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Why we should read...

"The Armenian Church at the Crossroads of the 18th Century Armenian Liberation Movement" by Armen Aivazian
(344pp, Yerevan, Armenia, 2003)

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By Eddie Arnavoudian

The Armenian National Liberation and the Armenian Church

The Armenian Church has had a deservedly bad reputation having been, through the centuries, a rather poor guardian of the real interests of its flock. But as with the sections of the French Church during the French Revolution, or the 1960s Catholic Church in Latin America, sections of the Armenian Church also produced individuals and groups who made outstanding contributions to the Armenian people's history. Armen Aivazian's is a study of such a case, one that, albeit fraught with the risk of exonerating the Church as a whole, opens up new and exciting territory for those interested in Armenian history.

Scrutinising often neglected primary sources, Aivazian argues that in the 18th century national movement a faction of the Armenian Church in Etchmiadzin, its historic centre, played an active, energetic and at certain points leading role that was however always consciously and extremely secretive. His account hinges on an exciting detective like investigation of a claim, that clerical laws dating back to the 12th century dictated that a successful candidate to head the all-Armenian Church required a unanimous vote involving all the important Eastern Armenian bishoprics.

This 'rule' about the elections of Catholicos, Aivazian shows, was actually adopted sometime in the first 10 years of 1700 but was graced with a much earlier origin by its formulators in order to give it the weight and legitimacy of ancient and glorious tradition. It was adopted in particular to secure the election of a Catholicos from the eastern bishoprics. Being the more nationalist orientated section of the Armenian Church, they were intent on preventing the Patriarchate in Istanbul from imposing on Etchmiadzin someone who would be their stooge and by extension a lackey of the Ottoman power. This eastern

struggle against Istanbul had another dimension too - resistance to the Catholic conversion carried out by the Mekhitarists and the Antonian monks among others, who were regarded as a threat to the independence of the Armenian Church and to the prospects of Armenian liberation.

Aivaizian makes a convincing case to show that the almost endemic division and conflict between the Constantinople/Cilician wing of the Armenian Church and its religious centres in eastern Armenia were more than theological disputes about the future of the Church, its dogma and its relations to Catholicism and Rome. The Constantinople/Cilician Church leadership, subordinated to the Ottoman Empire, sought at the behest of the Ottoman power to secure its own reliable candidate to head the Church apparatus based at Etchmiadzin. It and Ottoman imperial authority distrusted the eastern Armenian parishes and prelates regarding them as obstreperous and involved in supporting anti-Turkish Armenian military operations in aid of Russian expansionism.

There is substance to the argument. The Patriarch in Constantinople was far removed from the realities, needs, conditions and influences of the native Armenian lands. Integrated within the heart of the Empire and enjoying a degree of privilege, it was not responsive or open to the strivings and pressure from the ranks of Armenian society. In contrast the eastern parishes in Datev, Etchmiadzin, Julfa and elsewhere were within native Armenia. Furthermore by virtue of their proximity to the Tsarist Empire, they were in a position to conceive of and try to develop alliances to be rid of Ottoman rule that they regarded as the greater enemy.

The case for a more actively nationalist wing of the Church is strengthened by the fact that as the major, and in fact the only, enduring powerful national institution it was bound to be involved in diverse ways in the fortunes and lives of an Armenian nation and people buffeted between the imperial policies and domestic repressions of the Ottoman, Tsarist and Persian states. Whether as willing or unwilling agents for foreign rule, or as a force tempering or resisting such rule, or seeking to tactically adjust itself so as to secure the best advantage, the jurisdiction of the Armenian Church always involved more than the business of spiritual salvation. It was always an intensely political institution with a complex internal structure, a domestic and even something akin to a foreign policy through the medium of which it sought to balance and manoeuvre in relation to foreign powers and organise its administration and governance of its own fiefdom all with a view to protecting its own status and power vis-à-vis the state.

It is in this context that political questions, among them those of national liberation and political freedom, were forced upon its agenda. It could not remain indifferent to the altering balance of forces between the three empires jousting for dominance in Armenian territories. It needed to calculate, evaluate and develop a strategy and orientation that suited its own interests best. Thus it was ineluctably drawn into the political conflicts and ambitions of the day, with different wings of the Church adopting different attitudes and strategies. With regard to the 18th century, Aivazian demonstrates

the eastern Church leadership's relationship to and role in the 1720s Armenian insurrectionary movement.

A particularly exciting moment in the volume is the account of Lazar Chahagetzi's role in the origin of modern Armenian nationalism. Catholicos in Etchmiadzin from 1737 to 1751 and representative of early Armenian nationalism, his reputation needs to be salvaged from decades of malign evaluations that followed his nationalist opposition to the Catholic Church. Remarking on Chahagetzi's referral back to the brilliant Krikor Datevatzi from the late 14th century, Aivazian argues that Datevatzi represented a certain type of medieval nationalism which Chahagetzi both inherited and developed. Datevatzi, for example, lists 10 particularities that define or distinguish some form of Armenian identity. Chahagetzi offers no less than 50, significantly adding the factors of language and land as foremost in his list. In developing his vision of the Armenian nation Chahagetzi also referred to classical Armenian Kings and royalty, generals and fighters - both secular and religious.

Unearthing the contribution of Church to the 18th century liberation struggle, Aivazian makes a note of the movement's breadth and depth. There is evidence that beyond Artsakh/Karabagh and Siunik/Kapan, the movement's organisers also attempted to secure armed rebellion in parts of western, Ottoman occupied Armenia. Aivazian thus suggests the existence, albeit in inchoate form, of a broad pan-national movement, one in which the Church and its leadership, at least in Etchmiadzin, played an important supporting and sometimes leading role. This interesting and possibly very significant thesis deserves further consideration.

A potential problem that lurks in Aivazian's book surfaces clearly in a concluding chapter. He argues that from the XV-XVIII centuries the Church, through its cultural, educational and ideological work, shouldered the task of preserving a semblance of Armenian nationhood. This argument has of course an element of truth - in so far as it refers not to the Church as a whole but to a segment of it, and in so far as it is qualified by reference to the fact that the Church was not representative of the Armenian people as a whole. One needs to note the almost feudal structure of the Church whose privileged estate rested upon the labour of the Armenian peasant and serf, to whose fortunes the Church was hardly responsive or sympathetic. Whilst noting any positive contribution, it is wise to recall the Church's widespread defence of obscurantist and backward custom and tradition that was compounded by corruption and general philistinism. Armen Aivazian is of course conscious of such corruption and indeed devotes some 25 pages to considering the corrupt Catholicos Nahapet Yedesatzi.

Making any broader or generalised statement about the Church opens a hornet's nest of questions. Among them being a demand for an explanation of the 19th century revolt against the Church and its authority, both in the east and the west, by outstanding thinkers such as Mikael Nalpantian and Haroutyoun Sevajian and many others. Such reservations aside, Aivazian has done a fine job sifting through apparently trivial, purely theological or bureaucratic Church documents and letters to throw light on the different political trends within the Armenian Church, especially as they related to the struggle

between the power centres of Bolis and Etchmiadzin. He has not only salvaged the reputation of some honourable Churchmen, but has made an important contribution to the history of the Armenian liberation movement.

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