

THE ELECTION OF KAREKIN I

ARMENIAN CHURCH, NATION, AND THE GOSPEL WITNESS

by Vigen Guroian

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Perhaps the least understood aspect of the rise of the new national entities in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is the role that religion plays. As Martin Perez astutely commented in *The New Republic* (August 7, 1995) not long ago: "If nationalism is a difficult concept for [Western style liberal political analysts] to appreciate, the resilience of religion is, quite simply, incomprehensible." But, as Perez rightly suggests, religious identification and nationality are inextricably intertwined in these parts of the world. "If you cannot understand that, you cannot understand the grim news from Bosnia." Perez continues: "The Serbian war against the Bosnians is a religious war not only because Bosnians are Muslims but because the Serbs are Orthodox Christians."

Perez probably owes his readers a clarification and distinction between an ethnic war in which religion defines identities and provokes animosities and a holy war. Perez is speaking of the former and not the latter. We in the West, meanwhile, are having a difficult time understanding why peoples who have been invisible to us for so long now are rudely grabbing the historical stage with such outbursts of violence and apparently irrational behavior. We understand that they have been released from the restraints of totalitarian regimes, but we are perplexed and even outraged by their violation of the sacred canons of liberalism and democracy, especially the principle of tolerance. The sources of our puzzlement and impatience are principally two: first, we are ignorant of the histories of these peoples; and, second, we find it hard to believe that religion could be a source of the ethos and conduct of nations in the contemporary world.

I have been asked to address one of these perplexing situations. While, lately, most of our attention in the West has been fixed on the Balkans region, the Caucasus, which at least since the time of Alexander the Great has been a critical crossroads between Europe and Asia, has receded from our view. And yet there is trouble there, and, as in the Balkans, the turmoil and conflict cannot be understood without taking into serious account the religious factor. It is the distinction of Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe that it has insisted all these years upon the vital significance of religious history and ecclesiastical processes in all those parts of Europe that were once behind the iron curtain. And so I know that it is hoped that my remarks might transcend the usual preoccupation with the political state that is an earmark of secular political studies and American foreign policy. For a people is certainly much more than its government. Yet neither do I think that this audience would be satisfied with merely an account of

ecclesiastical happening apart from a consideration of the course that the Armenian nation is on in its struggle to become a viable political entity.

In the minds and hearts of real Armenian people there is an inextricable mix of religious and ethnic identity that even the unlikely institution in Armenia of a strict separation of church and state would not nullify. And it is in light of this fact that we are bound to consider the recent election of Karekin Sarkissian to the Catholicosate of All Armenians at the Holy See in Etchmiadzin, Armenia. This is the most ancient and venerated of historic Armenian Patriarchates, and almost all observers agree that the election of Karekin I is of great significance to the Armenian Church and Armenians throughout the world. Two factors lead to this judgment: (1) The first is the nature of the times. The tight yoke of the Soviet system has been removed and new possibilities and opportunities for the Armenian Church have opened up. (2) The second concerns the character and special qualities of the man himself. Karekin I is the product of an international education, including a B Litt. from Oxford in 1959 where he wrote a thesis that was later published under the title of *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church*. For over three decades, Karekin Sarkissian has been active in the ecumenical movement worldwide. He has served on the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches and as a President of the Middle East Council of Churches. He attended the Second Vatican Council and the Lambeth Conference of 1968.

This evening I will address the immediate context of Karekin I's new catholicosate. Put in the form of a question: "What does this ecclesiastical election mean for the Armenian Church in Armenia and for the Armenian nation as a whole, and, by logical extension, how does the election promise to affect the Church's role in efforts toward regional peace and its relations with other Christian churches?" In pursuit of the answers, I want to look closely at Karekin I's sermon for his enthronement on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1995, and to compare his statements on that occasion with what Karekin has said in the past on similar themes.

In his sermon, the new Armenian Catholicos comments at length upon his expectations for the future of the Armenian Church. His predecessor, Catholicos Vasken I, had headed the Armenian Church for nearly forty years, and had seen it and the nation through virtually all the years of the Cold War. His Holiness Vazken I lived long enough to witness also the collapse of Soviet rule and the birth of an independent nation. But as Karekin makes clear in his sermon, a new chapter of Armenian history is now opening. At the start, Karekin raises two points that frame all of his remarks. "For the first time in the twentieth century," he observes, an election of a Catholicos has been held in Etchmiadzin "during a period when [the] fatherland exists as an independent republic." And, he adds, with this election a "benevolent, democratic regime" also prevails in Armenia. Furthermore, the new Catholicos sets out three basic themes for his sermon. These are: (1) spiritual renewal and mission, (2) unity of the Church in light of the relationship of nation and diaspora, and (3) the role of the Church in the struggle for successful Armenian nationhood. Karekin's rhetoric is always inspiring; but it is not without problems, either.

Renewal and Mission

The hope that Karekin I expresses for the Church's inner renovation and rejuvenation and his vision for its global presence and active place among the other Christian churches evidence the broadness of his thinking and his deep ecumenical commitments. After a brief peroration, he formally launches his theme of renewal and mission. "The Armenian Apostolic Church, which has entrusted me with the office of its first servant," he states, "is summoned--at this decisive transition in our modern history--to an imperative mission of salvation. Led by the fundamental teachings of an historical legacy established by God and transmitted through Christ, it is called upon to pour into the life of our people new, clean and abundant water from the fountain of the Holy Gospels, the moral principles of human living, and spiritual values."

Similar things have been heard from other Armenian hierarchs without much to show. In Karekin's case, however, there is reason to hope that the rhetoric will issue in action. During the tragic earthquake of December 1988 and the politically turbulent and difficult years that followed, the public absence of clergy among the people was noted and severely criticized by many observers. From burials to relief efforts the clergy were frequently not present. In the meantime, the ecclesiastical authorities at Etchmiadzin howled and complained that Armenia was being overrun by the so-called religious sects. Everyone from the Baptists, to Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostals, Mormons, and Hare Krishnas were named this way. The church leadership did not want to hear that its own conservatism, complacency, and non-seriousness about spiritual matters made the job and success of these so-called sects infinitely more easy. The Armenian Church simply was not prepared to enter the modern world of religious pluralism and to compete. Not all Armenians, however, would submit to the psychological blackmail and the disingenuous plea that seventy years of Soviet rule were to blame and that the Church was doing the best it could.

Karekin I's long career as a churchman and ecumenist has taught him the meaning of mission and forced him to think hard about spiritual renewal in the church. I do not think he will resort to this kind of excuse making but instead look ahead to a wholehearted re-engagement of the Armenian Church with the Christian world at large. In his book *The Witness of the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, published in 1970, a young Bishop Karekin Sarkissian discussed mission and renewal this way. This inter-related process of recovery and rediscovery gave birth to a new trend of life in these [Oriental Orthodox] Churches that is characterized by a new awareness of the demand of Christ's continuing Incarnation in the world, a new responsibility towards the changing conditions and situations of modern times, a readiness to cooperate with other Churches under the imperative of the common mission that they share together with them.

Speaking in the magazine *AIM* (March 1994), just a year before his unexpected election as Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin made very clear what needs to be done in the Armenia Church. Referring to proselytizing in Armenia by other churches, denominations, and para-church groups, he commented:

The church has to go beyond opposing or condemning the new sects and cults. It must till the field.

Our clergy have to redefine their public role. No more waiting for the people to come to the church. The church, the churchmen have to go out to the people. This is the outreach, outgoing type of mission that we have to undertake. Seventy years of Soviet rule have surely left a mark on the attitudes of both the clergy and the people, we have to get to emancipate ourselves from the inherited apathy. We've got to go out and meet the people and the problems they live.

Based upon such remarks, the new Catholicos can be expected to build upon efforts initiated by Etchmiadzin to train religious instructors for schools and parishes. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Karekin was a leader at the Antelias Seminary in Lebanon. And in the first months of his new tenure, the Catholicos has taken steps to reform the Seminary at Holy Etchmiadzin. He is at a disadvantage because the Armenian Church is conspicuously wanting of theologians and good preachers. Nevertheless, perhaps Karekin I will draw from his ecumenical experiences for resources. In *The Witness of the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, he had been careful to note the interdependence of all the Christian churches in a post-Christendom era. In such a milieu, renewal in any one church would necessarily interconnect with the larger mission of all the Christian churches. One might hope that this Catholicos will take advantage of the forthcoming commemoration in 2001 of the Church's 1700th anniversary year of its founding to promote real reform and renewal in the Armenian Church. The date of 301 is traditionally given for the conversion of the Armenian King Tiridates to Christianity and the establishment of a Christian Armenian kingdom.

In his sermon, Karekin had this to say about the forthcoming commemoration of that event:

We have a wonderful opportunity presented to us: the 1700th anniversary of the Christianization of Armenia. . . . I have said elsewhere that it is necessary that this occasion be celebrated as a new Pentecost in the life of our people, both in the fatherland and in the diaspora. It must become a movement of renewal for the benefit of our people, and in the service of God and mankind.

The use of Pentecost as a symbol makes a powerful statement. This Catholicos, who like John Paul II, is not a native of the soil upon which his cathedral rests and See was founded, has the advantage also of not being provincial. His lifetime of experience in the ecumenical movement gives reason to believe that he will move dramatically to open the Armenian Church and its vast riches of tradition to the whole of Christianity, that he will invite everyone to the banquet. It would be wonderful to see an institutionalization of this great celebration such that the first 'national church' in the history of Christianity fulfills the universal vision of its founder St. Gregory the Illuminator and makes this place, said to be where the Only Begotten descended (Etchmiadzin means just that), a place of prayer and learning for all Christians. Perhaps Karekin will be so bold as to transform Etchmiadzin into a permanent center of ecumenical inquiry and Christian mission. In turn

the Armenian Church can benefit immensely from the talent of persons who will be drawn to Etchmiadzin. One can imagine the ongoing presence of an international visiting faculty and the kind of cross fertilization of ideas that might lead to a new renaissance of Armenian theology and religious life. It will take, however, every bit of Karekin's personal charisma, courage, and wisdom to make this happen, to move this ancient church beyond its habitual myopia, self-defensiveness, and suspicion of 'outsiders' shaped by 800 hundred years of Ottoman and Soviet subjugation.

Yet in *The Witness of the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, this visionary man looked into the future just that boldly:

They [the Oriental churches] are called to learn, in their turn, how to be involved in the Christian world at large and thus put an end to that isolation, the impact of which is still persisting to a certain extent in their life and action. They now have to become conscious that the ecumenical dialogue has been an abundant blessing to them as to other Churches.

The new Pentecost must be nothing less than an event where the languages no longer divide and nationality is transcended in a common witness to peace and salvation in Jesus Christ. It would be something to see if the center of Armenian Christianity--where the Only Begotten descended--were to become also the place where the Spirit makes a home for all Christians to gather and be edified for mission in the world.

Church Unity, Diaspora and Nationhood

The second theme in Karekin's sermon is unity in the Church and a strengthened relationship of the diaspora with the Armenian nation. His Holiness observes:

The new state of the present world and Armenian life recommend to us nothing other than the strengthening of the unity of the Armenian Apostolic Church. A new chapter has been opened in human history. A new chapter has been opened in Armenian life. A new chapter cannot fail to open in the life of the Armenian Church. The chapter of controversies and clashes must be considered closed. The chapter of unity has opened.

The immediate inference from these remarks is that the era of jurisdictional division in North America must be brought to an end. Armenians in North America are greeting Karekin I's election with special anticipation because it lends hope that, at last, the sixty year old ideological rift and forty year old jurisdictional dispute between the Holy See of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, which Karekin occupied for some 17 years, and the See of Holy Etchmiadzin will be resolved. Karekin I seems committed toward ending the non-canonical presence of two bishops in one city that was prompted by the milieu of the Cold War. The new conditions for reconciliation and unity are evident and compelling. Armenia is no longer under Soviet rule. Those who questioned the integrity of the See of Holy Etchmiadzin in that era and guarded the hope of an independent nation and Church have seen that day come about. Ideology need no longer stand in the way. Certainly, the overwhelming pragmatic need is for the Armenian community in North America to work

without division within and outside of the Church. Karekin I expresses this view in his sermon:

My brothers and sisters, it is necessary to build a golden bridge to span the distance between the fatherland and the diaspora. We must remain connected in the geography of our spirit, kindling within our hearts the feeling that we are citizens of a single nation. It is in this fashion that all of us must participate in the fortification of our fatherland and in the development of our people's life.

But it is precisely when Karekin begins to connect the purposes of the Church with the future of the Armenian state that his rhetoric looks the most familiar and is the most disappointing. As strenuously as he has striven on other occasions and in other locations to articulate a vision of the mission of the Armenian Church which embraces the whole freedom of the Church, Karekin is drawn to the old way of looking at the relationship of Church and nation that has played no small part in weakening the Armenian Church by rendering it a mere handmaid of the secular authorities, whether Ottoman or Soviet and now Armenian. Over the last century religious leaders have consistently argued that the Armenian Church is essential to Armenian nationhood. Karekin says in his sermon: "The [Armenian Church is ... the cement of our national unity." And he adds: "Without the Gospel our nation would be weak." Perhaps, and then again perhaps not. Karekin certainly knows better. He knows that the Gospel is about the salvation of a sinful humanity, of which a sinful Armenian humanity is a part. But instead he casts his language in terms of the old Armenian civil religion. The message is unambiguous: the Church and the Gospel exist to support the nation --one suspects even a sinful and unrepentant nation.

In an interview for the Armenian-American quarterly *Window* (1994) before his election, Karekin drew a distinction between nationhood and nationalism in a manner that, I submit, helped little to establish the post-soviet Armenian Church on a new and freer footing: He stated: "We need to be able to explain to our people the fact that nationhood is not opposed to religion. It is nationalism that repudiates Christian faith--nationalism that is exclusivist, i. e. that which does not recognize anything beyond itself." There is no denying that this was a radical thing to say in an Armenian context. It was even more significant coming from a hierarch who had been accused by the Etchmiadzin aligned segments of the Armenian Church of being an instrument of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the principal Armenian nationalist party over the long interim between the fall of the short-lived Armenian republic of 1918-1920 and the rise of the new republic in 1991. Since 1991, the ARF has positioned itself as principal antagonist to the government headed by President Levon Der Bedrosian. Karekin's remarks may, indeed, have laid the groundwork for the extraordinary event that occurred just before the election in April 1995 of the Catholicos. At that moment, President Levon Der Bedrosian, acting he insisted as a private citizen, declared his support for Karekin among the numerous other candidates.

This, of course, was really quite contrary to the spirit, if not the precise letter, of the new *Law of Armenia on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations* promulgated in

1991. And since then, there have been questions raised about collusion and the like. But the unhappiest consequence of this act, even if it was completely unilateral on the part of the President, is that it compromised the freedom of the Church. This question has hardly been addressed in the Armenian world because Armenians really believe, or at least want to believe, that the good of the Church and the interests of nationhood will always be in harmony. This is how, in the modern era, Armenians have reconceived their Christianity. In this sense, it is accurate to say that faith and national identity and religion and nationalism are thoroughly mixed together in the Armenian mind and imagination.

Radical as Karekin's remarks might have been in an Armenian context, his distinction between nationalism and nationhood is nettled with problems. In the most formal of terms it might hold some truth. But practically it is simply impossible to speak of nationhood in the modern era without also in the same breath identifying nationalism of one kind or another. Certainly one could hardly speak of Armenian nationhood while eschewing any connection with nationalism. What really lays behind Karekin's remarks, I suspect, is his desire to save the notion of a national church. My suspicion as to why virtually all of the leaders of the Armenian Church, to a man, embraces this term--while some, it is true, come to its defense rather nervously, is that a 'national church' symbolically connects the present with a glorified past: the last vestiges of a lost Armenian Christendom are held on to tightly because of the memory of the power that the Church had under the old social order. Historically and sociologically it may still be useful to employ this term when describing the historic relationship of the Armenian Church with the nation of Armenia. Theologically and ecclesiologically, however, at this time in history, it is a dangerous business for the Church to define its existence that way. The old order in which a national church was presumed and in which legal establishment was a foregone conclusion has disappeared and will not be rehabilitated.

The vast majority of Armenians are only in the shallowest sense a Christian people. Karekin himself has acknowledged forthrightly that this is so. In his *Window* interview, he stated plainly that the population of Armenia is only "Christian, nominally, through its history, heritage, tradition." He rightly then called for "a *new apostolate* [for the Church]-an evangelistic role in the life of our people." But Karekin is also on record in the *AIM* article referred to already as saying that the Armenian Church "is a national church, that is to say, an institution that is totally at the service of the nation." Karekin might want to insist that this is only another way of expressing what it means for the Church to be a "servant church" of Christ. But in reality the Armenian Church's behavior has not reflected theology but political expedience, at least for a hundred years. For a long time, power has been the motive of the hierarchs, a piece of the secular pie of nationhood; and *service* to the secular authorities in pursuit of that end has overshadowed spiritual servanthood. Ironically, in a post-Christendom Armenia, a Church that asserts its independence of the state and emphasizes its connection with the other Christian churches is much more likely to render a real spiritual service to the Armenian people. It is crucial for the Armenian Church that the dynamic character of *mission church* replace the static and establishmentarian mentality of *national church*. Karekin I must lead the way to this new and yet also very ancient way of thinking.

Church, Nationhood, and Relations with Others

This brings us to the crux of the third theme in Karekin I's inaugural sermon: church, national existence, and relationships with others. Karekin himself has understood the proper relationship of church and culture and nation and Gospel. In a paper entitled "Church and Nation" that he presented in 1965, Bishop Karekin made the appropriate distinctions. "National traditions, customs, and patterns of self-expression are secondary to the universal message of the Christian faith," he wrote. "They are important for the communication of the [Gospel] message," Karekin continued, but they have no absolute value." Yet one hears nothing like this from Karekin today. Perhaps this is because he is too consciousness of speaking to and winning the approval of the new political leadership.

Armenians, however, need to hear the kind of a message the early Karekin was capable of presenting so forcefully, because this is a moment when Armenians feel especially threatened and are tempted mightily to put nation above Gospel. I have found in my visits to Armenia that the Christian conscience is often present within individual Armenians, but that it is in jeopardy for want of sufficient nurture. I have often told the following story about a conversation I had in Armenia in 1991 because I have heard the gist of it repeated in many Armenian settings.

One late afternoon in June of 1991, I strolled through the streets of Yerevan with Lillet Zagaryan, an historian of medieval art, and Erna Melikyan, a classicist. The two women were explaining to me how many Armenians were returning to the Church searching for something to believe in after the Soviet system had created a spiritual desert. Lillet was of the opinion that a morality was needed by which people might steer their lives in the new freedom after the collapse of Communism. She believed that morality is a universal, but suspected also that there is something specific and compelling about Christian morality, which requires supererogatory love of neighbor, even the neighbor who is an enemy. I said that I thought that Christian ethics includes more than moral principles or universalizable rules, that it is joined to a person whom Christians are asked to imitate and follow. "You mean Jesus," she responded. "I do not dispute that he was an historical person. . . . But Christianity teaches us to turn the other cheek and love our enemy. That is difficult. How can we love Turks or Azeris? . . . When faced with such enemies maybe it is better not to be so moral, so Christian." Erna agreed: "Such a morality is nearly impossible for Armenians." I did not let the matter rest at this, however. I asked Lillet and Erna if it might not be possible that the hatred of Azeris and Turks could turn inward upon the Armenian psyche and manifest itself in the self-hatred of the victim. Lillet agreed. Erna consented that this was true of "personal life." She questioned, however, whether the same syndrome could affect a whole nation. Lillet quickly responded that if it was true of the former then it was bound to be true for the latter. Then I asked the two women whether the nation's wounded psyche didn't need healing because, otherwise, mightn't there arise serious social pathologies. If Armenia gained its footing in its new freedom, for example, and these things were not healed, was it possible that the once persecuted Armenians might become the persecutors. Lillet responded without one moment of hesitation. "Yes," she said. "It could become so." I asked them both, "Where

do you look for such healing?" "The church," said Lillet, "must say something." "But we have not heard anything," Erna added. If nothing changes, what does this conversation portend if not the final triumph of nationalism over the Gospel in the Armenian soul. Yet the Armenian Church remains silent about these profound issues of anger, hatred and self-hatred, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In his sermon, Karekin says the following about the bloody conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh:

... [O]ur Church must play its national role, since it is inextricably bound to the entire history and fate of the Armenian nation. With this same understanding, our Church must continue to support our brothers and sisters of Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] in their heroic struggle to defend their -- and our own -- rights. The issue of Artsakh has absolutely no religious character. Like our predecessor, we have advocated a peaceful resolution of the problem by means of honest consultation and negotiation.

In light of such comments, a vital question concerning the freedom and the integrity of the Church arises "When, if ever, might the Armenian Church raise a voice of opposition to the state's behavior and conduct?" Karekin I, like his predecessor Vazken I, has insisted upon the inextricable union of Church with national life. And he has begun to conceive his role of spiritual leader of the Armenian people as essential to the success of the nation. But I suspect that most of those in Armenian government, including President Der Bedrosian, don't view things quite that way. They may view the Church presently as a unifying and uplifting force in a demoralized society; but they might just as easily consider dispensable a deeply divided Church or one that criticizes the course that the government is taking. For this almost uniformly secular leadership, national church means submissive church, or at the very least a church which keeps it house in relative order and faithfully supports the government. So what if the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh were to turn really ugly and atrocities were clearly committed by Armenians against innocent Azeri civilians: what could the Armenian Church say about such obviously un-Christian behavior contrary also to international morality? What if the government tried to cover things up and deny the extent of the taking of innocent lives? This is the sense in which the conflict between Armenians and Azeris over Nagorno-Karabakh would become a defining test of the Church's freedom and faithfulness to the Gospel.

Karekin has on several other occasions denied, as in the excerpt I have cited from his sermon, that the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has anything to do with religion or the Church. In June of 1995, he joined with Patriarch Alexie of Moscow and Sheykh-ul-Islam Allahshukurpash-Zade, supreme spiritual leader of the Muslims of Azerbaijan in issuing a statement on the conflict. In that joint statement, the three religious leaders declared that the struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh "is devoid of any religious basis." But one cannot have it both ways. One cannot insist, as Karekin I does, that the Armenian Church and the Armenian nation are indivisible and then say that religion and religious identity have nothing to do with what moves Armenians to courageously defend their homeland and also to hate and kill Azeris. In that same joint statement the three leaders

also stated that it "is sinful from a Christian as well as Islamic point of view" to implicate religion in such violence. But religion and church are implicated in all sorts of ways. It would be well if all three leaders admitted the contradiction and went on to call their churches and religious communities to repentance rather than disingenuously retreating on such occasions from the identification of religion and ethnos that they themselves have made an art of.

Throughout the Caucasus this deep fusion of religion and culture exists, as it does in most of the Christian East (and among Islamic peoples, as well). It has been relatively benign thus far in Armenia, provoked divisive and injurious struggles between churches in Ukraine, and come dangerously close to legitimating violence and killing by lending sacral symbolism to nationalistic irredentism in Serbia. But as I suggested above, the greatest test of the Armenian Church's faithfulness to the Gospel may yet be coming. Short of the unwanted advent of such a terrible test, there will arise all manner of smaller tests for the Church in which the Gospel will be pitched against the behavior of the state. There will also arise countless opportunities for this new Armenian Catholicos and visionary ecumenist to invite others into the life of his Church who could help him to bring his flock fully into the universal conversation of mankind. And last of all, it is my personal hope and prayer that Karekin I will commit himself to being the preeminent pastor and preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Armenian people. Because, as he himself has so often stated, in that eternal Gospel lies the best chance of healing this ancient nation's scarred body and tormented soul.