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The Challenges Facing the Armenian Church An Interview with Hratch Tchilingirian

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"The Armenian Church hides, under its each and every stone, a secret path ascending to the heavens", wrote the famous Armenian poet, Vahan Tekeyan. Yet, the Armenian Church is more than a religious institution that has acted as a "mediator" between Armenians and their God. Having survived the shifting tides of time for more than seventeen centuries, this "unique organization", as Professor Hratch Tchilingirian calls it in this interview, has served its people as much as, if not more than, it has served God. Today, in the age of globalization, secularization and false crusades, the Armenians - despite their constant boasting about having the oldest Christian state in the world - are also following this global trend, by gradually distancing themselves from established religious institutions and, at times, looking for spiritual answers elsewhere.

What is the mission of the Armenian Church in the 21st century? What are the challenges that it faces in Armenia and the Diaspora? How effectively is the Church hierarchy tackling these challenges? I discussed these and a number of related issues with Professor Hratch Tchilingirian when he was visiting Beirut in July.

Hratch Tchilingirian is Associate Director of the Eurasia Programme at the Judge Institute, University of Cambridge. He received his PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science and his Master of Public Administration (MPA) from California State University, Northridge. His current research covers political and territorial disputes in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the region's political, economic and geostrategic developments. He is the author of numerous articles and publications on the politics, economy, culture, religion and social issues of the Eurasia region, especially the Caucasus and the Armenian Diaspora.

Tchilingirian was the former dean of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary in New York (1991-1994) and was co-founder and editor of "Window View of the Armenian Church" (1990-1995), a quarterly magazine dealing with issues related to the Armenian Church. He has authored many articles on contemporary Armenian affairs, including those relating directly to the Armenian Church.

Aztag- Currently, people are farther away from religion than they used to be, perhaps because in a highly secularized world, organized religion is giving way to other philosophies and teachings. How do you see the situation of the Armenian Church in this context?

Tchilingirian- This is a major and complex issue, but I would say there are internal and external reasons for the current situation. As you mentioned, secularization is part of the general trend globally. There is a steady decline of organized religion and church attendance. For instance, there are some studies which show that in Armenia only about 9% of the population attends church services regularly on Sundays. In America, the percentage is much higher; it's about 40%, but in Europe, it's also low, about 6-7%. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is a decline of interest in spirituality. There are alternative religions, as well as various other philosophies and spiritual teachings that have gained currency in our world today. So the challenge to institutional churches is how to be relevant in the 21st century. In the case of the Armenian Church, the question is no different: How can a 1700-year-old church make itself relevant to Armenians

living around a very-fast paced world in the 21st century? This is the major challenge. In fact, the Armenian Church has not addressed this issue collectively and seriously.

Aztag- Can we benefit from the experience of other churches in this respect?

Tchilingirian- Well, virtually all churches are facing great challenges, be it the Catholic or Orthodox or Protestant churches. They have various programs or mechanisms to address- not necessarily successfully- these challenges. For instance, homosexuality and gay marriage is a big issue in the Anglican Church and it is creating divisions. The Roman Catholic Church has its own sets of problems, with priests involved in cases of sexual abuse, and with the issue of celibacy and marriage of the clergy creating tensions. So, you have churches with particular issues and challenges, and other problems that are common to all churches.

In the case of the Armenian Church, I believe there is a lack of clear sense of mission. I have written about this quite extensively. What is the mission of the Armenian Church in the 21st century? At least personally, I am not aware of any well-articulated statement or program on the part of the church that spells out the Armenian Church's mission. Of course, if you ask the clergy or the hierarchs, they would tell you that the mission of the church is very obvious, it's based on the Gospel; it's the salvation of souls. But how do we achieve this? How is this mission carried out? How do you make it relevant to the Armenian on the streets of Bourj Hammoud, Yerevan or Los Angeles? How does this translate into the everyday life of the Armenian faithful?

Each problem is unique and has a unique solution and one cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach when thinking about solutions. In America, there are many new ideas. There are churches that play modern music or Christian rock, but if you try to bring this to Lebanon, for instance, people would be scandalized; they would find that very foreign and reject it. So you have to find a solution based on the local culture, on how local people perceive things, or based on whether a particular community is ready for a particular change.

One of the most important functions of religion or faith is to provide meaning to human life. If a religion or a philosophy provides this role in your life, then you follow its teachings. If the Armenian Church provides meaning to Armenians from different walks of life, who are looking for something more than the Sunday liturgy, conducted in a language most people don't understand, then it would become relevant to them.

Aztag- The Armenian Church is also regarded as an institution with a national mission. Is there a lack of planning in that domain as well?

Tchilingirian- I think the church and the clergy feel more comfortable in the so-called "national mission" of the Church- Azkayin Arakeloutoun, than its religious-spiritual mission. And yet when you ask about the national mission of the Armenian Church in specific terms, you realize that the answers are very vague. Obviously, the Church has played the role of a surrogate state in Armenian history and it has preserved our culture, but today, one has to be more specific also about what the national mission of the church is. Of course, the church can publish books, discuss Armenian philology and culture, and so on, but why does the church have to do these things? Why doesn't the Church or the hierarchy relegate this role to other, perhaps more qualified organizations in the community to carry out such functions - and what could be termed as 'non-religious' services - so that the Church and clergy can dedicate more talent and resources to their main religious and apostolic mission?

Aztag- But throughout history, perhaps due to the circumstances, the Armenian Church has served the people by a number of ways that have little to do with its apostolic mission.

Tchilingirian- Every organization has its primary raison d'etre. But when you neglect and do not carry out your primary mission and you engage in secondary or other peripheral missions, then why exist? If an organization wants to change its raison d'etre and say, 'henceforth, we are not this, but we are that', fine! But if you say you're something, and you are doing something else, then you're not being true to your own calling, and you are not delivering what you say you are going to deliver. This is a matter of principle; it's a matter of stating your mission. What is your mission statement?

The Church is the only national institution that has existed continuously throughout Armenian history in the last 1700 years. So the church, as an institution, is beyond the individuals who run it. It is very powerful - it has an in-built power vis a vis the fact that it is a religious and national organization that has a very long history. And it will still be here in the coming centuries. It's unlike a secular organization which is very temporary - it is here today, but might not be here in 50 years or 100 years. And yet, each generation has a responsibility to carry out the mission of the Church. If we want the Armenian Church to be what it's supposed to be, then we have to ask: What are the people who are running the church, namely the clergy and hierarchy, doing? What are the laymen doing? How are they carrying out their mission?'

I think this is the problematic issue -whether in Etchmiadzin or in the Diaspora. I should note that some Hierarchical Sees are more aware of these issues and are carrying out more serious work in their respective jurisdictions. The Catholicosate of Cilicia, for instance, is involved with serious mission work. Yet, collectively, we are still not clear about what the main purpose of the entire Church is. How do you reach the 90% of Armenians who are not affiliated with the Church, who do not come to church, except once or twice a year, for weddings or for funerals?

Aztag- Do you think changing the language of the liturgy into modern Armenian would make a difference? After all, religion seems to have become an individual quest for meaning in life, and it seems that the factors carrying people farther away from the church have little to do with the language.

Tchilingirian- If you conduct the liturgy in modern Armenian or English, there is no guarantee that suddenly you'll have thousands of Armenians flocking to the church. I think making the language understandable does help; but it's not the solution.

In the old times, the church was the center of the community life. There was a church in every village and it brought the community together. People had a communal life around their faith, their everyday-life traditions. But in modern times, when people live in such remote places the situation is completely different.

I agree that religion has become a very individual matter. In fact, even if people go to church on Sunday, they go there as an individual; they go there to light a candle, to say a prayer; they don't go there from the beginning of the service, it's like they go in for 10-15 minutes and they don't necessarily feel a sense of commonality with everyone in the church, because probably they're not from the same neighborhood or have no meaningful affiliation with that community.

People choose various philosophies, various kinds of alternative religions or faiths that fit their particular choice or particular sense of where they are in their lives. For example, there are different types of Armenian believers, which I have identified through my own research in Armenia, Karabakh and the Diaspora. There are what I call Theist Believers, Deist Believers, 'Agnostic Believers' and 'Atheist Believers'. For instance, the Armenian 'atheist believer' does not believe in the existence of God, but he may be baptized in the Armenian Church; he may go to church once in a while for weddings or on holidays, just to feel Armenian or to meet with friends, so on. And, interestingly, he is considered a 'child of the Armenian Church', at least by the hierarchy of the Church. If you ask the clergy, they include every Armenian in the 'membership' of the Armenian Church. But what is significant here - and generally overlooked - is the fact that if you are preaching to an atheist Armenian, you have to preach differently than if you are preaching to someone who is dedicated and attends church regularly.

Aztag- What are the challenges facing the Armenian Church particularly in Armenia and Karabakh?

Tchilingirian- As I mentioned, there are common problems facing the Armenian Church regardless of geography, but there are issues that are specific to the region where the church finds itself. For instance, in North America, the Armenian Church has different sets of problems; these problems have to do with language, the length of the liturgy, ordination of women, and so on. These are not problems, say, in Karabakh or in Armenia.

In Armenia, the major challenge is what the late Catholicos Karekin I used to call the 're-Christianization' of Armenia, the re-evangelization of Armenia. This is still a major problem, because after almost seven decades of atheist regime, people don't even have the basic knowledge about Christianity and

the Armenian Church. In the last 10-12 years, the Church has tried to educate the population and yet, as I mentioned earlier, there is the need to further clarify the mission of the Armenian Church.

As far as the so-called cults are concerned, I think people have exaggerated the problem. For example, there are about 30-40 Hare Krishnas in Armenia. It's not like tens of thousands of Armenians are following these cults. More important, at least sociologically, is the fact that all of these people who are following alternative religions are Armenians -- they are not foreigners who are coming and living in Armenia as Hare Krishnas or Jehovah's Witnesses. This fact is totally ignored in the anti-cult discourse in Armenia. The fact that hundreds of Armenians are following alternative religions indicates that these religions or teachings are appealing to a certain segment of the population. These are not necessarily brainwashed people, as anti-cultists would have us believe; in fact, many of them are highly educated individuals. They are people who are in search of something and it happens that a particular group or teaching provides them with what they are looking for, spiritually. My point is that we should not look at the issue of cults or alternative religions from a very nationalistic point of view. Some say, 'This is causing a problem to our national security', that's too much. One way of addressing this problem is to carry out a similar mission. If, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses are going around in Yerevan knocking on people's doors, why isn't the Armenian Apostolic Church doing the same thing? Simply sitting in comfortable places and complaining about it doesn't resolve the problem. We have to be very realistic about this.

In Karabakh, I would say the church, headed by Archbishop Barkev Martirosian, has done a lot of work. The church has provided extensive pastoral services during the most difficult periods in the life of Karabakh. Especially during the war, the church has played an important role and, I believe, it is continuing to do so today. Of course, it has its own problems, but the clergy are doing their best to provide the type of pastoral mission and care the people expect from the church. In Karabakh, generally people are skeptical about any philosophy or any kind of teaching, so the Church faces a challenge there; but the younger generation, the children and youth, are much more receptive and open to the teachings of the church.

Aztag- In the Armenian Church, leaders constantly talk about reforms. What is your take on that?

Tchilingirian- The issue of reform is not new. There has been a continuous discussion about reforms in the Armenian Church at least in the last 100 years. There is some literature about this matter, for example, Patriarch Torkom Koushagian of Jerusalem has written "Paregarkoutyoun hayasdanyayts yegeghehsv" (Improvements [or reform] in the Armenian Church), published in 1940. But, again, my point is that if you don't have a clear sense of mission, if you don't have a clear mission statement, you cannot organize the types of reforms you need to make. What are you trying to do? What are you trying to change or reform? Where are you trying to go with your reforms? From what point to what point? And as long as you don't have a clear idea about where you want to go and what you are supposed to do, then all this talk about reform is irrelevant. In business, for instance, people formulate a clear plan about the goals they want to achieve in, say, 5 years. My question is: Where is the plan in the Armenian Church that says in 5 years or 10 years time this is where we want to go and this is what we are doing today to reach that point. It's like a tree. You plant a tree, so that in 5 years or 10 years you benefit from its fruits. If you wake up in 10 years and say 'where are the fruits we need?' people will tell you that you should have planted your tree a decade ago.