

Dal Paleolitico al Genocidio Armeno

Ricerche su Caucaso e Asia Centrale

a cura di Aldo Ferrari, Erica Ianiro

Some Aspects of Theology and Religious Studies of Genocides: the Armenian Case

Shushan Khachatryan (Yerevan State University, Armenia)

Abstract The article deals with interpretations of the phenomenon of Genocide in terms of theology and religious studies. The article is an introductive description of the religious studies and theological research of genocides. The issues are classified under two main groups with its points: historical-religious and theological. The historical-religious discussion is around some issues on religious conversions, clashes of the religions that might lead to genocides (the principal pattern is Islam and Christianity). The second group includes some aspects of theology of sacrifices, problem of evil and theodicy, theology of 'death of God', evidences of the missionaries and a brief description of the works of theologians of genocide.

Summary 1. The Sin of All Sins, Evil and the Theodicy of Genocides. – 2. Canonization of Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide. – 3. The Clashes of Religions During Genocides: Turkish Islam and the Armenian Genocide: The Conversions. – 4. The Theology of Death of God and Genocide. – 5. The Theology of Sacrifice and the Armenian Genocide. – 6. Christian Missionaries' Evidences. – 7. The Theologians of the Armenian Genocide.

The genocide is a disaster, which belongs to the list of the most widely-discussed phenomena. The supreme amount of the research in genocide studies refers to historiography. The Armenian Genocide has so far been researched in terms of psychology, sociology, history of literature (among the literary works of Armenian and foreign authors) and other fields as well. This kind of verified analysis is of special significance, but along the above-mentioned spheres special attention should be paid to theological explanations and religious studies of the Armenian Genocide. The latter was a crime perpetrated against Christian nation and requires both theological and religious interpretation. Therefore, anthropological knowledge should be applied to conduct studies in the best possible way, because genocide is a phenomenon not limited to a certain historical period or perpetrated only once; it has its deep consequences on various sides of human ontology.

We have selected two provisional groups as subjects of our research. Firstly, we will focus on the theological aspects of the Armenian Genocide and secondly, on the topics referring to the field of religious studies. As an introductory, we would like to reveal here the scope of the topic, as well as to discuss cases of theological studies of genocides, the clashes of religions in the course of the genocides and some other relevant aspects.

1 The Sin of All Sins, Evil and the Theodicy of Genocides

If the genocide as a legal term is called ‘the crime of crimes’, in the language of theology it could be called ‘the sin of all sins’, because it includes all human sins and their consequences.

Perhaps one of the most difficult questions that the Christians have faced is the reconciliation of the view of God revealed by Christ with the existence of evil and human sufferings. One of the most difficult theological questions is the comparison of powerful evil and almightiness of loving God. This fundamental inquiry is known as the problem of evil.

The murder of the pagan nations of Canaan is an important issue of theodicy of the last decade: the theories are sometimes controversial and there is no final answer to it. There exists a widely known theory of theodicy in Judaism. Actually the latter is not a theodicy in its original meaning, rather than a complex of responses, to the question why God allowed the Catastrophe happen to His chosen people, i.e. Israel. This complex is suggested by religious thinkers of Judaism. The Jewish tradition states that there has always been a reasonable cause of destruction of people (for example, Sodom and Gomorrah – Genesis 19.1-29) and God’s anger on Israel was most commonly considered as the result of Israel’s repudiation and adjuration from God. In Christian theology the question is also philosophical and ontological. It is as follows: «How Loving God revealed through Jesus Christ could command to slaughter the heathens living in the Land of Israel long before the Jewish nomadic tribes arrived to the place and how could God let so much evil happen while He is the creator of everything».

The theology of the Armenian Genocide deals with the theological concept of God’s presence in the fate of Armenians massacred during 1915-1922. The faith of God and its transformations are presented as an imperative point of theological interpretation of the Armenian Genocide. There are certain emphases on some particular issues of the connection between the Genocide and the Armenian national identity. The main emphasis is put on Church’s mission of healing the Armenian people from harsh psychological consequences of Genocide.

Below we have collected some typical questions of witnesses from the book of D. Miller and L. Miller (1993) which are accompanied by their own answers as well (cfr. Miller, Miller 1993, pp. 177-186). The questions that the Armenians ask themselves referring to God are the following:

- «How can a God who is All-powerful, loving, just allow evil to occur?»;
- «If there is a God, how could He watch this activity without cutting off the hands of the tormentors?»;
- «How God could allow righteous people to be massacred?»;
- «How did God destroy a whole nation, including their children and

- even the animals? What sense does this make when God says that not one ant can be hurt without His knowing it?»;
- «Why God would create a Christian people, the Armenians, only to destroy them?»;
 - «You think of Sodom and Gomorrah and how God said that even if there are fifty faithful people he would not destroy them. Were there not fifty or five hundred righteous people [Armenians] so that God could not spare them?»;
 - «Why did God not help us? What had we done?»;
 - «Why should those things have happened to the Armenians... if there was a Lord and God?»;
 - «If He is a Mighty God and He knows everything, [then] He should have turned the swords and the guns against them [the tormentors]».

Some of the survivors have tried to answer these difficult questions.¹ The most popular response to the theodicy is that there cannot be any reasonable answers to the above mentioned-questions. Many believers lost their faith and never regained their loyalty to God. Some claim that God had gone blind and did not intervene in human affairs (cfr. Miller, Miller 1993, pp. 178-179). Others believe that Christianity is in their blood and that it is impossible to reject the faith (cfr. Miller, Miller 1993, p. 179). There are also people, who talk about miracles that happened on their way of deportation when they were praying for release, or affirm that they saw Jesus suddenly appeared to heal their diseases, like in the case of the miracle of Fr. Ignatios Maloyan (1869-1915)² during the Eucharistic prayer (cfr. Maloyan 2001, p. 47). Some witnesses insist that God does not treat people's evil deeds. However, the authors of such statement feel that this answer is not sufficient because it doesn't explain why God allows evil to happen so violently. One of the widely-spread points is that the Genocide was God's punishment because the Armenians lived as atheists and were a Christian nation at the same time. They were obliged to disseminate the light of Christianity among their neighbours, for example, among the Turks, but they failed to do so.

1 Though actually the survivors have the tendency to keep silent. Keeping silent is a well-known psychological defense mechanism among them.

2 Fr. Ignatios Maloyan was beatified in Saint Peter's Basilica by Pope John Paul II on 7 October 2001.

2 Canonization of Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide

In September 2013, the Bishops' Council of the Armenian Apostolic Church discussed the question of canonizing those who preferred to die rather than being converted. The last person, who was canonized by Armenian Church, was Grigor Tatevatsi (1346-1409). This canonization dates back to the fifteenth century by the time of Catholicos Kirakos Virapetsi (1441-1443). On 23 April 2015, the Armenian Apostolic Church canonized the Armenians (without mentioning the total number of 1.5 million massacred Armenians) who refused the conversion and met death as martyrs.

3 The Clashes of Religions During Genocides: Turkish Islam and the Armenian Genocide: The Conversions

This is a term for contemplation not only for the Armenians but also for the Jews. What was the role of religion for the Young Turks and Nazis within final decision-making process of slaughtering? Were the Armenians killed because they were Christians and many of them refused to convert to Islam? The latter is diverse from Holocaust. In the course of Nazi persecutions the Jews were killed because of their ethnicity and not their faith;³ the victims were the followers of Jewish religion, the Christian and atheist Jews. In the case of the Armenian Genocide a certain number of Armenians survived by converting to Islam, mostly under the pressure of the persecutors. Actually few efforts have been made to study the conversions of the Armenians to Islam so far. We consider the question of conversions along with its religious rite and mechanisms as one of the tools of perpetrating the Armenian Genocide. This opens a wide area for religious studies of the Armenian Genocide.

Additionally, as we know, Islam is by nature a religion of State. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism, it cannot be separated from internal and external affairs and politics of a state where Islam is a dominant religion.⁴ As it has been proved many times, the factor of religious diversity can serve as a tool to raise a clash between the believers inside the State: it is true for both Armenian Genocide and Holocaust. It is highly essential to examine the following questions:

3 That is the main reason why in the Post-Holocaust rabbinic literature the victims of Holocaust are not classified under the term of '*kedoshim*', those who sacrifice themselves in the name of God or faith. See Pilkington 2001, p. 346.

4 Islam was already separated from State by the Young Turkish government in 1908. But, simultaneously, Islam was declared as a state religion. The politics of Young Turks and Mustafa Kemal to separate state from deeply Islamic society was artificial and historically, culturally illogical for Islamic concept of State. See Kondakchyan 1983, pp. 34, 59-60.

- The features of Islam in Turko-Tatar cultural area;
- The research on Islamic ethics in Turkey, *jihad* and the watchwords to exterminate the Armenians.

It is not a secret that some essential part of Young Turk government consisted of the representatives of Sufi mystic orders: *nakshbandi*, *bektashi* and *mevlevi*. A research on the orders' functions and roles in the social and religious life of the Ottoman Empire can be conducted with the help of religious studies.

4 The Theology of Death of God and Genocide

Since 1950s a new theological movement was born in the USA, which was adopted subsequently by a well-known Jewish theologian of Holocaust Richard L. Rubenstein (born in 1924). One of the founders of this movement was Gabriel Vahanian (1927-2012) a theologian of Armenian origin. Gabriel Vahanian belonged to a family of refugees of the Armenian Genocide. He was an indirect bearer of the destructive consequences of the Genocide, knew and felt the psychological and spiritual destructions of Genocide. His book titled *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (1961) suggested a completely new explanation of a new post-Christendom era which lasts up to nowadays. This movement of death of God is not an atheistic turn. G. Vahanian insists that modern man does not seek the «sacred» (Vahanian 2009, pp. 148-149). The followers of this theology insist that God is not the same God of Covenants, of Moses and Jesus Christ; that He has changed (Vitello 2012). One of the distinguished thinkers on the theology of Holocaust Richard L. Rubenstein says that the Jews should no longer celebrate *Pesakh*- the Passover, because this religious feast signifies God's attention, concern and care for His chosen people (cfr. Rubenstein 1992). He states that this kind of concern was absolutely absent while the Nazis were carrying out their actions and that Israel has to forget about the traditional understanding of Yahweh. According to him, God is a Holy Nothingness and is indifferent to the fate of humans.

We prefer not to speak about the theological contemplations of the authors of this movement, because the theological terms could seem overwhelming. We will treat another aspect of theological studies of genocides with its general features.

5 The Theology of Sacrifice and the Armenian Genocide

As a result of the Armenian Genocide the essential attribute of the Armenian identity, unfortunately, has strong ties to the genocide. Huge changes have occurred inside the psychological and spiritual character of the Armenians. In historiography, psychology and jurisprudence there is a term of victim. The discipline in psychology called victimology is examining the behaviour of the victims, their psychological peculiarities, while in jurisprudence, namely in criminology, a victim has always been special category. The term 'victim' is not applicable for theology but the theology of sacrifice stands close to genocides. We may suggest that every kind of murder is a sacrifice to someone or something. For theologians one of the most concentration demanding and interesting parallels is the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4.1-18), the well-known biblical narrative of first murder as a sacrificial act done by Cain which is often considered as an archetypal symbol of antagonism among people.

6 Christian Missionaries' Evidences

The missionaries of both catholic and protestant charity organizations have witnessed the mass atrocities against the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire. Their speculations, eye-witness accounts of the deportations provide extremely important information, only from historical, but also from theological point of view. Being religious people, they paid special attention to conversions, as well as to Islamic and Christian relations. Some good examples are the diaries of Abbot Jules Chaperon, Alma Johansson, Maria Jacobsen, Bodil Biørn and others.

7 The Theologians of the Armenian Genocide

The number of theologians attempting to give an interpretation to the Armenian genocide is not big. In 1970s Fr. Hamazasp Glnchyan, one of the Mekhitarist Fathers of the Island of San Lazzaro (Venice, Italy) wrote a review on the theological contemplations of Gabriel Vahanian's concept of Death of God (cfr. Gly'ntchean 1975, pp. 202-223) stating his own view of human history.

Vigen Guroyan (professor of theology at the University of Virginia) examined in some of his works the Armenian Genocide, Church's mission to heal people from its harsh consequences, some important issues of nationhood and the need to remember the catastrophe in Diaspora (cfr. Guroian 2005).

Archbishop Boghos Levon Zekiyian in a number of articles analyses some important aspects of the Armenian Genocide: *Quale rapporto tra la defini-*

zione giuridica e la realtà storica dei genocidi? (2006); Metz Yeghern, *il genocidio armeno, Paradigma di sradicamento e di esilio irreversibile* (2005); *Dal'tehcir' al genocidio: Riflessioni sul 'Metz Yeghern' armeno a partire dal negazionismo del governo turco* (2006); *Riflessioni sulla trasposizione semantica del concetto di 'giusto' nel contesto del 'Metz Yeghern' armeno* (2000); *Reflections on Genocide: The Armenian Case: A Radical Negativity and Polyvalent Dynamics* (1998).

Another Mekhitarist Fr. Grigoris Siranian of San Lazzaro wrote an article in Italian, discussing some issues of human existence. He collected some literary and philosophical-theological reflections on the Christian existence and the Armenian Genocide (see Siranian 2007, *Dov'era Dio? Una lettura spirituale del genocidio armeno*). Another author, who made a theological review, is Flora Keshgegyan, an ordained pastor in Episcopal Church: *Redeeming memories: A theology of healing and transformation* (2000).

The twentieth century is called 'century of genocides and wars'. Genocides are crucial for understanding the modern cultural and religious depressions that challenge almost every aspect of human activity. They should be inspected for an extremely important reason: to prevent any further genocidal disaster.

Bibliography

- Gly'ntchean, H. Hamazasp Գլընճեան, Հ. Համազասպ (1975). «Astowc'oy ezakan yowgharkawory'» Աստուծոյ եզական յուղարկաւորը, (The Only Gravedigger of God). *Bazmave'p, hayagitakan-banasirakan-grakan handes* Բազմավէպ, հայագիտական-բանասիրական-գրական հանդես (Armenological: Literary-Philological Review) [Venice, San Lazzaro], 1-2, pp. 202-223.
- Guroian, Vigen (2005). *How Shall We Remember? Reflections on the Armenian Genocide and Church Faith*. Montreal: s.n.
- Keshgegyan, Flora (2000). *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Kondakčjan Raffi Кондакчян Раффи (1983). *Turcija: vnutrennjaja politika i islam* Турция: внутренняя политика и ислам (Turkey: the internal policy and Islam). Jerevan: s.n.
- Maloyean, Ignatios Իգնատիոս Մալոյեան (2001). *Mardy' ew nahataky' Մարդը եւ նահատակը* (The Man and the Martyr). Bzommar: s.n., p. 47.
- Miller, Donald; Miller, Lorna (1993). *Survivors: Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*. Oakland (CA): University of California Press.
- Pilkington, Kristin Пилкингтон Кристин (2001). *Iudaizm* Иудаизм (Judaism). Moscow: Fair-Press.
- Rubenstein, Richard L. (1992). *After Auschwitz History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. Baltimore; Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Sirianian, Robert (Grigoris) (2007). «Dov'era Dio? Una lettura spirituale del genocidio armeno» [online]. *Il Regno*, 4. Available at http://www.ilregno.it/it/rivista_articolo.php?RID=0&CODICE=48051 (2014-10-30).
- Vahanian, Gabriel [1961] (2009). *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*. Eugene (OR): Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- Vitello, Paul (2012). «Gabriel Vahanian, Professor, Dies at 85: Was Linked to 'Death of God' Movement» [online]. *The New York Times*, 8 September. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/education/gabriel-vahanian-85-death-of-god-theologian-dies.html?_r=0 (2014-10-30).
- Zekiyian, Boghos Levon (1998). «Reflections on Genocide: The Armenian Case: A Radical Negativity and Polyvalent Dynamics». *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, 37 (3), sr. or. 29, pp. 223-241.
- Zekiyian, Boghos Levon (2000). «Riflessioni sulla trasposizione semantica del concetto di 'giusto' nel contesto del 'Metz Yeghern' armeno». In: *Sì può sempre dire un sì o un no: I Giusti contro i Genocidi degli Armeni e degli Ebrei = Atti del convegno internazionale* (Padova, 30 novembre-2 dicembre). Padova: CLEUP, pp. 216-243.
- Zekiyian, Boghos Levon (2005). «Metz Yeghern, il genocidio armeno, paradigma di sradicamento e di esilio irreversibile». *Nel Suo Nome: Conflitti, riconoscimento, convivenza delle religioni*. Bologna: EDB, pp. 213-224.
- Zekiyian, Boghos Levon (2006). «Dal 'tehcir' al genocidio: Riflessioni sul 'Metz Yeghern' armeno a partire dal negazionismo del governo turco». In: Bianchi, Bruna (a cura di), *La violenza contro la popolazione civile nella grande guerra: Deportati, profughi, internati*. Milano: Unicopli, pp. 349-364.
- Zekiyian, Boghos Levon (2006). «Quale rapporto tra la definizione giuridica e la realtà storica dei genocidi?». In: Bernardini, Paolo; Lucci, Diego; Voghera Luzzato, Gadi (a cura di), *La memoria del Male: Percorsi tra gli stermini del Novecento e il loro ricordo*. Padova: CLEUP, pp. 182-206.