

THE MECHANISMS OF IMPLEMENTING FORCED SECULARIZATION IN SOVIET ARMENIA: THE CASE OF THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

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Abstract

As a historical process secularization should not be regarded as a “once-for-all unilateral process”¹. It carried various patterns and occurred at varied historical periods in the world. But in many societies it had a scattered nature and did not take those radical forms, which the Soviet government implemented in order to eliminate religion. In this paper by illustrating the case of the Armenian Apostolic Church, I describe and explain the effects of forced secularization on the Church and religious practice in Soviet Armenia. I focus mostly on forced secularization, as my goal is to identify the mechanisms of lessening the impact of the Church in the society and the attempts to demolish religion from it.

Keywords: Armenian Apostolic Church, forced secularization, Soviet Armenia, Church in the USSR, Soviet religious policy.

With the establishment of the Soviet rule in Armenia in December 1920, began the era of militant secularisation and atheist propaganda. Prior to Sovietisation of Armenia, the Soviet government adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology as one of the main levers to develop a communist society, where religion would be replaced by science. The government sought to accomplish the “replacement” by implementing different measures to combat with religion and religious institutions. Those measures in different periods of time included persecutions and killings of the clergy, confiscations of the property of the religious institutions (churches, mosques, synagogues etc.) destructions of religious buildings, implementing antireligious education and propaganda and other

¹David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Burlington, 2005, p. 3.

similar enterprises, that taken as a whole can be viewed as a process of forced secularization. Similar to other churches, the Armenian Apostolic Church from the early years of Sovietisation of Armenia experienced harsh restrictions. Under the constant control of the state it operated through limited activities and coped with a huge loss of its adherents.

In this paper by illustrating the case of the Armenian Apostolic Church² I describe and explain the effect of secularization on the Church and religious practice in Soviet Armenia. I focus mostly on the historical process of secularization, as my goal is to identify the mechanisms of lessening the impact of the Church in the society and the attempts to demolish religion from the society. As a historical process, secularization should not be regarded as a “once-for-all unilateral process”. It carried various patterns and occurred at varied historical periods in the world. But in many societies it had a more scattered nature and did not take those radical forms which the Soviet government implemented in order to erase the religion by “Caesarean section and political fiat”³. What were the key mechanisms of secularization that affected the Church in communist Armenia? Could the theories of secularization that had evolved in the western scholarship during and after the Cold War match the framework of the religious and social realities in Soviet Armenia? The answers of these questions constitute the core of my paper.

Secularization as a theory and as a historical process

The concept of secularization has been constantly tested and debated. Initially the thesis of secularization was discussed in the works of early social scientists and philosophers including Auguste

² Armenian Apostolic or Orthodox Church is a complex structure with two ecclesiastical centers and two Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin is the supreme spiritual center of all the Armenians. The second Catholicosate, the Holy See of Cilicia situated in Lebanon, is the spiritual center for the Armenian communities in the Middle East and some Western dioceses. The Catholicos of Cilicia recognizes the primacy of the Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin. In my article the described historical events refer mainly to the Mother See of Etchmiadzin.

³ David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, p. 47.

Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud and others, who did not question its validity and “took it for granted”⁴. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were the first, who gave systematic formulations and built the base for later theories of secularization⁵. Later, within the sociology of religion, it developed into a complex theory that was viewed and debated mainly in the spectrum of the general theories of differentiation, by being interwoven with the theories of modernization. Especially starting from the 1960’s sociologists (Luckmann 1967, Berger 1999, Martin 2005, Casanova 1994)⁶ drew more structured contestations. But those theories and counter theories did not abandon the connectives of religion and modernization theories. In reality, they contest religion in modernity. As Jödicke argued, “[T]hey either assume that modernity is at least in principle, a tough environment for religions to survive in or they are more optimistic about religions in modern times under the proviso that they are being transformed by these societies. The first assumes there is a dichotomy involving «either modernization or religion» the latter postulates a characteristic «modernization of religion»”⁷.

In regard to the Soviet perspectives on religion, I suppose that an appropriate conclusion would be “modernization without religion” which the state aimed to achieve by a well-designed and structured strategy. Nevertheless, to test this assumption within the study of the Armenian Church in the Soviet Union, it is not enough only to debate the theoretical aspects of secularization, rather in this context it should be viewed as a historical process, involving certain historical actors and a setting.

⁴ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁶ See Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1967; Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994; Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999; David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*.

⁷ Ansgar Jödicke, “General Trends in the Interaction of Religion and Politics as Applied to the South Caucasus”, in Alexander Agadjanian et al., *Religion Nation Democracy in South Caucasus*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2015, p. 8.

To define secularization as a historical change in a simplified way, it is the term for the split between the religious institutions and the secular state, economy, art, health and welfare etc.⁸ Secularization is also specified as the appropriation by the secular institutions of those functions that once were maintained by the religious institutions⁹. Nevertheless these definitions perhaps fit at their best to those countries (mainly western societies) where the Church for a long period of time was the absolute power (e.g. The Catholic Church before the start of Protestant Reformation) and the conflict happened directly between the Church and the state. But for the societies that historically were dominated by alien or non-Christian powers and their ecclesiastical institutions subordinated to those powers, these definitions seem non-applicable, as the pattern of secularization varied substantially. Such is the case with Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian society.

Due to the historical circumstances, the Armenian Church and the Armenian people had to adapt to the sovereignty of foreign rulers. Throughout many centuries the Church had the role of a “mediator” between the ruling alien power and the Armenian nation. As a part of the millet system in the Ottoman Empire she represented the rights of the Armenians. But the Orthodox Armenians, as a subject nation, had to conform to the authority of the Muslim rulers. The Armenians together with other non-Muslim minorities were given a special status of a *dhimmi* and had to suffer certain restrictions and inequity. The Church also was compelled to function according to the rules defined by the Ottoman governors. In a similar way, religious activities and the status of the Armenian Church were set and controlled by the tsarist government in the Russian Empire¹⁰. All in all, those imposed obligations largely neglected the theological traditions and doctrines of the Armenian Apostolic Church. They comprised regulations mainly of secular significance (tax collection, education, jurisdictional affairs etc.), which could lead to a certain type of secularization¹¹. Yet, a specific

⁸Jose Casanova, *The Secular and Secularisms*, in „Social Research, The Religious-Secular Divide: The U.S. Case”, vol. 76, (2009), no. 4, p. 1050.

⁹Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, p. 13.

¹⁰The tsarist government applied a special statute called *Polozhenie* (1836) to regulate the relations between the state and the Armenian people.

¹¹Interview with Hratch Tchilingirian, *The Secularization of the Armenian Church*, (in Armenian) <https://horizonweekly.ca/fr/85812-2/> [accessed on 24.03.2020].

variation of secularization that could affect the Armenian Church, is the unification of church and nation in the liberation movements against the alien domination¹². In those circumstances the affinity between the nation and the Armenian Church was reinforced. The Church became the protector of the national identity and cultural values and her politics that were directed to the preservation of national interests made her one of the main agents to promote the further existence of the Armenian nation.

The agencies of organizing religious policy in the Soviet Union

The policy of lessening religion in Soviet Armenia was a part of strategies that were initially developed and approved by the Soviet functionaries (in Moscow) and then they were distributed throughout the Soviet Union. For instance, the League of Militant Atheists was firstly established in Soviet Russia and then it founded its branches in other Soviet republics including Armenia. For this reason, in order to examine the mechanisms of the secularization in Soviet Armenia, first of all it is necessary to study the general structure and the state bodies that dealt with religious policy in the Soviet Union.

In the eyes of the Soviet functionaries the Church was seen as an anti-revolutionary institution and the promoter of the enemy groups of the dictatorship of the proletariat, she always carried out “backward activities”, depending on the objective conditions within which she had to function¹³. The aim of the Soviet religious policy according to its respective executers was by all means the destruction of the religion which they could achieve by pushing a split and turmoil in the Church and also through persistence and constancy of their strategy¹⁴. But despite this, the tactics of religious policy varied from time to time. Mostly depending on the social, political and economic conditions, the anti-religious campaign

¹² David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, p. 21.

¹³ Armenak Manukian, *Documents of the History of the Armenian Church: The Imprisoned Clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, from 1930 till 1938*, Amrots, Yerevan, 1997, (in Armenian *Վավերագրերի Հայ Եկեղեցու Պատմության: Հայ Առաքելական Եկեղեցու բռնադատված հոգևորականները 1930-1938 թթ. Ըստ ՊԱԿ-ի փաստաթղթերի*), p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

had several stages with different intensity and approaches¹⁵. The first wave of the attacks on the religion was between the years 1917-1921. From 1921 till 1928 the second wave of the assaults happened during which the officials launched the anti-religious propaganda by using the educational tools. During the third phase between the years of 1928-1940, the Church experienced the harshest period of her survival. With the start of the Second World War the relations of the Church and the Soviet state were revised. As the Church could promote and boost patriotic mood in the times of the war, Joseph Stalin reconsidered the religious policy and allowed the Church and other official religious institutions within the Soviet Union to restore part of its property. Nevertheless, the Church did not manage to fully recover and regain its erstwhile position as the anti-religious propaganda and policy in the Cold War period took more indirect forms to affect the religion.

The intensity and measures also differed from country to country within the Soviet Union, depending on the year of Sovietisation. In the period of 1917-1920 the Bolsheviks launched harsh politics against the clergy and the property of the Russian Orthodox Church, whereas the period of the offensives against the Armenian Apostolic Church started mainly after the 1920's.

Furthermore, two main agents were involved in the realization of those strategies: "The 'fundamentalists' that were found primarily in the Party's Agitation and Propaganda organisation and in the Komsomol, and the 'pragmatists' amongst those in the party and state executive apparatus, and also in the secret police, who generally realised that religious believers could be more easily controlled when allowed a (limited) legal existence rather than being driven underground"¹⁶.

The executives of the Soviet religious policy followed the tendency continually to restructure the organizations that dealt with religious activities. For example, the so-called Department of Cults, established within the Commissariat of Justice, held the administration of all-Union religious affairs. But soon, in 1924 it was abolished and restructured as the Secretariat for the Affairs of Cults. In

¹⁵ Philip Walters, "A survey of Soviet Religious Policy", in Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

addition, the Commissariat of Enlightenment founded another special branch that was charged with the administration of anti-religious propaganda, under the auspices of the Communist Party's Agitation and Propaganda department¹⁷. The aforementioned League of Militant Atheists (initially named as League of Atheists) was formed in 1925 and was led by Emel'yan Yaroslavsky till the start of World War II. Yaroslavsky was a member of the editorial board of several journals of communist propaganda including the infamous journal "Bezbozhnik [Godless]". After World War II this society renamed its sophisticated title to a "Znanie [knowledge] society". During the Second World War the state also reorganized the Secretariat for the Affairs of Cults and the Department of Antireligious Propaganda. From 1944 the supervision of religious activities was conducted by the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), which was the central organization for all the Soviet republics. At the same time, each republic had its branch department that dealt locally with the respective religious establishments. The council for the affairs of the Armenian Apostolic Church managed the relations between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the government (in Soviet Armenian and Russian documents it is named as the Council for the Affairs of the Armenian Gregorian Church). These two Councils in 1965 incorporated into one organization, the Council for the Religious Affairs (CRA), which operated till the dissolution of the USSR. Although the Council for the Religious Affairs and its local departments were aimed to direct the relations between the government and the religious institutions, in reality they followed other aims. "They turned out to be well adapted to facilitating both direct infiltration of church structures by the security organs, and the authorities' control over church activity"¹⁸. Yet, these agencies implemented their tasks and closely operated with the Soviet secret police that in different periods of time was restructured under different names of Cheka, (1917–1922), Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU, 1923–1934), People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD, 1934–1946) and Committee for State Security (KGB, 1954–1991).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Philip Walters, "A survey of Soviet Religious Policy", p. 5.

The mechanisms of forced secularization in Soviet Armenia

In order to understand the strategy of Soviet attacks against the Armenian Apostolic Church, conditionally I distinguish the mechanisms of assault into direct and indirect ones. Direct attacks included open offensives against the Church such as the confiscation of Church property, imposing of high taxes, destruction of the churches or exploiting the buildings for other purposes (museums, warehouses etc.) and conducting anti-religious propaganda mainly through education. Indirect attacks were for example persecutions of the clergy by charging them with implicit and indirect accusations, impeding any possible religious activities with extraneous arguments and pretexts etc.

Prior to the arrival of the Bolsheviks, the Armenian Apostolic Church was already in a devastated state. The Armenian Genocide, World War I, the dissolution of the Russian Empire and the reforms of the short-lived Armenian independent state had their consequences on the organization of the Church. She faced limited measures and time for accommodating within the setting of the communist regime. Any possible enterprises she would consider for adapting to the new political changes and reforms, were either hindered or were fulfilled in limited ways.

At the time of establishing Soviet rule in the country, the Armenian Church was headed by Catholicos Gevorg V Sureneants' (1911-1930). His administration witnessed the first charges and assaults that increased and became more direct after the mid-1920's.

Shortly after the Catholicos refused to accept the newly formed government run by radical atheist ideology, the state commenced its plan of assaults. The property of the Church was seized, religious activities were reduced and the clergy started to experience ridicule and persecutions¹⁹. According to the decree of 1918 the Church was deprived from her rights as a legal entity, which meant that anyone joining her did not carry any legal obligations. During the confiscation of the Church property, in some areas the leaders of the Armenian dioceses and the members of the

¹⁹ Vrej Nerses Nersessian, "Church-State Relations in the Soviet Republic of Armenia during the Catholicate of Gevorg VI Chorkchian (1945-1954) and his Successor, Vazgen I Palchian (1955-1994)", in *Living Stones Yearbook: The Inter-Relationship Between Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Kent, 2016, p. 227.

diocese councils had to leave their apartments within 24 hours. They had to find accommodation outside the Church parishes, which contradicted the traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Church²⁰. In many churches the furnishings, carpets and altar curtains, clerical clothing and vestments were confiscated and used for other purposes. The churches were closed against the will of the believers. The adherents were publicly mocked or charged for participating in religious ceremonies²¹. Yet, to reduce the influence of the Church a new campaign was initiated by the state in 1922, that came to be known as the “Free Church Movement”. It was an artificially made reformatory movement, led by the clergy, whom the Catholicos Gevorg V excommunicated from the Church. Within a short period of time the group managed to appropriate for their services several churches in Yerevan including the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, Mother Church of the Diocese²². Moreover, they were allowed to have their own publication, through which they constantly attacked the Armenian Apostolic Church²³.

Despite all these hardships Catholicos Gevorg V managed to bring some reforms into the Church. He introduced the Gregorian Calendar, granted the widowed priests with the right to re-marry and established the Supreme Spiritual Council, that became the highest executive body of the Armenian Apostolic Church²⁴.

In May 1930 the Catholicos Gevorg V died but the patriarchal throne remained unoccupied for the next two years, as the Soviet functionaries impeded the elections of the new Catholicos with any possible means. The Supreme Spiritual Council endorsed the candidacy of Archbishop Khoren Muradbekian, whom earlier in 1923 in his encyclical the late Gevorg V appointed as *locum tenens*

²⁰ Sandro Behbudian, *Documents of the History of the Armenian Church” Gevorg V Surenants Catholicos of All Armenians*, Yerevan, 2005, (in Armenian Վավերագրեր Հայ Եկեղեցու Պատմության; Գևորգ Ե Սուրբնեանց, Կաթողիկոս Ամենայն Հայոց), pp. 588-589.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 590.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 605.

²³ Nersessian, *Church-State Relations in the Soviet Republic of Armenia during the Catholicate of Gevorg VI Chorekchian (1945-1954) and his Successor, Vazgen I Palchian (1955-1994)*, p. 227.

²⁴ Nersessian, *Church-State Relations in the Soviet Republic of Armenia during the Catholicate of Gevorg VI Chorekchian (1945-1954) and his Successor, Vazgen I Palchian (1955-1994)*, p. 228.

after his death. In 1932 amid the growing tensions and restrictions the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church became Khoren Muradbekian. Muradbekian previously was known for his resistance and fighting against the Free Church movement. After the enthronement he became actively engaged in enforcing relations between the Church in Etchmiadzin and the emerging post-genocide Armenian diaspora. During years of his leadership Muradbekian tried to establish the constitution of the Church, to reopen the publishing house of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin and the Gevorgian Seminary in Etchmiadzin. But all his attempts were fruitless²⁵. Instead the officials accused him in assisting the Dashnak party abroad²⁶ and for planning an anti-Soviet movement. Those accusations severed when the two brothers of the Catholicos were arrested, followed by the arrest and the murder of the bishop Artak Smbatyan for his loyalty to Catholicos²⁷. The terror reached its peak when the agents of the Soviet secret service murdered His Holiness. On 4 April, 1938 the Catholicos Khoren Muradbekian was found dead by being strangled in his residence²⁸.

One of the main pretexts for imprisoning the Armenian clergy was the supposed cooperation with the Dashnaks and other parties. Also they were charged for the alleged anti-Soviet and anti-revolutionary propaganda that they could lead underground. But sometimes the reason for accusations was just the fulfilment of their religious duties. From 1930 till 1938 more than 130 priests and archimandrites were sent to prison. The studied archival materials also include the cases of imprisonment of one Archbishop and three Bishops of Etchmiadzin²⁹.

²⁵ Sandro Behbudian, *Documents of the History of the Armenian Church Khoren I Muradbekian, Catholicos of All Armenians*, Yerevan, 1996, (in Armenian Վապերազրեր Հայ Եկեղեցու Պատմության; Խորեն Ա Սուրաբբեկյան Կաթողիկոս Ամենայն Հայոց), p. 7.

²⁶ Dashnak party or Dashnaktsutyun (Eng. Armenian Revolutionary Federation) is the one of the oldest Armenian Parties. It was the ruling party of the first Armenian Republic (1918–1920). Dashnaks were expelled from Armenia when the Armenian Bolsheviks seized the power. Since then they became active in the Armenian Diaspora and held Anti-Soviet politics during the Cold War era.

²⁷ Nersessian, *Church-State Relations in the Soviet Republic of Armenia during the Catholicate of Gevorg VI Chorekchian (1945-1954) and his Successor, Vazgen I Palchian (1955-1994)*, p. 232.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 232.

²⁹ Armenak Manukian, *Documents of the History of the Armenian Church: The Imprisoned Clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, from 1930 till 1938*, p. 19.

In Soviet Armenia the majority of the churches was preserved but they served as storehouses, barns and cultural centers. However, several churches were abolished including one of the oldest churches in Yerevan, Saint Paul and Peter Church (built in the 5-6th centuries, destroyed in 1930)³⁰, the above mentioned Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator (built in 1900, destroyed in the 1940`s)³¹, Gethsemane Chapel (constructed in the 11-13th centuries, destroyed in the 1920`s.)³².

The Anti-religious propaganda, due to its constant and uninterrupted character, perhaps had the most long-lasting and effective outcomes for building an atheist society. To promote such a strategy, the state used education, broadcast media (radio, TV) and print media (books, journals, pamphlets etc.).

The first militant atheist society called *Anast`vats* (Godless) in Armenia was founded in 1927. In 1928 it started to issue journal *Anast`vats* carrying the same name of the society. In reality, *Anast`vats* was the Armenian version of the Russian *Bezbozhnik*. The main goal of the journal was to mock the religion and the clergy with caricatures and with political and scientific articles that opposed religion and religiosity. For instance, the cover photo of the issue 5-6 published in 1929 displayed a group photo of villagers with the title of "the sprouts of the new lifestyle" followed by the text "the «Red baptism» [referring to the Name-day] of 165 Armenian, Kurdish, Yezidi and Molokan children organized in Dilijan without any priests and the Church".

In order to reduce the participation of people in religious ceremonies, the officials restructured the religious holidays by adopting secular interpretations. As a result, new generations got distorted views on religious ceremonies. The celebration of Christmas was banned, instead the feast of New Year became the major holiday of the year. The Church attendance during the Easter celebrations was strictly controlled.

The Armenian branch of the "League of Militant Atheists" was also responsible for a so-called "Antireligious textbook". Such

³⁰ <https://www.yerevan.am/en/st-peter-and-paul-church/> [accessed on 28.03.2020].

³¹ <https://www.yerevan.am/en/st-gregory-the-illuminator-church-1/> [accessed on 28.03.2020].

³² <https://www.yerevan.am/en/gethsemane-chapel/> [accessed on 28.03.2020].

manuals, in contrast to the aforementioned journal, comprised mostly scientific articles that discussed the origin and essence of religion. During the whole period of existence of the USSR various pamphlets and manuals were produced to strengthen atheism in the family, in the school, in the army etc.³³

Such enterprises, regardless of the extent of assaults against religion and the Church, were strongly promoted and propagated by the state. The Soviet way of secularization with all its mechanisms still failed to eliminate religion or to destroy the Church in Armenia. In fact, the strong oppression of religion led to its revival after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, because many Armenians still considered Christianity as an integral part of their national identity. But this did not necessarily lead to a revival of religiosity and religious knowledge, since many Armenians kept their secular mentality and many regarded Christianity to be only a cultural frame and a part of their demonstrated nationalism.

The Armenian experience with forced secularization and of being a subject of non-Christian rule for a long time resulted in a specific position of the Church within the Armenian society. The Armenian Apostolic Church adapted to a large variety of oppressive measures of the Communist state and found ways to survive in a hostile environment. To reflect the historical function of the Armenian Apostolic Church within Armenian society and the forced character of secularization in Soviet Armenia, is therefore necessary to understand the non-linear developments of secularization in the Armenian context. These have not been well studied so far.

³³Number of brochures and books about atheist education are still preserved at the National Library of Armenia.