

THE STUDY OF THE ISSUE OF ISLAMIZED ARMENIANS IN TURKEY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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In the Armenian reality the issue of the forcibly Islamized Armenians has drawn the attention of the experts and general public in different periods. Valuable publications, accounts, travel notes, articles can be found since the 18th century with regard to the different groups of Armenians who have been estranged from their roots under the pressure of Islam. In this relation it is worth to mention such authors as Hakobos Tashian, Minas Bzhshkian, Atrpet, Hovakim Hovakimian, Sarkis Haykouni, Grigor Artsruni, Vladimir Gordlevski and others who had done much work in this direction. In the Soviet period Levon Khachikyan, a prominent scholar, wrote a remarkable article about the Islamized Hamsheni Armenians, whereas Barunak Torlakyan, a Hamsheni Armenian himself, published interesting materials on the ethnography and history of the Hamsheni Armenians' Christian and Muslim segments.

It deserves to be specially stressed that high ranking clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church have been also involved in both academic and practical aspects of the problems related to the forcibly converted Armenians. For instance, the Catholicos Vazgen I of Blessed Memory, the Armenian Patriarchs of Constantinople Zaven Der Yeghiayan, Karekin Khachadourian, Shenork Kaloustian were among such clergymen.

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Since 1980s valuable research activities on topics related to the Hamsheni Armenians have been carried out by a true enthusiast Sergei Vardanyan, whose works greatly contributed to expounding the issue and induced further work in this direction. Today Sergei Vardanyan continues his research of the issues related to Hamsheni Armenians and it is a pleasure to note that other researchers have joined him over time, including, notably Haykazun Alvrtsyan, Lusine Sahakyan and Hovnan Simonian (USA). The issues of the forcibly converted and crypto-Armenians of Turkey are also studied by Karen Khanlaryan who has published a valuable monograph.

Since 2006 articles devoted to the Armenians adhering to other religions or confessions have been periodically published in the *Hanrapetakan* magazine. A more institutionalized study of the issue has been initiated since 2007 by the “Noravank” Foundation, led by its director Gagik Harutyunyan. A program dealing with the issues of the Armenians converted to other religions or confessions has been established in the Foundation, field studies have been carried out in Turkey and Georgia, and seminars have been organized. The researchers of the Foundation presented their reports at the conferences held in Armenia and abroad. Finally, the cooperation between “Noravank” Foundation and the Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia resulted in publication of books covering the issues of the Islamized Armenians and Armenians of other confessions.

The studies on the issues of the forcibly converted Armenians in the real academic field can be assessed as normally evolving, but some negative developments have also been observed alongside. First of all, non-professionals got involved in the matter, some of which made flashy conclusions that there are millions of crypto-Armenians in Turkey who will soon rise and Turkey will collapse. Another group of non-specialists, who perhaps have some achievements in certain disciplines of science, try to penetrate this area too and they not only put forward nihilistic, anti-scientific and often

amateurish assessments, but also feel it their duty to harshly criticize those who are involved in this subject. We believe that, for instance, the issue of the Islamized Armenians is an interdisciplinary topic, but it mostly has to do with Turkish Studies, as without having knowledge of the political stance and policies of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, the matter cannot be studied comprehensively. For unknown reasons many believe that it is very easy to become a narrowly focused specialist on this subject and they make conclusions and conduct analyses which are rather far from being scientific and realistic. Unfortunately, in this issue some people are guided by personal discontent, complexes, envy and narrow-mindedness rather than by scientific impartiality. In addition to the aforementioned group, there are some Internet maniacs and bloggers of all sorts for whom the subject of Islamized Armenians is just another excuse to prate.

Both the admiring and nihilist approaches are unacceptable for us.

Along with the rising interest toward the subject of the forcibly converted Armenians, the following artificial issue came up in our academic discourse: whether the ethnic or religious identity should take precedence in indentifying an Armenian. Very often an idea takes hold in our consciousness that only a Christian can be considered Armenian, and hence, there could be no such notion as converted Armenian or Armenian of another religion. Many arguments are being brought to prove this point of view. It has to be stated that this is rather difficult question, but in our opinion, one should approach the issue in the context of today's reality, rather than what we want to see or what is ideal. The existence of the forcibly Islamized Armenians and their descendants is a fact and it would be at least unfair to ignore the people who have preserved the memories of their Armenian origins despite innumerable difficulties.

In our opinion, such a vehement reaction to the issue of the converted Armenians contains an obvious tendency, as the subject was taken out of the

academic studies framework, causing new rifts and deepening of the older ones. Most importantly, the counter-arguments concerning the issue of the Islamized Armenians do not stand up a scrutiny at all and are quite outdated. The main argument is that an Armenian can only be Apostolic Christian and those who are not Apostolic cannot be considered Armenians or they are Armenians with some reservations. It is necessary to emphasize that although the Armenian Apostolic Church has played a special and important role for our nation, identity and history, however, the ethnic and religious identities differ. We had been Armenians before 301 A.D., and those Armenians who are Catholics, Protestants, pagans or atheists are still Armenians, so utmost discretion must be exercised in assessments. The famous writer Raffi is among the intellectuals who are broader-minded with regard to this issue. He had turned many times to this problem, providing exhaustive answers to various questions. For example, referring to the religious and confessional accord, he noted: "We believe that the diversity of faiths does not destroy the national unity. Unity should be sought in harmony of these segments, with the main motive being the devotion to the nation in its most exalted meaning." [1, p. 292]. "There is no civilized or uncivilized nation on earth, which would adhere to the same church" [2, p. 327]. "Neither Catholicism, nor Protestantism, nor even Islam cause the Armenian to cease being an Armenian, and conversely, adherence to the Apostolic church does not give us the right to be called Armenians" [2, p. 332].

We must combine abilities of being both good adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church and being broad-minded in the issues concerning the national identity. Studying the converted Armenians cannot damage the Armenian Apostolic Church, as no anti-church or anti-religious ideas are propagated; just the opposite, it is shown how different groups of Armenians forcibly removed from Christianity keep struggling to preserve it even if doing so secretly, in what conditions they have preserved their memories, etc. Also, as

it has been mentioned above, many priests, Catholicos and Patriarchs of the Armenian Apostolic Church dealt with the issue of the forcibly Islamized Armenians, trying to reclaim these assimilated Armenians.

It should be specially stressed that Armenians converted to Islam or crypto-Armenians are a result of the Turkish oppressive policy. They were forced to abandon their religion, ethnicity and language. They are silent and enduring evidences of the Ottoman tyranny. At the same time these people and their descendants are incontestable proofs of the Armenian Genocide, as the item (e) in Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide clearly states that forcibly transferring children of the ethnic, religious group to another group constitutes genocide. In the years of the Genocide tens of thousands of Armenian orphans were forcibly Islamized and today we speak about their descendants.

We believe that the issue must not be politicized, should remain mainly in the academic field and be analyzed properly, the results of which could be presented to the public in a professional manner. Incompetent statements affect both the subject matter and the people who live in different parts of our historical homeland. Besides, two approaches should be adopted to deal with this issue – long-term and short-term. Correspondingly, our long-term goal is to re-integrate and return this part of the Armenianness to their roots, and here the Apostolic Christianity plays an important role. Meanwhile, to communicate with them now we should adopt a more flexible strategy and accept them as they are. It is important to note that adoption of Islam for many of them was a temporary solution and they intended to return to Christianity whenever an occasion would arise; due to the circumstances some managed to do that and others did not.

It is much spoken about the dangers caused by this matter, for example that the Islamized Armenians will come to Armenia and open mosques. First of all, it should be stated that we are not in favor of bringing these people to

Armenia, because most of them live in their historical homeland and they do not want to leave it either. During our conversations with the converted Armenians, whenever it was suggested that they did not remain loyal to their religion, they counter-argued that they remained firmly committed to their land. Hence, we need to communicate with each other, because our essences has been somehow distorted; in one case caused by the loss of the homeland and in the other case by the religion. Through studies of the converted Armenians we also aim at restoring our deformed identity, as those people stayed in the part of the homeland which has been lost for us, and they have been the ones who secretly visited and continue to visit our defiled sanctuaries. The feeling of this twofold distortion is present among the converted Armenians as well.

With regard to the dangers, many point out that we should not have initiated the study of this issue in Armenia, and moreover some non-professionals contend it is a trick devised by foreign intelligence services. It has to be noted that this issue has been first touched upon by the European researchers, then by the Turkish researchers, and under such circumstances the silence of the Armenian science would have seemed strange at least. The Armenian science should have a say on the subject after appropriate studies are carried out. We also study the elements of the Armenian culture preserved among these people – the dances, songs, customs, place names and we see nothing dangerous about it. Of course, as it has been already mentioned, groundless and politicized statements are not desirable and may adversely affect the common cause. It also has to be added that the studies of the forcibly converted Armenians may contribute to identifying the entirety of resources available to the Armeniacy

We would also like to turn to the moral aspect of the issue: we, as Christians are obliged to lend a helping hand to our stray compatriots who had been estranged from us against their will. In this regard a rather remarkable

observation was made back in 1969 in an article by S. Bakkalian, a priest of the Armenian Evangelical Church: *“However today when we have a pretext and opportunity to help them (the Islamized Armenians), and if we miss this last golden chance, surely one day our Lord will ask us – you and me: “Where is your brother?...” [3, p. 179].*

We would also like to present some practical results of the study on the topic of the Islamized Armenians. First of all, the research uncovered some realities that even more strengthened the irrefutability of the fact of the Armenian Genocide. These arguments are based, inter alia, on the Turkish sources, and to date the Turkish side has not been able to contest them. It is important to underscore that since 2008 the secular and religious leaders of Armenia have also made references to the issue of the forcibly converted Armenians, which is something that never happened before. For instance, on September 24, 2008 the President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan stated during his visit to the USA at the meeting with the representatives of the Armenian Diaspora that he was against linguistic, religious or confessional divides among the Armenians¹. Later on, in February 2009, the President of Armenia discussed the issue of the Armenians of other religions and confessions at the meeting with Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians and the Supreme Spiritual Council, and the press-release issued after the event contained the following: *“Among the issues discussed were enrooting a fuller sense of Armenian identity among the Armenians of other religions and confessions and effective cooperation between different Armenian confessional communities”*². In his address of April 24, 2011 the president spoke about the forcible Islamization of the Armenians during the Genocide: *“The Ottoman Empire carried out a state-level policy to annihilate the Armenian people and deprive them of their homeland. Throughout all stages of its implementation, massa-*

¹ <http://www.president.am/events/news/arm/?day=24&month=09&year=2008&id=209>

² <http://www.president.am/events/news/arm/?id=418>

ces, deportations, **religion conversions** (bold emphasis added, R.M.) and enslavement were viewed as common, routine trifles¹. We are pleased by the approach of the Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II to this issue. For instance, in his address on April 24, 2010 he stated: *“The Armenians who were forcibly converted to Islam and their descendants who are afraid to speak about their identity are also victims of the Genocide”*².

Our intelligentsia is also concerned about the issue of the forcibly converted Armenians. For example, in one of the recent interviews, National Hero of Armenia Charles Aznavour acknowledged that he had raised the issue of the Islamized Armenians during his conversation with the President of Armenia: *“One day I spoke with the President of Armenia about the Islamized Armenians and I told him that something has to be done. These people are not happy as they are accepted neither by Turks, nor by Armenians; it is necessary to help them. We are a nation and nations obviously consist of different people – good or bad, people of different religions – Christians, Jews, Muslims, it is normal. Armenia needs to change its mentality and accept Armenians of different religions, just like Europe does”*³.

As for the developments around the issue of the forcibly Islamized Armenians in Turkey, it has to be noted that using various structures this country tries to speculate on it, which is something one would expect. One of the developments concerning this issue is worth a discussion – in the recent period interesting and at the same time dangerous tendencies can be observed in the ethnic policy of the Turkish authorities carried out particularly in some of the mostly Kurdish-populated eastern regions of the country. One of the main arguments of the Kurdish claims is that they constitute an absolute majority in some eastern regions of Turkey and, in essence, these regions are

¹ www.nt.am/newsday.php?p=0&c=0&t=0&r=0&year=2011&month=04&day=24&shownews=1040754&LangID=9#1040754

² <http://www.tert.am/am/news/2010/04/24/april24/>

³ http://lin.am/arm/armenia_interview_37227.html

ethnically homogeneous, i.e. Kurdish. Of course, this situation is a consequence of the genocidal policy carried out by the Ottoman authorities whereby the native people of the territory – the Armenians – were exterminated or assimilated. However, currently the Turkish authorities try to question the fact that those regions are “homogeneously Kurdish” and for this purpose they tend to use the factor of the forcibly Islamized Armenians. It has been for a while that the Turkish media and official Turkish historians have put into circulation the idea that there are many converted Armenians in the eastern regions of the country. Very often some of the statements made with the adverse intentions correspond to the reality, but certain Turkish structures had known about this fact for quite a long time and they did their best to control and fully assimilate those fragments of the Armenianness. As the Turkish authorities failed to achieve a complete success in their attempts, today they strive to turn the situation to their advantage. In particular, the same context could be applicable to the phenomenon that at least with the tacit consent of the Turkish authorities, efforts are taking place to self-organize and activate the forcibly Islamized Armenians living in different parts of the historical Armenia (e.g. in Dersim). Actually, this is a rather pleasing development for us, but the other components of this matter should also be considered. Raising the issue of the Armenianness’s fragments surviving in the historical Armenia, the Turkish authorities try to exploit it for showing that these regions are not homogeneously Kurdish and there are other ethnic groups as well. We believe that the attempts to restore the Armenian churches could also be part of the same context. All of this may cause tensions between Kurds and Islamized Armenians and lead to unpredictable effects as Kurds may start viewing them as competitors. However, it should be noted for now that the minor attempts to resurge the Armenian presence in the region are taken positively and sometimes are even encouraged in the Kurdish circles, but, nevertheless, the possible dangerous developments

should also be taken in to consideration. Today, one of the main trends of the Turkish ethnic policy is setting the interests of different ethnic groups against each other. Thus, it can be safely stated that the ethnic direction continues to be an important part in the domestic policy of Turkey and although the observed new trends sometimes may superficially seem positive, at the same time possible hidden threats and traps should be taken into consideration.

In conclusion it has to be mentioned that there appear to be two areas of development for the issue of the Islamized Armenians. First, due to the ongoing crisis of the ethnic identity in Turkey, many people will suspect about, search and reclaim their Armenian identity; they will associate themselves with the Armenianness with all the consequences that come with it. Second, one part of the converted Armenians will choose the way of complete assimilation (even today they are at a certain level of assimilation and some of them had been almost completely assimilated). Our impartial academic studies should set solid grounds for the political and religious authorities to undertake practical, tangible and effective actions.

December, 2011.

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