they believe also in the life beyond. In spite of the domination of evil on Earth and over the

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<sup>23</sup> Archbishop Shnork Kaloustian, *Saints and Sacraments*, (New York: Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, 1969),pp.97-98

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*pp.97-98

misfortunes on Earth, embodied by the figure of the Devil, they still feel strength and hope in the future that, in the end, things will be better.”

The Church teaches resurrection as the state of the afterlife. Over the centuries, resurrection has been the central teaching of their Church. The story of Christ rising from the dead was the first *gospel* of the early Christian Church according to historical Biblical analysis. The centrality of the resurrection story to the Armenian Church is seen in the emphasis it has placed on the symbol of the cross. The Armenian cross is ornamented without a figure; crucifixes are not displayed in the Church. “The Armenian cross resembles the basic Latin cross. Its distinguishing characteristics are two-fold. The absence of the figure of the crucified Christ which is expressive of the Armenian Church’s emphasis on the resurrection of Christ. The joy of His resurrection is further expressed in the intricate, decorative design, especially on the four extremities of the cross....”<sup>25</sup>

The symbol of the cross plays an important role in the Armenian Church. The Church calendar contains many feast days with one of the major feast days in honor of the Armenian holy cross. Abp. Shnork Kaloustian explains the symbolic meaning of the cross, “As this sign reminds us of the greatest sacrifice ever made on Earth, the cross has assumed, in Christian vocabulary, the

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<sup>25</sup> Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, Department of Religious Education Bulletin 8 (May 1980), p. 2

meaning of a life of endurance and courage and sacrifice. Our Lord once said, 'He that taketh not his cross and followth after me is not worthy of me' (Matt. 10:38); meaning, that those who cannot endure moral hardships, those who cannot sacrifice their own selfish and bodily interests for the sake of a higher life of sanctity and honesty, cannot be worthy to be called Christians."<sup>26</sup>

Abp. Shnork's articulates the central teaching of the Armenian Church from the early centuries. The scriptural passages which he cites demand that each Christian be willing to suffer.

Abp. Shnork continues his thesis as follows, "Sometimes, we lament that Armenians and their Church have had to live in the past in most trying conditions, persecutions, and tribulations. We must, however, give thanks to Almighty God, for He has given to this people and Church the strength and courage to live a life worthy of their faith in such trying conditions."<sup>27</sup>

As a dominant symbol of resurrection, the Armenian cross emphasizes the victory which Christ achieved over death with the promise of the same to all who follow.

Fr. Vartan Kasparian described the theme of resurrection which the Church expounds, "Prior to the massacres, prior to the last century, if one looks at the ecclesiastical landmarks – I am thinking especially of the Holy Cross at Akhtamar – there is a continuing theme of death and resurrection. The outward decora-

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<sup>26</sup> Kaloustian, p. 95

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.p.

tions on the Church buildings showing the resurrection of Christ, and this has been interpreted as the Armenian Church seeing itself and its people in precisely those terms, a period of death, if you will, under foreign domination, and yet a day of resurrection coming. That view, alone, tends to project our view beyond what is immediately discernible. At this moment in time, I might be physically ill, I might be terminally ill, but, viewed by the perspective of the Christian faith, this current circumstance which we find ourselves in, is not the sum total, it is not the end of it....”

The strength of the Armenian Church as a force in the life of the people can be attributed to the way it has transferred the concept of resurrection from the individual to the nation conversation. The priests who were interviewed described the Armenian people as a resurrected people. Fr. Arshag Khatchadourian, makes the parallel between the Christian story and the Armenian Story. “Christ died, was crucified, and three days later was resurrected: in the same way, the Armenian people were crucified, died and rose after three years and formed the new Armenian republic.”

God’s justice in the world is found here in the Resurrection of Christ and the Armenian people. Fr. Levon Apelian, the pastor of St. Vartan Armenian Church of Oakland, California, explained, “When Jesus was laid in the tomb, there appeared to be a major triumph for evil. The forces which had brought him to the cross had triumphed. If that had been the end of the story, we could only

conclude the world is moral chaos. Jesus staked everything upon the supremacy of love and goodness and truth. Apparently, he had lost. But, that was not the end of the story. The cross was brightened by the resurrection. The stone was rolled away and the tomb was left empty. By resurrection, it was as though the whole nature of things, by one mighty act, had rejected evil and vindicated goodness. More often than not, this is what is always happening in the world. Evil may triumph for a time, but inevitably it goes down in defeat or ends in disaster. It never triumphs for long and never finally wins in any situation... While it may appear to triumph for a time, the triumph is only temporary and is a prelude to defeat. The fact is, as many have discovered both individually and collectively, the world has a moral order where justice prevails, where truth wins out and where evil is defeated.... For the pull of the universe is on the side of goodness, not evil. The same defeat evil suffered on the cross awaits evil for five years, for sixty-five years, forever. The resurrection of our Lord ought to remind us of this truth. None of us need be discouraged. The darkest day in the world's history was Good Friday, the day in which our Lord was crucified, but Easter followed it. The darkest time in our people's history was in 1915 when we were decimated by the Turks and turned into a nation of starving refugees. But, today, we have resurrected. Out of a remnant of a million, we are now over six million strong. And, we shall continue to rise so long as we

continue... to remain loyal to God, to our Lord Jesus Christ, and we shall keep rising so long as we believe in the empty tomb.”

The ultimate defeat of evil is a central theme in Christianity. In our human temporal existence we are not privy to the character of God’s time and so therein lays the problem, a mismatch of time-perception. Many members of the clergy remarked on the seemingly incomplete justice because of the character of time-perception. Fr. Vartan Kasparian describes it as such, “In 451 A.D., a major religious war took place at the Battle of Avarayr. If you look at from an historical point of view, if we had not taken a stance at that point, then there might not have been religion in the West because the Persians may have gone all the way and conquered the West with their Zoroastrianism. For those who believe... that Christ obviously is our hope and resurrection, I think the Armenians should look at that from 1915, from our Genocide and from even before, to 1980, and they have to see a resurrection, a resurgence.... I think we have to look to the resurrection of Christ, saying that this is where our hope lies and that is what kept us together.”

The theme of resurrection has directed the outlook of the Armenian people in a positive and optimistic direction. It has also given them hope of eternal life and ultimate vindication in the face of evil. The symbol of the cross, present throughout centuries of persecution, has offered the same hope. Moreover, the hymns of the Armenian Church, developed throughout the centuries, present

a deep-seated confidence in a future in which justice will be granted.

The theme of resurrection is also found in the myths of the Church and the Armenian people. For example, the myth of David of Sassoun contains a legendary hero who symbolizes the importance of endurance and patience, offering hope. His statue has been created in Yerevan, Armenia, to be a continual source of faith and hope.

In summary, the eschatological theodicy is the working theodicy of the Armenian Church. While the Church accepts the existence of evil, she views it in the context of God's mysterious plan.

The Church views man, not God, as the author of evil. Through his free will, man gives rise to evil. While evil is temporary and will be ultimately defeated, the sufferers will be rewarded with eternal life.

The priests in the sample viewed the Armenian Church as the transmitter and preserver of these ideas. Consciously or unconsciously, through the pulpit or invisible symbols, the Armenian Church has enabled its people to look evil bravely in the face with the knowledge that justice will be rewarded.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **APPLIED THEODICY**

Chapter 1 analyzed the theoretical Problem of Evil in the Armenian Church in light of the responses of eighteen clergymen. This chapter moves one step further to the application of the theodicy in the pastoral context to answer the question: How can an individual pastor counsel a person who has encountered evil? Beyond that, this chapter seeks to answer these questions: How can a pastor counsel a survivor of the Genocide: Does it suffice it to relate the Garden of Eden story to such survivors? Is there an “applied” theodicy to which a pastor can appeal to deal with specific encounters with evil?

This chapter focuses on the pastors’ responses to the question of evil in terms of their role as spiritual counselors. The goal is to apply their theoretical knowledge of the Problem of Evil and its manifestations to pastoral counseling situations to enable members of his congregation to deal with the problem in terms of the philosophy of the Armenian Church.

All of the participants in this study described at least one experience during their ministry or pastorate in which a parishioner asked them the question, “How can I continue to have faith and believe in an all-powerful and wholly-good God when He did not

save our people during the massacres?” The pastors’ answers varied. All agreed that this was not a central problem or issue. However, they did admit that it was quite natural for Armenians to ask such a question.

Fr. Moushegh Tashjian, the pastor of St. John Armenian Church of San Francisco, California, described the questioning of God in the face of evil to be a superficial, yet natural, form of expression. “I cannot remember when, but yes, the question has come up. Not only youth, but also many old people, people who are fed up, depressed, and want to find someone to blame for all that has happened to them. [They will say] ‘Since we have been a people who have been very Church-loving, faithful, how, then, why have we been a people who have been massacred innocently?’ This is very natural question.

“Sometimes, when someone dies in a family, young or old, or if an accident happens and someone dies, and, in that sad moment, there are those who will get up and express feelings of this type. Yet, they never realize, that to have feelings of this nature is a very natural thing. I think these are very superficial expressions. I do not believe they actually make people stray away from their faith.”

Abp. Vatché Hovsepian expressed a similar view, “From the day of creation, or especially after Christ’s incarnation, every now and then, more than agnostics and atheists, you will find those who try to defy the authority and try to philosophize that the energies

or the power is God, not the spiritual God that we believe in... And so on. We get this all the time.

“As for the Genocide survivor, their rejection of the existence of God is not philosophical. The reason why they reject the existence of God, in other words, why they question the existence of God, is for a local and parochial reason. It is localized – it has selfish motives as well, for instance, ‘Why did my father die?’ Sure, the Turks have done it, but the same thing can be said of a man who dies at age twenty five or thirty. ‘Why did my father die?’ Well, in this case, it was a heart attack, or a bullet... and it usually comes to evil... when we try to usurp the power of God for our self-glorification.

“A survivor of the massacres would probably question God and evil in relation to his own personal experience rather than in relation to what was experienced by the nation as a whole,” concluded Archbishop Vatché.

Fr. Shahé Altounian, found the root of the problem in the conflict between good and evil. He stated, “I would think as an answer to the troubled person, I would say that all things are not leveled off, happy, and peaceful on earth. But, there are ups and downs. The ups and downs in human history are the battles and wars men fight in, and they suffer the consequences.”

Fr. Shahé said he would counsel a survivor of the Genocide differently from others outside of that experience. “Personally, I do not believe that the Turks in 1915 (or even before then, and many

other nations before 1915 and 1896 that massacred many, many millions of Armenians), I do not believe that the reason for their massacre was a political issue although some tend to make it as if it is and they read history from that point of view. But, I believe that the reason for the massacre was within the Turkish Empire where they found a competitor, where they found some nation which was going to be competition for them; therefore, they wanted to extinguish them.

“I believe the second reason for the massacre was the sudden awakening of the Armenian people through the return of their sons and daughters who had studied in France. They had studied the French Revolution and had come back to activate possibly some such function in Turkey, and it backfired. Therefore, the reasons for the massacres possibly can go back to those who started the irritating action of the subjects and their masters – in the narrow sense of the word, of course.

“Now, what would I say to this person? I would explain what the situation is, and then, go from there and say, ‘Since life is made of flesh and bones, it has to disintegrate. It just cannot stay.’ If we enlarge it in a physical and spiritual sense, the massacre, I’m sure, can be explained in the two points I tried to make.”

Thus, to answer a specific Problem of Evil in the individual’s unique circumstance, Fr. Shahé would explain “the situation.” In this example, he would explain the massacres and decipher the forces of good and evil within that context. Likewise, many of the

other priests responded to individual problems of evil by explaining general or antecedent conditions which surrounded the massacres of 1915.

Fr. Shahé Semerdjian, the pastor of St. Peter Armenian Church of Van Nuys, California, described the role of God in the face of the Turkish evil and tyranny over the Armenians in 1915.

“The Turks massacred us because the Turks were evil people and they did whatever their ancestral instincts were. The Armenian people were massacred, not because we believe in God, but because of tyranny... Besides this, we must understand what God is. God is a power in the universe, a big power that nobody can reach and human beings name that power God.

“God is not like you and I as a human being, that He can come and interfere in evil works, but He protects us. That is why the Armenian nation, regardless of what it went through, has always kept its faith in God because God is good, God is almighty, God does everything, and God protects. Now, the creation of a new government, the creation of the diaspora, of the Armenian colonies here and there and everywhere, that proves that God is helping us if we help God.

To compliment his answer, it is important to note that Fr. Shahé Semerdjian was born in Aintab, Turkey and along with his family, he was among a wave of refugees who in 1925 were exiled from Turkey and landed in Syria.

Fr. Kevork Arakelian, one of the three American-born clergy who participated in this study, described how he explains the role of God in the face of the Genocide:

“...What is genocide? You have to get back to the government of the times, and it was a political issue: people were looking for power, those who wanted to get rid of another people. That is the key point.

“People come to me all the time, especially when they are bitter and those who have lost their families and who have believed and have turned away. The thing is that God does not work in that way; I mean, He sees an evil being done, He does not come down to stop it. Again, it is the free will of the people.... God does not intervene in that sense all the time. We see Him intervening in history in the birth of His Son, but when people ask, “Why didn’t God just come down and save the Armenian people, back then?” I think we, Armenians, take a very narrow view. First of all, we are not the first, and we are not the last to come up against genocide.

“I do not agree with some Armenian people in the way they want retribution: it will never happen. Frankly, I think if we got our lands back and, if our people did go back, they would come running back here to America. So I answer this question differently to different people. Basically, God does not work that way when He sees an evil happen because He gave us free will.”

Fr. Kevork’s brought up the point of retribution. This was not a question in this survey, however many of the clergy discussed

retribution as a focal theme and in others, their answers answer reflected the issue.

In these two answers, Fr. Shahé and Fr. Kevork explained the concept of God and its application to pastoral counseling by saying that despite the massacres, the Armenian people have been resurrected. This concept, a central theme of the Armenian Church, was discussed in detail in chapter 1.

The issue of the role of a benevolent God reminded Abp. Vatché Hovsepian of the Saturday matins service of the Armenian Church where this hymn is sung:

*The righteous shine in the kingdom and the ascetics in heavenly rest;*

*Martyrs are crowned and the lamps of virgins are alight;*

*Number those who confess thee God, among the ranks, O Lord,*

*And do not judge them with justice but forgive them by compassion.*

*With thine unspeakable humility, thou was buried in death*

*And thou didst raise those of the sons of men who in faith cast themselves upon thee;*

*Raise up us also in righteousness.<sup>28</sup>*

Abp. Vatché explained, “By human action, by human analysis, or human judgment, if we were judged, except for the saints,

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<sup>28</sup> (1 Book of Hours or Order of Common Prayers of the Armenian Church, trans. Bp. T. Nersoyan (Evanston: Ouzounian House, 1964), p. 11)

we would be found guilty. For that reason, in the confessional we read, 'For known and unknown sins which we have committed, we confess.' For that reason, the 12th Century patriarch, St. Nerses Shnorhali put it very nicely in one of his prayers, 'O Lord, do not judge us according to justice, but according to your compassionate love.'

"That is why we believe in intercession, because of the imperfectness of our system. We pray to God, but through the intercession of the saints, through the Virgin Mary, 'Please accept *this person's* soul according to your compassionate love, not according to justice.' In other words, according to his deeds. Particularly, if that person has committed a sin, unknowingly. Even during the last minute of judgment there is repentance. That is why penance is one of the most important sacraments of the Armenian Church. Penance, means regretting, making a complete U-turn in your life, is very important.

"Because God did not act according to our wish that does not make Him a less-loving God. At the same time, we should not be rebellious against God."

As part of the counseling method, the clergy set definite boundaries between the human and divine realms. This is works with the concept of mystery within the Armenian Church. Fr. Arshag Khatchadourian phrases this as, "The mystery of inequality." Theologically, this is formulated in the quoted Saturday matins hymn above, with such themes as, "Martyrs are crowned," demonstrating



a final reward; “With thine unspeakable humility thou wasn’t buried in death,” accepting the mystery of God dying; and “Thou didst raise those of the sons of men who in faith cast themselves upon thee; raise up us also in righteousness” emphasizing the importance in the concept of resurrection.

In applied theodicy, the clergymen offered the person whom they counsel the wider perspective of God’s view of history. When discussing the Problem of Evil, the fundamental problem lies in the question: How can a good and omnipotent God permit evil? This question is usually purely asked with a temporal understanding of the world. The clergymen responded with this question: Would it have been less evil if God interceded in 1915 and saved one, one-hundred, or one thousand lives?

As a non-omniscient being, man cannot suppose the answer to be affirmative. Removed over sixty-five years from the massacres, the Armenians have rejuvenated into a prosperous people throughout their homeland and diaspora. It is vital to understand the dichotomy between God and man to appreciate the Armenian Church’s response to the Problem of Evil.

Fr. Vartan Tatevossian explained the dichotomy as follows:

“We can turn to the book of Daniel where King Nebuchadnezzar mocks the three men and asks, ‘Where is your God now?’ God does not come down.... Christ himself said, ‘My kingdom is not of this earth.’ We cannot expect to find answers to these questions in this world. God is found in harmony. You cannot find Him in evil.

He is found in total harmony, after everything subsides. Like a storm, everything is thrown apart. God is not there, but is at the end when everything is settled and in harmony. In one of our hymns, we sing, 'The sons of Earth are stronger than the sons of Zion.' People, in general, are stronger than God in that they were able to even kill His Son."

Here, Fr. Vartan Tatevossian's final comment is interesting because it eliminates God's omnipotence in the temporal realm.

Fr. Vartan Kasparian explained his view of God, adding to Fr. Vartan Tatevossian's thesis, "At the base of it, we have the problem of: How do we view God? What is He? Is He a celestial superman? If that is what He is, then, 'Hey, God, you missed, these guys got away with this, and you did not come and protect us.' But, looked at in an even larger context, and I realize that is very difficult to do, especially, if one has a loss from the massacres in one's immediate family... but, in the long run, that statement about God's justice and truth being carried out, I think, has actually worked out for the Armenians."

All of the priests of the sample counseled their Genocide survivors by commenting on the nature of God and the Armenian Church's understanding of Him. Thus, understanding the nature of God seems to be a prerequisite to understanding the Problem of Evil.

Abp. Tiran Nersoyan explained God's role in the perpetration of evil, "We must get away from the idea that God sits up on His throne and sends suffering and evil down to the world in order

to test us.... God's deliverance of us from evil does not entirely depend on us or upon God. When evil people come, God cannot, repeat cannot – not that He will not – but He cannot prevent evil from doing its thing.”

The obvious problem with the contention that “God cannot do” is that it places a restriction of his omnipotence. This is contrary to one of the presuppositions of the Problem of Evil which assumes that God is omnipotent. Abp. Tiran explained this presupposition as follows, “...He is omnipotent, but consider that He established the laws of the world, considering that He created the world with all kinds of people and animals who chose violence. In fact, He drove out Adam and Eve from paradise because of their sins; therefore, He cannot very well say, ‘Because they are Christians, all people stand aside; I want to make these Christians happy. I do not want evil to touch them.’”

One of the priests explained his personal experiences in applying his concept of an omnipotent God in a world with evil, “For example, a twenty-three year old girl came to me whose father had died. She was crying. She asked, ‘If I speak with my father, now, will he answer me?’ Of course, the answer is easy: physically, no, spiritually, yes. It is an easy answer to give, but, at that instance, I began to wonder: a twenty-three year old girl, how could she ask me such a question? Because she is depressed and does not know what type of question she is asking. It is strange because this is not a question that has to be asked; it is interfering

in God's work. When they asked Jesus, 'When is the end of this world?' he says, 'The angels do not even know that, only God the Father.' It means that 'Whatever I have given you is all there is: besides that, you cannot know.' Even if you wanted to know, you could not or you would have to be God. After all, the difference between us and God is that. This ties in with your question of how we can explain to people that God allowed evil. It is like someone asking about Mary, the mother of God, 'How could she conceive without a sexual relationship?' I cannot explain it theologically because the person does not understand. I could sit down and explain it for hours and hours but he would not understand it because it is totally beyond his knowledge. So, I tell him: If God is all powerful, which he agrees to, then, if God does not have the power to make a woman pregnant, then, He is not God. You have to explain it, humanly speaking. So, when we turn to question God, 'We have suffered that much, our people have suffered; our people were killed; my relatives died. What are you doing; where are you?' Then we are interfering in His work. That is a sin, too.

Critics of religion will be quick to point to the repressive qualities of religion with answers such as this. Basically, in this answer the priest dismissed the Problem of Evil as incomprehensible, or the "mystery" which should not be examined.

Archbishop Vatché Hovsepian illustrated the Armenian Church's view of God's relationship to the world this way. "We want to use God as our tool for our enjoyment in life. We base our

happiness upon God's willingness to be our subservient servant. In other words, we want God to be the tools of our lives. If God does not interfere directly in changing the course of history, in the same way that the general would get a gun and start leading the army... we say, 'Where were You when they were killing my father?' In other words, we are trying to use God's will, God's purpose in the world, according to our whim and our wishes. And that is a sin."

The Armenian Church's emphasis upon mystery does not serve as a substitute for rationality. The theme of mystery and the separation between God and the world has established an aura around the divine which makes it incomprehensible. The Church approaches the divine very solemnly and sacredly. This is found in many of the Church's physical symbols. For example, Armenian Church architecture traditionally places the window above eye level to prevent wandering attention during worship services. In addition, the Church is set up with an altar area for only ordained clergy to stand in the presence of God, a chancel for assistants, and a greater area for the common congregation.

The deacon chants the following prayer at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy (in preparation of the Holy Eucharist), "Let none of the catechumens, none of little faith, and none of the penitents, nor of the unclean, draw near unto this divine mystery. ...and ye that are not able to partake of this, divine mystery and have gone without the doors, pray." At the same time, the celebrant of the Divine Liturgy prays in secret, "None of us that are bound by carnal

passions and desires is worthy to approach thy Table to minister to thy royal glory; for to serve thee is great and fearful even to the heavenly hosts.”<sup>29</sup>

Abp. Tiran Nersoyan warned that mystery should not be used to escape reasoning. “It is not becoming that people should renounce their reasoning; just by saying it is a mystery. Why? God gave you intelligence; you must inquire as far as you can go.”

This sense of mystery provides a groundwork for personal counseling regarding the Problem of Evil in reference to the Genocide in the sense that God works through His mysterious ways, and that man ought not to question these ways. Yet as Abp. Tiran pointed out, this answer ought not to reflect a sense of escapism.

The priests sampled used different counseling methods to explain the massacres or evil to their parishioners. One priest candidly said, “At the time of pain or suffering, there really is no consoling remarks that one can give.”

Abp. Vatché Hovsepien offered, “That is not very easy because the man has had a bitter experience. Personally, I have seen this in many families. The only way you can counsel is: I will tell them to open their hearts to God, pray for guidance, and pray for divine wisdom. Because, with words from other people, you are not going to console the man in times of need. Prayer establishes a communion, a communication between your heart and God. Asking for divine wisdom and guidance will give you solace and comfort in

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<sup>29</sup> Nersoyan, *The Divine Liturgy*, p.59

life. There is no other way. Sure, you can cite a million examples from the Old Testament and the New Testament and the lives of the saints and that they gave their lives for their God. They are all past; you have not seen them. It is very difficult to use them. Personally, in my life, having lost my father very young, having lost my brother-in-law very young, leaving very young children: Nobody killed him, but life killed him, or humanity killed him, or whatever killed him. Let us say, disease, where did the disease come from? We could go back and try to find the roots of this evil. It does not have to be a bullet; it does not have to be a disease. There is sickness; there is poverty. These are all evil powers that destroy humanity as far as I am concerned. But, I am not going to use these against God... it is God's wish; what can I do? This is it. I am sure he had His purpose in the world and the only way to console myself is by praying and establishing genuine and perfect communion between God and myself... There is no easy explanation to these things. If anyone were to try and explain it, how could they?"

Thus, these priests incorporated an element of consolation into their counseling. Other priests added an element of advice. Most of the priests in this survey tended to console the individual, rather than advise them hypothetically. However, some, such as Fr. Vartan Kasparian, said that they offer advice as needed. "The basic approach that I always try to take is that, okay, this has happened; let's not, at this point, worry about the 'why?' We are here! The problem is: What do we do from here on? Is it going to get better

from sitting around and fretting? No... God gives us the grace and the smarts to discern these things and make these changes so that our life will be wholesome. Unfortunately, human beings take the illogical course, whatever is the long-range, damaging course. Then, it blows up in their face: “Why did God do this to me?” The examples go *ad infinitum*.

Abp. Vatché Hovsepien explained that in his counseling method it is important to emphasize a positive view of God and life after death, “Times of crisis are the times when we have to confirm or firm up our conviction in God. If you approach these from the negative point of view that will create pessimism in your life, and that will be self-destruction of thought and movement. On the other hand, if you approach it from the positive point of view, that God is the creator, giver and taker, and you say, ‘Thy will be done,’ and pray for guidance to understand the situation or to accept it; that is the only way you can find some comfort. Whether you are a pessimist or an optimist, positive or negative, eventually, we are all going to go through this same system, through the casket, through the grave....”

In Armenian communities, from Soviet Armenia to the diaspora, the people commemorate Armenian Martyrs Day on April 24 to recognize those who were martyred in 1915 and the years which followed. All but one priest felt a need to remember and continue to observe Martyrs Day.



The following question is often asked: Why maintain this tradition since the massacre was such a calamity? The obvious answer seems that recognition and therefore retribution has not been offered until now. However, this answer fails to coincide with the main thrust of this thesis: a resurrected nation, final victory over evil, and judgment according to compassion instead of justice. Chapter 3 will discuss the phenomenon of remembering April 24 as a force to bring Armenians together.

Fr. Levon Apelian described the function of Armenian Martyrs Day, "Talking about death is never pleasant. In fact, talking about our martyrs, about blood, the massacres, the dead, the indignities and brutal and atrocious violence that our bodies and spirits and our institutions were subjected to is a heavy burden that bears down on our shoulders, our minds, our hearts, and our souls. However, we must talk about it if we have a sense of history, if we have an awareness of our national and ethnic roots, and, if we have a Christian conscience.... Moreover, if we do not talk about it, the bones of one-and-a-half million martyrs, for which all of Anatolia and the Syrian and Mesopotamian deserts became one, big graveyard, all these bones buried and unburied, with no family to visit them and murmur a prayer for, all these bones of our people that are restlessly sending up protests to heaven will curse us. But, what can we say other than telling and retelling the same things over and over *ad nauseum* as we have done for the past sixty five

years? What can we do other than hold a requiem service and talk just to ourselves?”

Fr. Levon’s statement separates the Genocide from history as a unique event which continues to the present day in the response of people to that history. This becomes more evident in the following remarks he made, “We are massacred when we forget the Armenian language and do not try to learn it; when we consider ourselves as members of just another ethnic group in this pluralistic society, who have come here to seek our fortunes; when we do not learn our history; when we leave the Armenian Church and start attending another church for convenience or whatever reason; when, even though we consider ourselves members of the Armenian Church, we only attend it on Christmas and Easter; when we forget our recent history, what the Turks did to us and misguidedly say, ‘We are Christians, we should forgive the Turks and forget,’ when there is no repentance or restitution on their part....”

At face value, Fr. Levon’s statement in opposition to forgiving and forgetting seems contrary to the Christian teaching of turning-the-other-cheek. Other priests also echoed that sentiment insisting on remembering the massacres for this reason: “This is not being Christian, for this is giving in to evil and allowing evil to have its own way.”

It is this understanding of the omniscient and benevolent God who gives man the free will for good and evil which gives Armenian people the strength to survive. While the eighteen

priests described different styles of pastoral counseling, they all expressed the aim of filling their parishioners with hope in the goodness and justice of the Lord, to continue to retain their faith in the teachings of the Church and to survive.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE ARMENIAN CHURCH'S ROLE IN ANSWERING THE COLLECTIVE PROBLEM OR EVIL**

In chapter 2, we examined the Armenian Church priests' treatment of the Problem of Evil at the pastoral level. This chapter deals with this problem on the broader level of the general, Armenian community to answer the general question: Why have the Armenian people remained loyal to Institution of their Church.

A word or two should be said about the Protestant faction within the Armenian community. The Armenian Evangelical movement evolved as a reaction to the biblical emphasis within the Armenian Church. This group complained about the lack of spiritual fulfillment within the Church's traditions. However, they continued to recognize the Armenian Church as the "Mother Church."

Rev. Vartkes Kassouni, the pastor of the Armenian Congregational Church of Los Angeles, California, paralleled this with the Jewish concept of the temple and the synagogue. He said, "When the Jews left their temple, they continued to worship in a synagogue setting where the services consisted of a sermon, biblical readings, and hymns. The Armenian Church is like a temple where the sacrifice is made."

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Armenian protestant missionary faction in Armenia was equally important. American-protestant groups sent missionaries to the Muslims. Some of the Armenians joined the ranks because the missionaries offered them food and shelter during their atrocities and, on top of it, because the missionaries were Christian, this was not seen as a faith conversion. This was perceived as a movement from one type of Christianity to another. Bp. Terenig Poladian wrote, "The Armenian Church... is the most liberal, broadminded and tolerant Church in Christendom... She never condemns... She believes that each Church is saved by her own faith. Her lofty motto for centuries has been as follows: Unity in essentials, liberty in doubtful matters, and charity in all things." Although there are large numbers of Armenian Protestants throughout the world, this fact does not depreciate the idea that the Armenian Church was, and still is, the central transmitter of Christianity for the Armenian people.<sup>30</sup>

The question we seek to answer is that in the light of the evil which Armenian have encountered, what is the unique role of the Armenian Church within the Armenian community? Where does the Church find the drawing power to keep its members faithful?

Bishop Terenig Poladian explained the unique role of the Armenian Church throughout history, It is the Armenian Church

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<sup>30</sup> Bishop Terenig Poladian in *The Role of Armenia in History* (Jerusalem: Armenian Convent Printing Press, 1959), p.33.

which keeps all these dispersed members together. Every Armenian, wherever he lives, is tenaciously and zealously attached to his Church. The Armenians, during their long period of persecution and distress, have turned to their Church as the ground of their existence and the anchor of their salvation. For them, the Church is an integral part of the nation, and form one unity, a single whole.<sup>31</sup>

Bishop Terenig Poladian's explanation leads to the question: Was it merely theodicy that has kept the people with the Church during their long period of persecution and distress? Or did the Armenian Church offer something over and beyond theodicy to keep the people together as Church members?

To further understand the characteristics and role of the Armenian Church in the community, the researcher asked the priests in the sample these two questions: What is the Armenian Church and its role within the Armenian community in the past and present? And, more specifically, what has the role of the Church been in the context of the Problem of Evil; how has the Church strengthened the bond of loyalty between its members?

The priests viewed the Armenian Church in dual roles. Patriarch Malachia Ormanian who wrote the encyclopedic "The Church of Armenia" at the turn of the last century, summarized the prevailing conception of its ecclesiastical and nationalistic roles, "If it be true that there is a close correlation between the life of a nation and literary expression of its ideas, it cannot be denied that

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.34

the ecclesiastical character which permeates Armenian literature has contributed toward the preservation of the national consciousness."<sup>32</sup>

The Armenians have enjoyed only brief periods of political freedom since they accepted Christianity in the fourth century. The Church functioned as both spiritual and political leader. Today, many political parties in the Armenian community are rising and gaining strength in membership. Many Armenians object to the dual roles of the Church. Fr. Arshag Khatchadourian cited the prevailing view, "We must not think that the Armenian nation is part of the Armenian Church. There is the Armenian nation which is comprised of many organizations and institutions, among them the Church."

Another respondent added, "If the Armenian Church can only cater to the spiritual needs of the people and leave the rest to the other organizations, we are sure to see a new vitality within our Church."

On the other hand, others clergymen in the sampling insisted on maintaining the Armenian Church's dual character. Abp. Tiran Nersoyan summarized their viewpoint, "No organization, however holy, however scriptural, however sacred... if they do not perform a function, not only will die, but they must die. Because we are both spiritual and physical persons, the Church is like that. The Church is the body of Christ. Christ himself was the son of God who

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<sup>32</sup> Archbishop Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia* (London: A.R. Mowbray and Company, Ltd., 1955), p. 189

came, ate, and talked, and slept... he did everything human beings do. We are no different. The Church is no different. The Church is the body of Christ; we are like Christ, not individually, but as a total organism.

The diversity of the clergy responses is indicative of the friction within the Armenian community in relation to the dual character of the Armenian Church. Politically oriented community members insist that the Church should not delve into matters beyond the people's spiritual nourishment. On the other hand, historians view the Church as the provider of national leadership. The clergy combine both viewpoints, maintaining that the Church should continue to operate with two functions.

Ernst Troeltsch describes the mediaeval unity of church and state which continues into the present time in the Armenian Church, "If, by the Middle Ages, we mean that unity of civilization which combined the sacred and the secular, the natural and the supernatural, the State and the Church (characteristics which also belonged to the culture of the Islamic States, and for similar reasons), then the Eastern Roman Empire is genuinely mediaeval.... In the East, this mediaeval period has lasted down to the present day, and we see before our very eyes the strangest combination in which this medievalism is mingled with the most modern political and economic plans and aspirations."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> (4 Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 19), p 213).



The Armenian Church, one of the Eastern churches, operated in sacred and secular roles. Abp. Vatché Hovsepian explained the historic, sacred and secular convictions, “Of course, with the Christian and religious conviction, there was the nationalistic conviction, too. There was national feeling involved, that our country - a Christian country was in danger. We had to defend our faith against the invaders.

Fr. Datev Tatoulian gave specific instances in which the Church functioned in a nationalistic role, “Besides the spiritual teachings, it has kept the national identity of its people: the idea that ‘I belong to the Armenian nation.’ It has a great cultural mission. It has upheld the Armenian national identity. It has done this with its spiritual mission. Throughout history, we come across many instances where we see the Church in this dual role. For instance, there were Sts. Sahag and Mesrob and their students. There was also Medzn Nerses who can be considered a social worker. He established many laws and canons about the family life. He established homes for the Armenian aged. He helped the poor. This is not on a small scale, but on a large one. Just as today there is welfare, he did these things on the level back in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. The Church opened schools in cities and in villages. The Church did it all. There was Krikor Datevatzee during the thirteenth century. He protested against the Unitarians. The Armenian people were going to be dissolved by accepting the Catholic, Unitarian ideas. He prepared people, young men, and gave them the education and so

the Monastery of Datev became a learning center, not only for that kind of teaching, but also for the arts, learning a trade and skills. Famous teachers and priests came from there. They preached throughout Armenian and strengthened the people in their faith. The role of the Church in different areas has always been beneficial and helpful to the people.”

Throughout Armenian Christian history, the Church has always occupied the central position in the community. As Fr. Datev pointed out, “the Church was a major social institution. Although many Armenian political parties and secular organizations have sprouted during the past one-hundred years, the Armenian Church has continued to enjoy her central position within the community.”

In the past, the clergy have also been social leaders in the interest of preserving the national identity. Fr. Shahé Altounian described the Armenian clergys’ impact in this role, “From general history, we know, in 1915, and before, while the public, the common person was exiled, so was the priest. The public saw that the priest was preaching and was not staying behind to enjoy life as he may receive it, but rather, they were participants in what they believed. Their words were not just words, but were actions as well. This gave, even to this day, I would say, to the Armenian public, the doubtless question about the preaching offered by the priests and bishops. With it, of course, came the education of the public. The school system that we had in historical Armenia was a church-oriented, or parochial school, headed by the Church, moti-

vated and supervised by the Church. Therefore, the clergyman was not only the preacher of the faith, but he was the carrying force of the so-called Armenian culture in his language, in his music, in his dance, in his architecture, and so forth. The Church has always played a central role in Armenian history until recent times. Even now, I think the Church has a definite role with a good understanding between the political system and the hierarchy of the Church.”

Historically, Armenian clergy took the role of national leader after the Armenian kingdoms lost political independence. Fr. Vartan Tatevossian explained, “The Catholicos has taken the King’s place. Clergy have become the leaders both physically and spiritually. Toward the twelfth or thirteenth century, the King of Baghdad called the Armenian Catholicos to his palace and greeted and entertained him as a king. The King asked the Catholicos as to why he was all dressed in beautiful and expensive garments, while the Armenian people were suffering and the man, Jesus, the Church followed was barefooted and did not care for all this material wealth? The Catholicos took off his clothes and showed the King that, under his vestments, he was wearing a very rough camel-hair material. The King prostrated himself before the Catholicos who explained that the people love and need this royal figure, but underneath it all, I am feeling the pain of the people. The Catholicos was taking on the role of the secular as well as the spiritual leader for the Armenians.”

Dr. Richard Hovanesian, Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, maintained that “Without Christianity, the Armenian people would not have survived. Christianity gave them a certain sense of separateness and strength.” Dr. Hovanesian also maintained that the Armenian people conversely gave Christianity the strength to survive, “...Perhaps, without the Armenian people, Christianity could not have survived in that part of the world. On the other hand, Christianity gave to the Armenian people a weapon for the defense of the culture and background, but, on the other hand, the Armenian people gave Christianity the ability to survive in hostile surroundings for centuries in a way that no other people have.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Christianity offers the vulnerable, Armenian people, the promise of survival. William Saroyan, a Pulitzer Prize winner in literature, described the Armenian people as a “race” of survivors, “...This race, this small tribe of unimportant people whose history is ended, whose wars have been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, whose literature is unread, whose music is unheard, and whose prayers are not answered. Go ahead: Destroy this race. Let us say it again. This is a war in the world. Destroy Armenian. See if you can do it. Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their

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<sup>34</sup> Lecture of Professor Richard Hovanesian, Armenian Studies Department, University of California at Los Angeles during the Parish Council Retreat organized by the Western Diocese, Santa Barbara, California, 14 March 1981

homes and churches. Then, see if they will live again; see if they will not laugh again; see if they will sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world... see if they will not create a new Armenia.<sup>35</sup>

Christianity granted the Armenian people an opportunity and spirit to rebuild from virtually nothing. Most important, here lies the answer to their collective Problem of Evil. Having resolved that spiritual conflict, the Armenian people continue to feel devotion to their faith despite the dissolution of their lives, and from that devotion, they gain the strength for continued survival.

To a people who had been plagued and persecuted with atrocity after atrocity, Christianity offers the hope of resurrection in a formalized manner, and the Armenian Church became the perfect vehicle by which that message reached the people.

Fr. Arshag Khatchadourian explained the impact of Christianity, "When the Armenian people accepted Christianity, they already believed in the life-after-death concept. However, the Church helped tremendously to refine the spirit of God and bring Him to a great aesthetic standard." To illustrate his point, Fr. Arshag recalled the pre-Christian story of King Ardashes and Ardavasd. After the death Of King Ardashes, King Ardavasd led the Armenian people to communicate with the soul of the dead king. This story contains many parallels with the Christian story of

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<sup>35</sup> George Ignatious Foundation, "A Tribute to William Saroyan" Los Angeles, California, 28 June 1981

Christ's crucifixion, obedience to the Father, burial, and resurrection.

Fr. Arshag explained, "Why have the Armenian people not lost their faith in God? Because, they were sure that if God raised Christ from the dead, even if they died physically, they were going to come out from their suffering and from their death. We see that idea before Christ, the Armenian people understood that a dead man could talk in the story of King Ardashes. The Church took these archaic concepts of good and evil, and the Armenian people were able to stand above these stories, and they refined and adopted them to the stories offered by Christianity. Armenian people found that Christianity is that particular source of inspiration to a higher standard of life or a goal to lead the Armenian people.

Abp. Vatché Hovsepian also described the impact of Christianity. Like Fr. Arshag, he described the Armenian belief in life after death before their acceptance of Christianity. He also believed that they accepted it when the Church formally introduced them to the Christian message. The Church then became the guiding force in their lives. He explained, "Some invaders, they destroyed the physical, visible part, but the invisible part -- that did not belong to them. They could not destroy it because, throughout the centuries, we put our trust in God. We believed that the spirit – the principle of Christianity – cannot be subdued by human, evil power. The Church is directly responsible for this understanding in our people."

The Armenian Church offered a response to the collective Problem of Evil. The Church functioned as a “positive community” for its members.

According to sociologist and cultural critic Philip Rieff, “a positive community is characterized by the fact that it guarantees some kind of salvation to the individual by virtue of her membership and participation in the community.”<sup>36</sup> The Church offered salvation, hope for ultimate vindication in return for the members’ participation. Rieff also contended that a member’s well-being depended upon his full participation. He called it the “therapy of commitment.”<sup>37</sup>

Also, throughout history the Church functioned as an institutionalized social center of Armenian life. The intensity of people’s link to their Church increased with each incident of persecution. Coupled with the concept of a positive community, the Church offered the Armenians the status of “chosen” in God’s history. After the Armenian people accepted Christianity as the official state religion in 301 A.D., they used their pre-Christian myths and rituals to incorporate themselves into the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is reflected in the writings of Movses of Khoren, the fifth century historian. He tried and succeeded in tying the beginnings of the Armenian people with the story of Noah’s Ark.

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row Publishing, Inc., 1968), pp. 52-53

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p 72

Accordingly, the Armenians call themselves “Hai” in honor of Haik, their great ancestor, the grandson of Gomer, and one of the six sons of Japeth (Gen. 10:2). Haik received the Armenian language following the Tower of Babel incident.

In his writings, Movses of Khoren reflected the earnest desire of the Armenians to become part of their new tradition. Other stories emerged, including the Armenians’ claim to the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:10-14) as the first birthplace of humanity, as well as Mt. Ararat (Gen. 8:4), where Noah’s Ark Rested and mankind was given a second chance.

Although current historians have found and formulated more comprehensively the actual roots of the Armenian people, the myths of Movses of Khoren, the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, and others are the dominant traditions among the people. “Hrashapar Asdvadz,” the hymn which is sung at episcopal Divine Liturgies, illustrates this feeling of preselection, “Most glorious God, and always merciful, who with pre-knowledge initiated the salvation of Armenia by granting us an enlightener from the sinful nation of Parthians....”<sup>38</sup> The “enlightener” refers to St. Gregory, called the Illuminator, was a Parthian by birth. He institutionalized the Christian Church in Armenia in the year 301.

Fr. Krikor Hairabedian described the Armenian people’s belief in Christ over the ages, “I believe the Armenian nation has

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<sup>38</sup> Canon and Ceremony of Blessing and Consecration (Fresno: St. Paul Press, 1979), p.25.



been gifted from the first centuries that Jesus started to spread His good news through His disciples. The Armenian nation from the first and second centuries accepted Christ, and they believed in Christ. No matter what happened, they did not lose that vision, that faith. The Armenian Church fathers, like St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Sahag and St. Mesrob, Vartan, Shnorhali, or Naregatz'i, they really had a living contact, a touch with God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and they gave something to our nation that no one could take from us.

Seventy years ago, we once again had the sign of the great power of God that the Armenian people, those who accepted Christ, that no matter what happened, they chose to remain Christian because that was their life. They did not believe that, by changing their religion, they could live a life that was in darkness as they saw in the Muslim Turkish culture. They preferred to die and be with Christ than to live a few years longer and lose their Christian touch.

Fr. Moushegh Tashjian defended the same position, "The Armenian people have a deep-seated faith toward God, in trusting God, in following God... and all those things that have happened to the Armenians in their history. They have seen that the salvation of our people has only been from God, the only God, the *Yehovah* God. And, this has been tried for centuries. The Armenian people saw the teachings of the Old Testament, and in the gospels, that the only past they could choose was this one, and they grasped it.

They adopted it and realized it, and it became part of their bones, heart and existence. So, when we have seen evil, by massacre or war, or when our people were taken captive in our history, the Armenian people have never lost their faith.”

In addition to making the Armenians a pre-selected, “chosen” people, the Church helped to preserve their faith. Fr. Moushegh described the role of the Church over the centuries, “Whatever the Church inherited from Jesus and his Apostles was not really too much; they were bits and pieces of letters of St. Paul, St. Peter, and the gospels which was not organized well at the time. The Church organized this all, and put its seal on it. It ornamented Christ’s Church with other traditions -- with holiness, with feast days, with prayers, with hymns. The Church in our situation became a reason for our people, who were spread throughout Armenia, to unite. It brought the people together. Under the one umbrella of the Church, under one Catholicos, under one Christian king. The people united with one heart, one faith, one religion, one language, they became one nation. The Church taught us, that beyond this life there is another life. The promised kingdom and the life there. The institution to teach us this became the Church. After centuries, when the people see the teachings of the Church, in a consistent manner, the people put it into their faith and their traditions. It became a part of their traditions, their heart. In this manner, the faith of our people was strengthened, and continues until today.”

The operative word in Fr. Moushegh's description is "consistent." The Church is enwrapped in traditions which manifest themselves in all facets of the Church and those traditions are handed out consistently. The Church has remained the singular, consistent institution for the Armenian people throughout its history of persecution and unrest. The consistency of the Church and its traditions has been the unifying force for the preservation and life of the people.

Fr. Nareg Marfazelian summed up this position, "...It has been the Church, its teachings and traditions which have kept the people loyal to their faith. Organizations have come and gone. The Mamigonians, the Arzounies, the Sionetzees, the Ashotians, the Arshagounies, the Cicilian kings, they were all organizations. Like today, we have Republicans and Democrats: they had the same things. There is no difference from today. But, the Church remained the same. It never changes, even its colors. After The Chalcedon Council met, we have had no relations with any other church. Whatever we have had, has been with us until today. In the twelfth century, St. Nerses Shnorhali added some things to our Book of Hours. That is another story. We have only added, never subtracted anything... this is one of the reasons for the continued loyalty of the Armenians to their God."

Likewise, Fr. Kevork Arakelian stated, "I think the Church has played the most valuable role. Because of our history, the Church is the basic thing that is left. We had a lot of political organizations,

too. Going back to the 1920s, some of those political or philanthropic organizations are not left. We have new ones coming up in their place. Some still are here.... They are ethnic organizations. I believe it is the Church which has kept the people together.”

In addition to its consistency, the Armenian Church has functioned as a permanent institution to its people with a 2000 year history that gives credence and credibility to the permanence claim.

Two of the clergy attributed the Armenian Church’s survival to its characteristic of being different from other religious institutions. Geographically, the Church personifies Christianity in the Muslim Middle East where the people have constantly fought for the survival of the Church. Furthermore, the Armenians set their Christology after the third ecumenical council in 431 A.D. When the Council of Chalcedon met twenty years later, the Armenians rejected its decisions, resulting in their separation from the rest of Christendom. As a national church, the Church of Armenia has never gone beyond its Armenian community and has struggled to be different.

Fr. Vartan Tatevossian described the Church’s ecclesiastical and nationalistic differences, “The Armenian people have stayed faithful to their God and beliefs basically because their Church has been different. Ecclesiastically, we have been separated from the rest of the churches since we only accepted three ecumenical councils. They say life comes through struggle and conflict or life is

struggle and conflict. In reacting against all those who were our neighbors, be they Romans, Greeks, or whatever, our survival has depended on, or is tied with, the fact that we have been different than others. That is why assimilation is such a big problem today. We are not living with others who are different than us here in America; they are all Christians. This is why one of the most important things we can do today is to conduct services in Armenian just as the Jews do in Hebrew.”

Armenians who have lived in different countries have constantly fought for survival and preservation of national cultural treasures. What Fr. Levon Apelian called the “White massacre,” is the danger of assimilation. “In the predominantly Christian-oriented, American society, Armenian youth are exposed to a multitude of religious options. This current generation has an entirely different attitude toward the Church than those who preceded them. The Armenians who escaped the massacres of 1915 believed that they were entrusted with their Church, and, therefore, survived. The generation who followed them battled for physical survival, and, consequently, built the Church within the diaspora. The present generation lives comfortably, often feeling resentful of taking hold of the reigns of a Church which has been handed down to them.”

Fr. Levon described, “We have been robbed of our property, our homeland, our dignity. We were raped: Our bodies, our minds, and our spirits were raped. They are still holding our lands. The

violence by the Turks continues because they do not admit the facts and because we, the remnants of those massacred, are being subjected to a different kind of massacre, the white massacre. All over the diaspora – from the Middle East to Europe to the Americas – we are subject to assimilation. Our grandparents fought to establish themselves financially. We have to fight to keep our identity. Often, this is a losing battle. The result is a watered down, diluted Armenianism. This often happens through intermarriage. This is, in effect, collaborating with the enemy. For the Turks wanted to wipe the Armenian name off the earth, the result of which is often a half-Armenian, a quarter-Armenian, a fraction of an Armenian. I am not trying to offend anyone. In fact, some non-Armenians who have joined our Church contribute much more than many full-blooded Armenians. These are the exceptions. I am not making a racist statement but one of concern for our survival. The general trend is that whenever there is a mixed marriage, the pull-away from our Church is much stronger than toward it. I know this from personal experience in my parish where ninety-percent of the marriages I have performed have been mixed and I know the result of this fact. The dilution of our Armenianism is also caused by the onslaught of an alien culture in an alien society.”

Fr. Levon’s description concerns survival. Today, the Armenian Church directs itself towards survival, as a religious institution as custodian for the nation. Survival has been a primary concern for Armenians and their Church. The Church has presented the

Armenian, Christian identity despite the circumstances of torment and persecution. In the Church's eschatological understanding of the world, its people will be redeemed. Those who were martyred – that is, faced death with this understand – believed this. Over the centuries, the Church has continued to bring spiritual insight to give its people the strength for survival.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONCLUSION**

The final chapter examines the Armenian Church's response to the Problem of Evil and in recognition of its secularized, Armenian community. It seeks to answer these questions: Can the Armenian Church continue to offer the traditional responses to the Problem of Evil by using the arguments of free will and resurrection? If so, will secularized man continue to believe those explanations? Can the past be applied to the present and future?

On the eve of the 1915 Genocide the Armenian nation had not had a political existence for nearly a millennium. The clergy, symbols of the nation, became the first targets of torment: They were buried alive and tortured. Churches were destroyed.

This attempt at genocide put the Armenian people in a devastating position. It undermined the foundation of not only the Armenian nation, but of the Armenian Church as well.

Following the atrocities, communism became victorious in the East. Hundreds of Armenian Churches closed under the Soviet system. Many of those which remained open came under siege. Despite the oppression, many Armenian Churches continued to exist, and, with them, the Armenian nation.

Without a country, without land, and without political power, the Armenian nation survived and continues to survive in a way that



very few ethnic groups have achieved. The Armenian language is still spoken, and the culture flourishes. These facts, in themselves, reflect the general phenomenon under investigation in this thesis. Far from being a philosophical analysis, this thesis has evaluated the Problem of Evil on three levels: (1) the establishment of a working theodicy, (2) the personal Problem of Evil, and (3) the collective Problem of Evil. Armenian eschatological theodicy has emphasized the theme of ultimate vindication, functioning as a premise for the Armenian nation and people to survive. It is also the reason that the people have always maintained allegiance to the Church.

Beyond the theodicy, the Armenian Church has offered its people a bond with the greater history of mankind. The Church provided this service to its people through the pulpit as well as with rituals, symbols and myths.

The uncompromising faith with which the Armenian people evolved is an achievement of centuries of reinforcement, of building upon foundations, of the history of the Church and the lives of its saints. The Armenians resurrected themselves from their 1915 crucifixion by actualizing the teachings of the Church. They completed many difficult undertakings including establishing an independent Armenian state in 1918, and beginning new lives in Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. And for the most part, they prospered monetarily as is evident by various entrepreneurial ventures with global ramifications. This prosperity, combined with

other social factors, has contributed to the Armenian people's secularization. Each community established by the survivors of the 1915 massacres included a church – the actual church building and its ecclesiastic infrastructure. As generations became further removed from the massacres, the degree of influence the Church had on their lives gradually diminished.

This thesis has viewed the Armenian Church within the context of its past history. However, the Armenian Church today finds itself embroiled in a greater struggle than the one presented by the Problem of Evil.

The Armenian Church continues to offer religious and national leadership yet it finds itself in a three-fold problem: (1) explaining the Armenian Church to Western mentality, (2) losing ground among the people in light of other nationalistic organizations in the Armenian community, and (3) competing with other religious organizations in a pluralistic society.

In previous generations, the Armenian Church, at most, needed to answer the question: Why evil? Today, it has the bigger question of why even believe in God? And even in light of God, why the Armenian Church among the many? These are new grounds for the Armenian Church, which was ill equipped to meet the challenges presented by Western and Westernized countries.

Erik Erikson contended that when a religion loses its bonds with living ethics, it is “apt to regress to the fostering of illusory and

addictive promises or empty fantasy.”<sup>39</sup> This chapter seeks to determine whether this is descriptive of the Armenian Church.

It is not necessary to investigate a large span of history to trace the secularization process of the Armenian people. During the middle of the nineteenth century, many prosperous Armenians in the Ottoman Empire sent their children to European schools. They became influenced by Western philosophy and they returned with ideas and opinions which conflicted with the traditional fundamentalism and mysticism of the Armenian Church. Hovhanness Toumanian, the renowned writer whose literature infused the Armenian community at the end of the nineteenth century, focused on an anti-superstition theme, dramatizing the danger in strong beliefs in the supernatural.

Although those sentiments were presented to the Armenian community at large, the Church continued to have a strong influence in the lives of Armenians up to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For example, it is not uncommon for a member of that generation not to know what day he was born yet be fully aware of his name-day and the saint or event on the Church calendar for which he was named.

After the 1915 massacres, survival became a top priority. Armenians struggled to sustain the remnants of their families. The Armenian Church also struggled to survive. One of the priests

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<sup>39</sup> Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: William Norton and Company, 1977), p. 155

interviewed described the plight of the Church, “I think we as a Church lost. We lost our elite in 1915, not only our clergy, but our lay people, and that took our Armenian Church back, not through anything of its own. After 1915, who, then, was left? We did not have any people left. The option of the Armenian Church was to enlist Armenian clergymen, anyone who could read, write and/or sing. There was not necessarily a good, sound, seminary system in place, where education with degrees could be had. We are, just now, coming around to where the Armenian Church is taking another resurgence, another renaissance in its history, here in America. In its struggle to survive, the Church emphasized building and growing. She considered her people to be faithful followers of the traditions. The generation which followed watched the Church struggle for physical stability. In the process, they were deprived of her Orthodox traditions.”

Meanwhile, individual Armenians strived for material gain. Their ambitiousness, freedom, and lack of oppression in a capitalistic society allowed them to thrive materially. Fr. Isahag Ghazarian described the current situation, “Our Armenian people are lost in the entire diaspora and are searching for themselves. Why is it that our churches are empty, while in Armenia, they are packed to a maximum? We are withdrawn from the Armenian Church, from Christianity, and from national Christianity. We have to turn back, and our people must devote themselves to higher ideals. They must not be tied to the material aspect of life and to

the self. We must learn to sacrifice ourselves towards the higher ideals of the Armenian nation.”

Today, Armenian political parties are succeeding to secure following with the Armenian-American community. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation is one of the most vocal. Its cry for the return of Turkish-occupied Armenia has become its trademark. The actions taken by the recently-formed Armenian Secret Army, or the Armenians for the Liberation of Armenia, are even more evident. Their system of highly-organized terrorism of Turkish diplomats reflect a rejection of the Church’s response to evil. It does not suffice for them to anticipate the day when evil will be defeated. Their desire for immediate results overshadows the Church’s long-term plan.

These militant groups and terrorists demand retribution. They also give anti-Turkish/Turkey sentiments a forum. They demand the restitution of Armenian lands lost to Turkey, compensation for the 1915 losses, elimination of Western aid to Turkey, and world acceptance of the events of 1915.

While these groups behave militantly, they continue to recognize the Armenian Church as the core of their religious heritage. Abp. Torkom Manoogian, Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, summed up their sentiments, “We fought for the freedom to live according to our own faith. We suffered martyrdom in preference to surrendering

this faith.... This is very curious. It seems, somehow, to be easier to fight for our faith than to live by it."<sup>40</sup>

The most important factor in secularization is the problem of East vs. West, science vs. magic, and philosophy vs. mystery. On the Eastern side, the Armenian Church comprehends the divine and its realm in terms of myths and symbols. They tend to follow the philosopher, Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) who reflected a mystical reverence for the sacred, that transcends all questioning of the divine. On the Western side, the churches have tended to follow the Aristotelian school of philosophy.

The Western Churches question the inconsistency of the triad: God is good; God is omnipotent; evil exists. The Armenian Church, on the other hand, is more likely to accept it as three basic truths with each statement not infringing on the validity of the other two statements.

Furthermore, the Armenian Church appeals to history rather than philosophy. Instead of asking, "Why evil?" the Armenian Church views evil within the context of its own people's history, i.e., how the Tradition of the Church has interpreted evil. Alfred North Whitehead describes an appeal to history as "the appeal to summits of attainment beyond any immediate clarity in our own, individual existence. It is an appeal to authority."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, "Growth of Our Children" (Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America, 1970

<sup>41</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures in Ideas* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), p. 285

Another reason for the Armenian Church's appeal to history is found in an example which Christ used, "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4-5: RSV). Thus, the Church, as the branches of a vine, cannot exist apart from the root, Christ. The Church cannot draw nourishment from man-inspired theology and philosophy. Whitehead, likewise, further maintains, "Religions commit suicide when they find their inspiration in their dogmas."<sup>42</sup>

The Church is nourished by the authority which is found in the deepest traditions. One priest maintained that the Armenian Church has been "around since the time of the Apostles. If you want to know what the Christian message was, just study the history of the Church." The Armenian Church has appealed to history and tradition to answer the Problem of Evil, e.g., it finds free will in the Garden of Eden story, parallels its own suffering to that of Christ, presents exemplary lifestyles through those of the saints.

The Church's history is a history of persecution and martyrdom. Each incident reinforces the experiences from the previous tragedy, building theme of hope. The Church, as well as other national organizations, use the 1915 Genocide to awaken a consciousness of identity within the new generations. Though this strategy of ethnic preservation is not articulated – at least pub-

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<sup>42</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1970), p. 138

lically – it is evident in the rhetoric that comes from leadership and even in the pulpit. It begins with the premise that the current Church is a final link in a chain which began with the Apostles. The Church is in a battle to strengthen each new link, after all, “A chain is as strong as its weakest link.” The rhetoric can work only to a point because as society moves farther into the secular realm, the Church Traditions and leadership find themselves in a weaker posture of leadership. Ironically, the leadership become the weakest link in the chain they have tried to preserve.

Because the interviewees selected for this study were Armenian Church clergy in America, the area of concentration was localized. Their responses displayed a wide variety of options ranging from a reference to the Problem of Evil as a sin to a more elaborate theodicy.

In all respects, the responses came from the teachings of the Armenian Church. In the past, myths and symbols were the primary tool of theodicy. Today, the Eriksonian question exemplifies whether myths and symbols function in the same capacity: if the Armenian Church is in contact with “living ethics,” and, if not, if it is fostering “illusory and addictive promises or empty fantasy.”

Perhaps it might be better to ask the reciprocal question: Do the fantasies and promises which the Armenian Church offers separate and sever its ties with living ethics? For some, the answer may be yes, but, for the majority of Armenians, the Church



continues to be the primary institution of living ethics, laying the foundation for Armenian moral options.

According to Archbishop Vatché Hovsepian, who leads one of the largest dioceses in the diaspora, explains that loyalty to the Armenian nation is still very real and strong. “We are a resurrected nation of over six million and we are knowledgeable of our inheritance. Our new generation, either clergy or laity, is ready to be martyred for his/her homeland.”

The Armenian Church’s long-term history and traditions have made it a permanent fixture in the Armenian community. It has been a haven of rest to its people. It has endured and remained in the community even while other Armenian organizations and institutions have come and gone. Some of the most militant, anti-religious, outspoken Armenians of this century have insisted to be buried according to the rites of the Armenian Church. The Church has offered its people a form of therapy in terms of Rieff’s allegory of a positive community. He states, “Ritual participation is an extreme form of commitment therapy. But, what ritual participation is to the group, mysticism is, functionally to the individual. Operationally defined, mysticism is always a form of unification with a saving agency.”<sup>43</sup>

The Armenian Church has catered to the individual and the group in a manner that has fortified their commitment to it. Said

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<sup>43</sup> Philip Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 72

Abp. Vatché Hovsepien, “Our faith is as strong as the foundation of Mt. Ararat.”

In the final analysis, the Problem of Evil and the questioning of it will become a progressively greater problem for the Armenian Church as its people become more Westernized and secularized. However, the clergy interviewed viewed the future of the Church with optimism: They considered its myths, symbols, and rituals to continue to be its weapons for survival. Time will be the deciding factor as to whether the Armenian Church will continue to be the center of the Armenian community, securing the loyalty of its people. His Holiness Vazken I, the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, the 140<sup>th</sup> successor to the throne of the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, provided these words of advice and optimism to the Armenian people, “Fate has scattered our sons over all the continents of the globe. One half of our small nation lives outside of the motherland. We, Armenians, often bewail this fate. But, come, let us put aside all lamentations, let us accent the reality as it exists, and even seek something useful in it for our Church and nation. We are a nearly three-thousand-year old historic nation with a tempestuous past and heroic accomplishment. We are a culture-creating people which has its respectable place in the history of human civilization. We are one of the oldest Christian peoples, with a Church rich in traditions, with authentic witnesses of the faith and a great spiritual legacy. We are a people reborn as an autonomous nation and state, on the highway of growth and

progress. Then, why must we weaken, and why must we despair, especially since we have the rich, historic experience of vital Armenian communities on distant shores where our forefathers have lived, sometimes even attaining a flourishing national-ecclesiastic and cultural life. The world of man and life in all its external aspects is a creation of the human soul. The Armenian nation should consider self-realization, self-improvement that is, the expression, growth, and refinement of its spiritual gifts, its creative powers, its distinct manner of living life with a free will and understanding and expressing it, especially through the crystallization of its religious and cultural values. The Armenian nation was thus able to endure and to survive through its history. It is thus that it will be enabled to preserve its existence also today."<sup>44</sup>

Evil has never succeeded whether it manifested itself by the Turkish sword or in the form of an opponent of the Armenian people. Perhaps that will be the fate of the Problem of Evil as well. Evil has been defeated in Armenian communities, and it will be defeated in the future, if the Armenian people continue to retain their consistent and unshaken faith in God and the Armenian Church.

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<sup>44</sup> His Holiness Vazken I, *Messages and Addresses* (New York: St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral Press, 1968), p. 42

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## **Clergy Interviewed**

### **Listed in Hierarchical Position in the Armenian Church**

Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, retired. Former Patriarch of Jerusalem and Former Primate of the Eastern Diocese of Armenian Church of North America.

Archbishop Vatché Hovsepian, Primate of the Western Diocese of the Armenian Church of North America.

Father Dirayr Dz. Vartabed Dervishian, retired. Former pastor of Los Angeles area parishes – St. James, St. Sarkis and Locum Tenens.

Father Isahag Vartabed Ghazarian, Locum Tenens of the Diocese of the Armenian Church, Alexandria, Egypt.

Father Levon Vartabed Apelian, pastor of St. Vartan Armenian Church, Oakland, California.

Father Arshag Dz. Vartabed Khatchadourian, pastor of St. James Armenian Church, Los Angeles, California.

Father Nareg Vartabed Marfazelian, pastor of St. Gregory Armenian Church, Pasadena, California.

Father Moushegh Vartabed Tashjian, pastor of St. John Armenian Church, Son Francisco, California.

Father Sipan Vartabed Mkhsian, pastor of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Santa Clara Valley, Cupertino, California.

Father Shahé Avak Kahanah Semerdjian, pastor of St. Peter Armenian Church, Van Nuys, California.

Father Shahé Avak Kahanah Altounian, pastor of St. Paul Armenian Church, Fresno, California.

Father Vartan Kahanah Dulgarian, pastor of St. Sarkis Armenian Church, East Los Angeles, California.



Father Vartan Kahanah Tatevossian, pastor of St. John Armenian  
Cathedral, Hollywood, California.

Father Krikor Kahanah Hairabedian, pastor of Armenian Church of San  
Diego, San Diego, California.

Father Vartan Kahanah Kasparian, pastor of St. Mary Armenian Church,  
Yettem, California.

Father Kevork Kahanah Arakelian, pastor of St. Gregory Armenian Church,  
Fowler, California.

Father Datev Kahanah Tatoulian, pastor of Sts. Sahag and Mesrob  
Armenian Church, Reedley, California.

Deacon Raffi Garabedian, spiritual administrator of St. Gregory Armenian  
Church, Fowler, California.

