

RELIGION AND ARMENIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY: NATIONALISM OLD AND NEW

by Vigen Guroian

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In his recent book, The End of the Twentieth Century, John Lukacs argues that the resurgence of nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe proves that "the most powerful political force in the world" for our era is nationalism. While persons might disagree with Lukacs' overall assessment, no serious analyst of contemporary world politics would deny that the old and new nationalisms arising in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Caucasus are going to be with us for some time and that they need to be better understood.

Religion is a significant factor in this nationalism. Yet Western interpreters keep to old habits and remain ignorant of the religious history of these regions, especially of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Thus much of the contemporary analysis skirts the religious issue. This limits understanding of the events that steadily beat upon our consciousness and hampers our capacity to respond to them.

If Western interpreters raise the religion factor at all, they do so almost always when they cannot otherwise make sense of why remote, unfamiliar peoples would be killing or slaughtering one another. The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, spoke of a stop-gap God. The modern media seems to have invented a stop-gap cause of last resort for conflicts that allude their limited resources of analysis. Why one side is Christian and the other side Muslim, or one group is Roman Catholic and the other is Eastern Orthodox are questions for which no further explanations were needed.

This is cheap talk. It displays an ignorance of peoplehood and national identity as they are forged out of the raw stuff of kinship, language, a common history, and geography, struggles against common foes and a common religion. The liberal imagination, stuck in its myths of autonomy, individualism, and social contract, cannot fathom the true meaning of peoplehood. Peoples who do not conform in character, history, or behavior to the liberal myth are dismissed as less civilized than ourselves, pre-critical or some such thing, and certainly unreasonable. Religion, which of course is irrational, is readily turned to in order to explain conduct that contradicts liberal tolerance and the peace of civil community.

Among the more "sophisticated," in the guilds of political science and history, it is distasteful and even embarrassing to resort to religion to fill in gaps of ignorance. But the same liberalism is at work. Is it not obvious that religion, namely Christianity, is no longer a serious factor in among national groups? That force was spent some time ago.

We live off of the legacy of the Enlightenment not the Middle Ages. Islam is a bit perplexing. There are those crazy Islamic fundamentalists. How did they come into our modern world? Anyhow, they are the exception.

Look at Armenia, for example. The simple description that Armenians are Christian and Azerbaijanis are Muslim seems to suffice for many Western observers when they seek to explain why these two peoples would be at each other's throats. But this "explanation" does not suffice. In fact it is pretty far off the mark as explanations go. The better informed political analysts know this. So they argue that we need to look seriously at Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalism as discrete phenomena separate from religion.

I mention as a case in point an astute paper by Peter Rutland entitled "Democracy and Nationalism in Armenia." Rutland states rightly at the outset of his study that: "Despite the fact that the Armenians have the oldest independent church in Christendom . . . [which] was an important vehicle for the preservation of national identity over the centuries, religion has not been a driving force in modern [Armenian] nationalism." To support his claim, he accurately points out that the Armenian Church was not a strong advocate of independent nationhood until quite late. Rutland also correctly points out that the intellectual defense of Armenian nationalism since the mid-nineteenth century has issued almost entirely from secular intelligentsia and political parties whose relationships to the church have often been strained, if not downright antagonistic. The conservatism of the Armenian Church under Ottoman and Soviet domination produced a powerful strain of anticlericalism among Armenian nationalists. Should Armenia survive and succeed as an independent nation-state, it will be a secular society.

Yet, perhaps because he remains so focused upon the political and governmental sphere, Rutland's welcome study, like so many recent analyses of the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, fails to capture or reflect the significance of religion in the recrudescence of Armenian national feeling. The key to this relationship is that nationalism is historically and logically preceded by a sense of peoplehood. And without that sense of peoplehood no nationalist idea or ideology can be politically successful. The standard studies of nationalism understate, often all but ignore, the role of religion in the historical development of peoplehood and national identity. And if religion is given attention, its role in contemporary nationalism is minimized.

Most of the standard studies work under the presupposition that nationalism replaces religion with other powerful secular symbols of national identity and destiny. This, certainly, is the prejudice of Ernest Gellner's Nations and Nationalism. At one point in that study, Gellner offers this significant and telling observation: "Nowadays, to be a Bosnian Muslim you need not to believe that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is his Prophet, but you do need to have lost that faith. This is a half-truth; and the half that is not true corrupts the subsequent analysis.

The whole truth is much more subtle. This certainly applies to the nations of the Balkans and the Caucasus. John Lukacs draws nearer to the full truth when he suggests that the differences between the churches in Eastern and Western Europe are less liturgical and

perhaps even less theological than they are historical and national. Lukacs writes: Among many groups in Eastern Europe the designation 'Christian' refers not only to religion but also to nationality; indeed, among some people the two designations do not merely overlap, they are identical."

The thesis that nationalism replaces religion--that is really Gellner's point--does not always hold true especially in societies into which the Enlightenment did not work its full effects. In point of fact, among Armenian nationalists (and today practically the whole nation fits that description) shades of religious conviction range from intense belief to atheism.

We draw even nearer to the whole truth if we consider Benedict Anderson's powerful statement in his indispensable book Imagined Communities. Anderson wages the thesis that the potency of nationalism will not be grasped if it is treated merely in terms of self-consciously held political ideology," the liberal and Marxist mistakes. Nationalism, rather, presupposes large "cultural systems that preceded it, out of which--as well as against which--it came into being.

Anderson argues that the history and beliefs of religious communities ought to receive more attention in the study of nationalism. He realizes that nationalism arises out of the cultural matrix of religion, and while the emergence of nationalism also usually marks the decline of the influence of religion, Anderson freely allows for the possibility that church and religion will continue to play significant roles in the imaginative construal of national identity and the practical affairs of national life .

The Religious Origins of Armenian Nationalism

This analysis certainly holds true for Armenia. The Armenian Church has been and remains a force of Armenian nationalism. I can only briefly review the important historical background. The Ottoman millet system needs to be taken into account in order to understand the beginning of this relationship. Under that system each of the subject Christian and Jewish minorities was organized under the headship of its religious hierarchs. This transformed religious leaders into political administrators and custodians of the ethnic culture. Thus under Ottoman rule, the Armenian Christian faith and ethnic identity became equated to a degree unknown during the independent Armenian Christian kingdoms of the Middle Ages.

The early Armenian nationalists of the nineteenth century were decidedly anti-clerical, jealous of the church's ethnarchy and power and critical of its conservatism, which they judged contributed to the servitude and suffering of Armenians under the Ottomans. Yet by the close of the century even the most secular nationalists saw that the church might yet be useful as preserver of ethnic consciousness and as a legitimizer of nationalism. The Armenian religious elites accepted this call and put faith to the service of nationalism. This was accomplished through the creation of a religio-national myth that was the common invention of religious and secular elements alike. This powerful myth projected modern ideas of nationhood and popular sovereignty back into the origins of Armenian

peoplehood and Christianity. Thus even the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the kingdom in the early fourth century was equated with the birth of the Armenian nation and nationalism.

During the Soviet period the Armenian Church adroitly joined this myth to the Soviet concept of a brotherhood of Soviet peoples and successfully represented itself to the Armenian people as the ancient symbol of national unity and pride while simultaneously it cooperated closely with the Soviet authorities.

After the dramatic events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which brought the Soviet Union to an end, the church found it safe and expedient to reconnect this myth once more with the long pent-up Armenian aspirations for independent nationhood. In November of 1989 the Catholics of All Armenians Vazken I of the See of Holy Etchmiadzin addressed the delegates of the newly formed Armenian National Movement making this claim:

The fundamental idea of your organization , or movement, has been the word National -- by the National concept. That is very dear to our heart

. . . I would like to remind you that since your are talking about the nation . . . at this moment you are at a historical center which created and shaped the national idea.

The national identity of the Armenian nation, the national ethos of the Armenian nation, [and] the national ideology of the Armenian people have been forged here at Holy Etchmiadzin, especially, in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Again on the occasion of the blessing of the holy chrism in September of 1991 the Patriarch expanded on this theme in his homily and now described the idea of national independence as the invention of the church . He declared: "Today, it is only just to acknowledge the Armenian Church as the proto-witness, the forerunner of our national independence." In a peroration that drew together all the strong symbols of Armenian church, Armenian peoplehood and nationalism the Patriarch proclaimed that the creed of the church was "one free nation, one free government, one free national Church" and declared the "holy chrism, . . . blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit, [to be] the 'Chrism of Independence`."

Thus since the late 1980s the Armenian Church has been aggressively claiming for itself the title of champion of Armenian peoplehood and has offered a sacral seal of blessing upon independent nationhood.

The Crisis of the Armenian Church

The Armenian Church, however, faces a crisis of identity just as real and as deep as that of the nation. In the initial phases of transition from soviet to free society, the church is jockeying to retrieve power and influence in the new political order. Craftily, church leaders are drawing upon deep historical memories and powerful cultural symbols to foster the recrudescence of national feelings and claim trusteeship over it.

Yet if the Armenian Church persists in its old habit of rendering obsequious legitimation to the state and persists in being a handmaid of nationalism it might commit the worst errors of phyletism and national idolatry and render its Orthodox faith superfluous, indistinguishable from nationalism, pride of culture or patriotism. A secularized civil religion would replace biblical faith with the church providing the solemn ceremony of national self-worship.

Political scientists and historians look at nationalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and ask questions, such as: What does this nationalism mean for the future of the nation-state? Or, is this nationalism a threat to alternatives of collective security, European federation, and economic integration? I am not uninterested in such issues. But as a theologian and churchman I know that other things are at stake. I must ask: What shape shall Christianity take in these new political orders? Will the old national churches fall to the temptation of feeding the engines of nationalism in the effort to regain old forms of influence over the culture and the state, or can they learn new ways of being church consistent with the Gospel in post-Christian and post-Communist societies? I am also convinced that the manner in which the churches respond to change is of importance to the course that these new nations take.

Two Kinds of Armenian Nationalism

The nationalism that the Armenian Church espouses is the old nationalism that emerged in the last century and was given further twists of tragedy and pathos in the early twentieth century by the experiences of genocide and expulsion from the historic homeland. Ernest Gellner calls this "diaspora nationalism," maintaining that the threat of assimilation (or, at the extreme, genocide) rather than economic advantage drives this form of nationalism and that the acquisition and retention of territory is its "first and perhaps its main problem.

Gellner's analysis is helpful but would be strengthened immensely if he were to consider how land, faith, and national identity are joined in the collective imagination. I venture to say that the whole character of Serbian or Bosnian, Armenian or Azerbaijani, Russian or Ukrainian nationalism cannot be understood apart from this relationship of land, faith, and national identity. Isaiah Berlin has another name for this nationalism; he calls it "bent twig" nationalism. Berlin argues that "bent twig" nationalism is a natural reaction to great suffering, wounded pride, and an accumulation of injustices. He judges that Zionism is animated by such experience and memory as is also "its mirror image, the movement of the Palestinian Arabs. He stresses the positive potentialities of "bent twig" nationalism--the aspiration of a people to gain respect, freedom and land in the wake of humiliation and oppression under colonialism. But Berlin also says almost nothing about the role that religion has played in this variety of nationalism.

Whether one calls it diaspora or bent-twig nationalism, the existence of this kind of nationalism certainly indicates a fundamental lack in the life of a nation, a lack of unity, freedom, and territorial security. The need is for mending and healing. And nationalism of this variety can serve that positive purpose. The danger is that frustrated aims and

festering wounds will prompt retreat into old shibboleths and myths and that false pride and vengeance will give motive to bloody violence against old enemies. We have seen this possibility come to pass in the Balkans. But it need not be so.

Rafael Ishkhanian gave positive expression to this kind of Armenian nationalism in October of 1989 soon after his release from a Soviet prison for his political activities as a member of the liberationist Karabagh Committee. In his now famous article, "The Law of Excluding the Third Force," Ishkhanian argued that Armenians must no longer look to a third force, whether that be the United States, Europe or Russia, to secure its freedom and sovereignty, rather they must rely on their own inner strength and best instincts. Christian faith can purify the motive. "Our path to becoming a sovereign and independent nation will become barren," Ishkhanian warned, "if we forget our Christian faith, which is being denied by the majority of our nation.... We need a return to Christianity, like we need the air. Let us rely not so much on a third force but on God and on the strength we can develop." Ishkhanian then linked land, faith, and peoplehood not romantically or mystically but with a deep understanding of the historical relation. He concluded:

We must begin negotiations and develop the idea of surviving on our own. I am convinced that we can survive in this environment if we move not with our emotions and a sense of vengeance but with reason. . . . In this case God will help. And if we survive, become strong, and do good deeds, our lands will be reunited too. But if we refuse to act with logic, if we become prisoners of our emotions, of the call of revenge, this piece of land too will be taken and we will be lost as a nation.

There is a second, newer form of nationalism gaining space in Armenia. It might be called liberal nationalism. This liberal nationalism has been embraced by significant numbers of the so-called democratic intelligentsia within Armenia and has been encouraged by Armenian intellectuals of the diaspora. It provides the rationale for what the present government of President Levon Ter Petrosian is doing at home and abroad. This nationalism is decidedly secular, investing its credibility in the language of universal human rights, territorial integrity of nations, national self-determination, and collective security.

A Russian analogy helps to clarify this distinction between two kinds of Armenian nationalism. It is the difference between Alexander Solzhenitsyn's religiously informed understanding of peoplehood and the late Andrei Sakharov's vision of a democratic Russian social order and cooperative internationalism.

Thus far, Armenians have not sorted out these two kinds of nationalism. Often both are uttered in the same breath by persons or political parties. For the time being this is adequate and perhaps even necessary. While we in the West might be far more comfortable with liberal nationalism (witness the dismal misunderstanding of Solzhenitsyn among Western intellectuals and adoration of Sakharov), there is much value in diaspora or bent twig nationalism. I think that the newly forming nations of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union cannot do without either of these two kinds of nationalism.

As for my own church, and this well may apply to other national churches, it is in serious jeopardy of missing the point entirely and failing to be a truthful witness to the Orthodox faith in a land that it once Christianized but which is now a secular nation. Rather than giving itself over to one form of Armenian nationalism or another, the Armenian Church ought to be taking up a higher calling. With respect to diaspora or bent twig nationalism, the Armenian Church needs to set aside the religio-national myth and once again place the Gospel at the center of its message to the Armenian people. With respect to the new liberal nationalism, the church must remind secular people that more is at stake than state-building. Armenian peoplehood is at stake, and a healthy people needs purposes that transcend the immediate practical goals of politics and statecraft. The finest service that the Church can render to the Armenian people in this hour is to constantly submit the national vision to an evaluation and critique under the transcendent symbolism of the Triune God and through the Gospel story of a crucified and resurrected Lord.