

The Role of the Armenian Church During Military Conflicts

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Abstract

Throughout its history, Armenia frequently has been a battlefield for foreign forces. Consequently, Armenians have repeatedly been forced to fight for their freedom. Society highly valued such resistance and Church leaders glorified these combatants as heroes. During the Armenian–Persian war in the 5th century, the death of Christian soldiers was defined as self-sacrifice and the Church canonized them as “fighting martyrs.” This attitude towards sacred militarism continued to be evident from that time through the present. The main focus of the following article is to examine how the Armenian Church legitimized the use of violence, especially during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1988–1994). For the future, it suggests a critical analysis of traditional Church–State relations and a complete separation between politics and religion.

A History of Invasions

Since the beginning of the first millennium, Armenia has struggled to preserve its existence between powerful empires. For this reason, every century of Armenian history is filled with armed conflicts. In the 4th century, Eastern Rome and Sassanid Persia divided the kingdom between them. After a long period of resistance, the Armenians faced a new enemy with Arab invaders. In medieval times, Armenians suffered under the attacks of Mongolian Tartars, as well as Byzantine forces and Seljuk Turks. Later it was controlled partly by Persia and partly by the Ottoman Empire. In the 20th century, Armenians unwillingly became involved in World War I because some were living in tsarist Russia while others were in Turkey. During this confrontation, the genocide of 1915 took place, during which more than 1.5 million civilians lost their lives. However, even that terrible ordeal was not the end of their disasters, because after the collapse of Soviet Union, Armenia was forced to fight Azerbaijan for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian Apostolic Church always stood close to its flock and therefore was directly involved in every single military confrontation. Because of the unrelenting foreign invasions, the Church leaders generally define their own history as a long chain of victimization. However, early in this tragic journey, they started to justify armed self-defense and developed the ideologies of “Fatherland War” and “Holy War. But how is it possible to legitimize theologically any military conflict and glorify the fallen fighters as “martyrs”? Other important questions are: Have these sanctified conflicts influenced the formation of national identity and do they still play a significant role in the present?

The Battle of Avarair in 451—the First “Holy War” for the Christian Faith?

Church leaders justified the use of force in Armenia’s domestic policy as early as the beginning of the 4th century, when King Trdat III proclaimed Christianity as

the state religion and, with the blessing of the bishops, started a campaign of compulsory conversion. One hundred years later, Armenian clerical historians started to write about “defensive and liberating wars.” Such resistance was glorified as heroism. In contrast, foreign conquerors were demonized and classified as fiends and brutes. This attitude was especially prominent after the battle of Avarair in 451. Archimandrite Elishe and Lazar Parpeci, historians from the 5th century, tell us that the Persian King Yazdegerd II at that time ordered the compulsory conversion of Armenians, Georgians and Caucasian Albanians to Zoroastrianism. One year later revolt broke out because Armenian princes and clergy answered with armed resistance.

Parpeci describes their readiness to fight by reproducing a prayer: “Let us await with desire the day of our martyrdom, on which, if we are worthy to share the lot of the saints, our virtuous death will crown us.” According to Elishe, before the main battle in Avarair, the bishops and priests were celebrating holy mass and preparing soldiers spiritually for the upcoming self-sacrifice. One of the famous preachers was pastor Gevond. His theological views were mostly based on the Old Testament. He even used the name of Christ and his death on the cross in a militant way: “If death is destroyed by death, let us not fear to share Christ’s death; for with whom we die, with the same shall we also live.”

Even the chief commander Vardan Mamikonian repeated the clergymen’s words to spur on his troops: “Let us hasten without delay, and let no one be found like Judas, who was rejected from the apostolic band. And if the time has come to end our lives in this battle with a holy death, let us accept it with joyful hearts.” According to this narrative the whole army accepted the idea of self-sacrifice without any hesitation: “May our death equal the death of the just and the shedding of our blood that of the blood of the holy martyrs.” The adoption of these sentiments put in place a shift toward a paradigm of “fighting Christians.”

In spite of the soldiers' courage, the resistance was broken after the final battle of Avarair in 451. Nevertheless, Armenian historians described that event as an "unequaled act of defense," where Armenians tried to protect both "their fatherland and Christian faith," and in doing so, the fallen fighters earned eternal life. Therefore, this extraordinary attitude towards the heroes of Avarair remained as a defining moment in the national memory.

The Later Image of the Battle of Avarair

"Death not understood is death, death understood is immortality!" This ancient wisdom was soon adopted as a strategic ideology by the Church fathers. The memory of Avarair started to shape the identity of new generations. The fallen commander and his slain comrades were canonized. Their deaths still are commemorated every year with a divine liturgy on the Shrove-Thursday before Fasching-Sunday. The glorification of military saints was intensified especially in the 19th century, when Armenians suffered under the yoke of Ottoman Turkey and tsarist Russia. In this period, liberation movements and a newborn nationalism rose inside several intellectual circles. The heroic story of Avarair became the focus of many writers and artists. Several Church leaders and intellectuals tried to use this event as an important motivator in building up Armenian patriotism. New Churches and chapels were consecrated with the name of St. Vardan to commemorate the fallen commander.

In 1950 Catholicos Gevorg VI wrote a patriarchal encyclical about the upcoming 1500th jubilee of the battle of Avarair. He named that conflict as "the most distinguished and venerable" in Armenian history because it was "the heroic expression of high morality, patriotism and the love of one's own nation, loyalty to an ecclesiastic vow, selfless heroism, spiritual culture, dedication and the martial valor of the Armenian nation." Bishop Eznik Petrosyan, currently the best-known specialist of Church history, is convinced that: "The battle of Avarair was the first example of armed self-defense of Christianity in world history, when light and darkness, life and death, faith and renunciation battled each other." He believes consequently that Armenians have fulfilled the biblical message, that "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Of course, many modern academics have criticized this exaggerated and obsolete interpretation. Nevertheless, Church leaders both in Armenia and among the Diaspora have yet to demonstrate any notable change in their attitude toward this controversial topic. The reason is that the glorification of fallen fighters was evident not only in ancient Christianity, but also in the present. In both world wars Armenian officers and intellectuals motivated their soldiers with the name of St.

Vardan. But let us just look at the latest example from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Role of the Armenian Church in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

In August 1992, when this conflict was at its height, Vazgen Sargsyan, the first Minister of Defense of Armenia, formed a special commando unit from volunteers and called them "Arciv-Mahapartner," which means "Eagles Sentenced to Death." The unit consisted of about 450 men who were sworn either to defeat all enemies and only after that return home or to die on the battlefield, as St. Vardan did 1500 years ago. Many other regiments also used religious nicknames and other symbols. Most of them drew the sign of the white cross on their uniforms and vehicles. Priests who were with the soldiers claimed after the battle that the fighters had drawn the crosses in order to secure God's protection. However, many soldiers denied this interpretation, saying that they were using this symbol only to distinguish themselves from their opponents, since both armies wore the same Soviet uniforms. Did the clergy claim that it was a religious war? No. But religion was exploited in order to make the acts of killing and dying more tolerable.

In the beginning, Catholicos Vazgen I sought to condemn and stop any nationalistic and liberation movements. Under pressure from the Kremlin, he participated in interreligious dialogue with Islamic leaders from Azerbaijan and encouraged brotherly and peaceful relations between the two Soviet nations. Later, when Armenia's independence was an unavoidable reality, he called this conflict a "holy struggle for freedom." In 1989, according to the wishes of the Armenian population of that region, he reestablished the diocese of Karabakh, which was dissolved in 1930 by Azerbaijan's communist rulers. Archbishop Pargev Martirosyan since then has served as the new primate. A charismatic leader, he still enjoys great popularity there. The people particularly were impressed by his attitude during the war. In his speeches, he talked many times about the importance of peace; however, at the same time, he described this conflict as a "just war." He is confident that "the blessing of God helped Armenians to achieve victory." In his booklet "Heavenly Help to the Christian Soldier", he explains how they could win against a much stronger enemy. In order to justify the use of force, he frequently quotes from the Old Testament.

Obviously, the Church leaders were not able to stop this confrontation. Physically they suffered together with their flock under the violent attacks of the contemporary enemy; psychologically they were not able to forgive the ancient conquerors. Therefore, they decided simply to support their troops. The argumentation remained the same

as it was 1500 years ago: All selfless heroes were fighting in order to protect their sacred fatherland and their Churches; therefore, they were in a “holy war” now. If someone died, he was regarded as a “new martyr.” Many such fallen soldiers were buried in the “Yerablur-Pantheon” military cemetery in Yerevan. On the website of the Ministry of Defense one can find the following description: “Armenia’s brave sons are buried here. Yerablur became the symbol of the young Armenian army, Armenian patriotism, heroism and steadfast determination to decide one’s own fate. Yerablur is a sacred and symbolic to every Armenian.” The main chapel of this cemetery was consecrated with the name of St. Vardan, who has become since then the protector-saint of the Armenian Army.

The government uses such religious terms and symbols with the blessing of the Church leaders. Together they glorify the recent military actions and work to ensure that the entire nation supports this issue. So if we try to define the role of the Armenian Church in regulating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the appropriate characterization could be that, unfortunately, it remained somewhere between the gospel and the nation.

Rethinking Current Church–State Relations

The present close relations between the Church and the state are a historical legacy of the past. After the Christianization of Armenia, the loyal clergymen regarded their sacred institution as a “national Church” and have since then worked in close cooperation with the existing rulers. During the periods of foreign invasions, when the monarchy was withdrawn, bishops remained in charge of local government and education. The parliament of independent Armenia mentioned this in Article 8.1 of the national constitution: “The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a national church, in the spiritual life, development of the national culture and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia.”

Although the state officially accepts the right of religious freedom according to European principles, the Armenian Church de facto enjoys the status of a national Church, which gives it many privileges, such as the right to provide religious education in public schools and universities, pastoral services in hospitals and prisons, and

chaplains in the Army. There is a special law and a study program confirmed by the Ministry of Defense regulating the status of chaplains. Mostly they are young deacons and priests who serve in the armed forces without any special training for two years. They arrange bible study circles, catechetical lessons, baptisms and other liturgical events. However, their main task is to convince the 18–20-year-old soldiers “to love their fatherland as real patriots with their whole hearts and to protect its borders responsibly with weapons in their hands.” One of their beloved religious feasts is, of course, the celebration of St. Vardan’s day. The presence of the clergy in the army today essentially serves a propaganda role.

It is evident, that such a tight model of Church–state cooperation is semi-legal, if we consider the general principle of religious freedom. Unfortunately, in practice, everything continues on in the traditional way of political and religious unity. This frequently leads to the manipulation of religion by the current political rulers and brings the Church consequently under the control of the state, as it was during the times of monarchic absolutism. How long it will take the Church to reject completely this conformist attitude is difficult to say. Clerics and politicians have to admit that there is an unresolved, “medieval” problem: The state has always needed legitimation by the Church for the justification of its military conflicts. Especially after unsuccessful wars, it was easier to accept the death of religiously-motivated volunteers. The clergy accepted this task because they were loyal to their respective government. And so they were engaged in supplying a pseudo-theological justification. In doing so they typically relied on arguments from the Old Testament and proofs from national history. Certainly, it was easier to mobilize everybody to take part in or to support a “Holy War.”

For the future, it is necessary to raise a sensible question: Is it not time for theological and political enlightenment? The state and the Church have to rethink and reshape their tight cooperation. A complete separation between politics and religion would be the best solution. Conservative forces may protest against such changes. However, if the Armenian Church and the government do not proceed with this reform, then the sanctified militarism will not disappear from their country.

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For Further Reading:

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- “Battle of Avarayr” Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. <http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.jsp?sid=1&id=58&pid=10>
- “Nagorno-Karabagh” Eastern Diocese of Armenian Church of USA. <http://www.armenianchurch-ed.net/armenian-heritage/nagorno-karabagh/overview/>
- “Yerablur” Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia. <http://www.mil.am/eng/index.php?page=23>