

# The Armenian\* Church in the USSR

EDUARD OGANESSYAN

Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion. In 301 Christianity was established through the work of Gregory the Illuminator. Before the Council of Chalcedon (i.e. before 451) the Armenian Church formed part of the Ecumenical Church, although it had its own organizational structure and national character. But after refusing to accept the rulings of the Council of Chalcedon, the Armenian Church broke away and to this day it has its own highest authority, the Supreme Patriarch, the Catholicos of All Armenians.

Armenia's subsequent history is closely linked with religion. Christian themes dominate in Armenian art, literature and architecture; and Christian traditions have become an integral part of Armenian national life. The Armenian political structure was, to all intents and purposes, a theocracy, although it was not officially recognized as such, and even after Armenia lost her sovereignty the administration of the country continued to be based on theocratic principles. (Even at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Armenia was represented by the Catholicos of all Armenians, Khrimyan Ayrik.) But this close identification between secular and religious life had unfortunate consequences: religious life lost its spiritual basis and became a tradition rather than a profession of faith. True faith cannot be destroyed when church buildings are destroyed, but for a traditional church, buildings, sermons, confessions, requiems and liturgies play a vital role. It was these external manifestations of the faith that the Soviet authorities set about destroying.

In 1922, Peoples' Commissar Dyurgeriya declared: "We do not recognize the Armenian-Gregorian hierarchy with its centre and branches, dioceses and diocesan leaders, as an independent spiritual authority. This means that our government cannot recognize someone as the head of the Armenian-Gregorian Church". A so-called "Free Church" (similar to the Russian "Living Church") was organized in Armenia with a former *chekist* (secret policeman), Ter-Arutyunyan, as its leader. Churches were

\* i.e. the Gregorian Armenians. These do not include about 100,000 (out of a total of 2½ million Armenians) who are in communion with Rome. *Ed.*

destroyed and many priests were imprisoned and shot. Bishop Gyut, a leading scholar, and the monk Yeznik were killed while in prison. Catholicos Khoren I was strangled by *chekists* in his apartment, and his body was thrown out of the window. Although forbidden to do so, a small group of women managed, under cover of darkness, to bury the body not far from the monastery of St Gayane. After 1943 when Stalin adopted a new religious policy, the Armenian Church's position was altered. Georg VI (Chorekchyan) was elected – or rather, appointed – to the vacant Patriarchal throne, and was received by Stalin, who promised to regain for Armenia those of her territories which were held by the Turks. The new Catholicos began to play an active part in the “struggle for peace” campaign, and took part in various political congresses organized by the Soviet authorities. He was given permission to open the Echmiadzin seminary and to maintain contacts with the Armenian diaspora.

During the period of liberalization following Stalin's death Vazgen I was elected (1957) Catholicos of All Armenians. The Soviet leadership charged Vazgen I with the mission of bringing the Armenian Church abroad (under the jurisdiction of the Catholicos of Cilicia) under the control of Echmiadzin by ensuring that a candidate, who would be acceptable to the Soviet authorities, was elected Catholicos of Cilicia. Although Vazgen I himself travelled to Beirut, his mission failed and Bishop Zare, a courageous priest and an outstanding leader of the Armenian Church abroad, who was not suitable from the Soviet point of view, was elected Catholicos of Cilicia. Thus, at present, the Armenian (Gregorian) Church is represented by two groups: the Soviet group with headquarters in Echmiadzin, and the Cilician, with its centre in Beirut.

Vazgen I was born in 1908 in the village of Rodoto (Romania). He graduated from the Bucharest faculties of philosophy and theology and headed the Armenian diocese in Romania when Romania collaborated with Nazi Germany and when it was occupied by Soviet troops. As head of the Armenian diocese in Romania, the future Catholicos visited Soviet Armenia several times (in 1945, 1948, 1951 and 1954) and published a book on his impressions, *Under the Sun of the Homeland*, which fully accords with the requirements of Soviet propaganda. In this book he claims that the Armenians are enthusiastically building a bright future; he praises Armenian architects for harmonizing “national style and new ideas and requirements”. He also writes about literature:

A writer in a Soviet land, following the method of socialist realism, takes an active part and becomes involved in the process of creating a new way of life, guiding the people in a spirit of peace.

Addressing Armenians abroad, the author declares:

Armenians abroad must understand, once and for all, that only Soviet rule and only the Russian people can guarantee prosperity for our

people, can guarantee the further development of our country and peaceful progress, and can guarantee the attainment of a golden future for the Armenian nation.

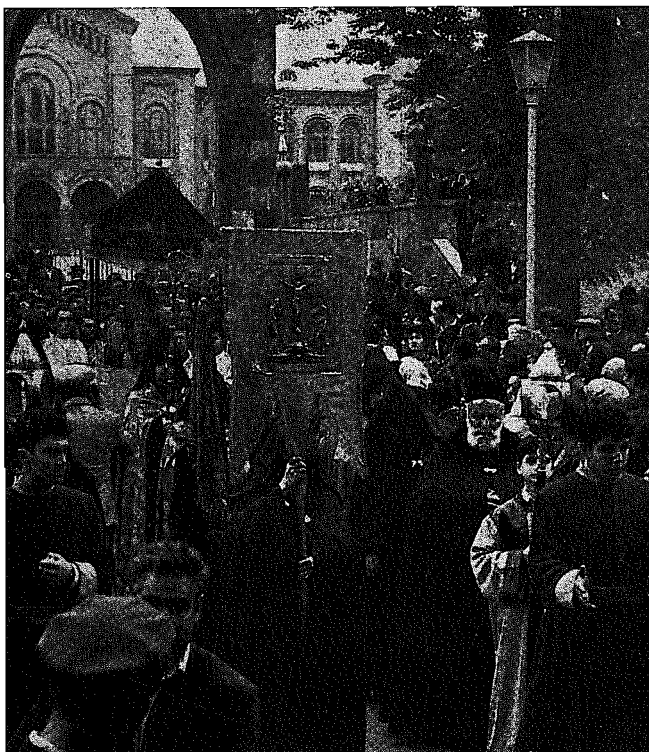
It is not known whether these words were written "to order" or whether they are a genuine expression of the author's sentiments, but they harmonize remarkably well with Soviet propaganda. When the book was published the Soviet authorities could have been in no doubt about the author's suitability, from their point of view, as a candidate for the position of Catholicos.

Communist tactics in relation to the Church were clearly evident in the official election of the Catholicos. The authorities gave permission for all ecclesiastical and secular delegates from abroad to come to Soviet Armenia. But only those who were pro-Soviet or, at best, "neutral" could be elected as delegates, so that, in practice, only a minority of Armenians from abroad were actually represented. The Armenian communities of Iran, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan were not represented, and the Armenian community in the United States was only partially represented. All those who refused to participate did so because they did not wish to be associated with the results of an election which was communist controlled. The deputy of the Catholicos of Cilicia (Beirut), the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople and the deputy of the Patriarch of Jerusalem also did not take part in the election. The Soviet press reported that the National Church Council was attended by representatives of Armenian dioceses in Soviet Armenia and other areas of the USSR, but as all these dioceses had ceased to exist by this time, it would appear that the authorities appointed delegates from fictitious dioceses.

Since his election Catholicos Vazgen I has done all he can to assure the well-being of the Armenian Church. He has managed to establish good relations with Armenians abroad, and has thereby increased his authority outside the country and made his position at home more secure.

Today in Soviet Armenia there is no widespread persecution of believers. In fact conditions are propitious for a religious revival. Such a revival appears to be taking place throughout the Armenian republic, as it is in the Soviet Union as a whole. There are three main sources for this revival in Armenia: nationalism, the study of science and morality.

At the end of the Stalinist era Soviet Armenia began to regain a sense of its national identity and re-awakened national feeling demanded the restoration of Armenia's history and traditions. It became clear that Armenian history was indissolubly linked with its religious history. Through their rediscovery of Armenia's rich national heritage, its art, music, literature and architecture today's younger generation in Armenia have been led to search for answers to religious questions which they had not dared to ponder before. Their religious search was also spurred



Above Procession into the cathedral at Echmiadzin (in Soviet Armenia), seat of Catholicos Vazgen I of the Armenian Church. (See article pp. 238-42.)



Left A group of newly-ordained young priests in Soviet Armenia.



Left During their ordination as priests in the Armenian Church, these young men prostrate themselves. (All photographs, courtesy Keston College.)



Above Goshavank, or the Church of Gosh in Soviet Armenia. Mehitar Gosh, a 12th century Armenian, established on this site what the Armenians call a university, which was destroyed by the Mongols in 1230. Goshavank has been restored, but is not open for worship. (Courtesy Keston College.)



Left A khachkar, or Armenian carved cross, at Goshavank. There are many thousands of such crosses in Armenia. Their carved patterns are elaborate and seldom repeated. (Courtesy Keston College.)

on by their study of science. Young Armenians today are well educated and find themselves facing a multitude of unanswered questions after reading such periodicals as *Tekhnika Molodyozhi* (*Technology for Youth*) or *Znanie Sila* (*Knowledge is Strength*), after encountering *samizdat* or listening to foreign radio programmes. At first they are amazed: how could most great scientists, even such favourites of atheist propaganda as Copernicus, Darwin, Tsiolkovsky and Pavlov, also be believers? Then it suddenly dawns on them that religion in no way contradicts science, but rather fulfils it. They gradually see that science is dependent on the limited logical abilities of man and cannot explain the limitless universe. Such young seekers in Armenia often find the answers to some of their questions in the works of Berdyaev, Frank and Lossky, but if, like myself, such seekers are not lucky enough to encounter this literature, they must find their own way with the help of God. Then morality, too, comes to the help of the seeker. Our young intellectual believes in justice and truth, yet all attempts to find them are fruitless. He cannot see them either in local politics or in international relations or even in his home and personal relationships. In today's world he is not helped to differentiate between good and evil, and if he has a conscience neither the State, nor the Party, nor society can satisfy his spiritual needs. He rejects all forms of violence. Looking around he sees that literature, propaganda, friends and neighbours are all devoid of truth. Where, then, can it be, this elusive justice? Sooner or later he comes to understand that there is no truth without conscience. He realizes that anarchy is immeasurably more just than the political and social structure in which he lives, and that in such circumstances his conscience is his only guide. Yet conscience cannot be explained apart from religion. Thus conscience, the study of science and nationalism all lead the young in Armenia to religion.

Apart from many young Armenians who are genuinely searching for a religious faith, the religious revival in Armenia amounts to a revival of interest in religious rituals which are seen as part of Armenia's national tradition. This form of religious revival affects even those in positions of power. For example, while the present author was still in Armenia, the director of the Polytechnic Institute in Yerevan, P. Melkonyan, died. He had been a deputy of the Supreme Soviet, a member of the Communist Party and of the Central Committee. The committee in charge of organizing his funeral decided to observe all the religious traditions (now called national traditions) with the exception of the funeral Mass. A. S. Svazyan, a militant atheist of the "Znanie" Society, protested vigorously against this decision: "What on earth do you think you are doing? After all, it's a member of the Central Committee we're burying." He received a stinging reply from the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Armenian SSR, B. A. Muradyan: "He was an Armenian, and we shall give him a

*proper funeral, observing all national traditions and not offending his family*".

In general the activity of the Armenian Church, in the USSR and abroad, is nationalist rather than religious in character. Armenians have come to love their religion because it is part of their national heritage. Although the church at Echmiadzin is packed every Sunday, this does not mean that all those present are believers. Many have come just to hear Armenian liturgical music. Many baptize their children, marry in church and have requiems said for the dead, not because they are believers but because these sacraments have become for them national traditions. The Armenian Church lacks faith and does not oppose the ruling ideology. This is why it is not persecuted.

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## Comment

*The Rev. Raymond Oppenheim writes :*

Eduard Oganessyan's article, "The Armenian Church in the USSR", is accurate in associating much of the success of the Armenian Church with the rise of nationalism in Soviet Armenia. There is the need, however, to consider the broader Soviet context. While it is true that many Soviet Armenians use the rituals of the Church in a nationalistic fashion, it is important to note that it is precisely this kind of observance which is under the heaviest attack among the Muslims of Central Asia, the Roman Catholics of Lithuania, and, above all, the Jews in every corner of the USSR.

The *modus vivendi* achieved by Catholicos Vazgen I has permitted a greater degree of religious freedom to flourish in Soviet Armenia than in any other part of the Soviet Union.

It would be possible to compile quite a catalogue of facts which would support this allegation, May I cite just a few :

1. On my desk is an Armenian New Testament, printed on the presses of Holy Echmiadzin. It was purchased on a parish church bookstall in Soviet Armenia. In my more than three years' residence in the USSR, the only Bibles I ever saw on legal, public sale were in Armenia.

2. I attended a concert in Yerevan, on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of St Nerses Shnorhali, the great Armenian Christian poet.

The programme, almost entirely of church music, featured the *prima donna* of the Yerevan Opera, People's Artist of the Armenian SSR, Lucina Zakharyan, who is also the soloist at the Cathedral of St Gregory the Illuminator, in Holy Echmiadzin. Further, each artist bowed to the party of robed clerics in His Holiness's box.

3. Picture postcards of Catholicos Vazgen are on sale in many places, and his portrait is seen on the walls of many shops and homes.

4. If you visit the Martyrs' Monument, above the city of Yerevan, you will hear in the background a recording of the Cathedral choir.

Where else but in Armenia?

There is no doubt that many Armenians love their Church for other than theological reasons, but love it they do. And thanks to his shrewd handling of a delicate situation, Catholicos Vazgen I has procured for his people a freer exercise of their faith than is known elsewhere in the USSR.

Eduard Oganessyan would prefer, as we all would, that the exercise of religion be based on faith rather than on nationalistic tradition. The achievement of the leadership of the Armenian Church should not be under-estimated, however, since the Armenians have thereby been granted far greater latitude than any other Soviet citizens.

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