

FOLK RELIGION AND POPULAR PIETY AMONG ARMENIANS

Abel H. Manoukian

Rev.Dr. (Geneva, Switzerland)

Brief introduction

Folk religion or popular piety is a term used to express the religious expression experienced by people in their daily lives. Folk religion is in other words a living religion of the people. Popular piety also refers to religious practices that have arisen and occur outside of official religious institutions. Folk religion or popular piety is sometimes termed as popular belief and describes various forms and expressions of religion that are deemed distinct from the official doctrines and practices of organized religion or of the Church. This distinct phenomenon exists in all major religions; in the case of the Armenian faith, it is taught side by side with the theology and liturgical disciplines of the Armenian Church.

Popular piety is mostly based on people's religious experiences, on their fear of death, on their awe of the supernatural, and their desire for eternal life.

Folk religion also finds among Armenians its expression through the celebration of Feast Days of the church, the symbols of the Holy Cross, stone-carved crosses, icons, relics, and Holy Sanctuaries as places of pilgrimage. Other manifestations are the lighting of candles, burning of incense, offering of prayers, sacred music, and the recitation of the Psalms and other pious traditions.

The aforementioned list shows, indeed, that this is too vast a field to be summarized in one presentation. That is why I will try to focus primarily on those ecclesiological-religious realities that are particularly respected and common among Armenians and through which the Armenian faith is best expressed.

The development of Christian Popular Piety among Armenians:

The early stages

In spite of the fact that Agat'angeghos¹, in his work "*History of the Conversion of Armenians*"² presents Armenia as being a thoroughly pagan country, it is worth considering that before the proclamation of Christianity as a state religion by Trdat III (*Tiridates*), this new religion had already progressed and existed among large groups of the population, mainly via the preachings of St. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, through

* The article of Rev. Dr. Abel Manoukian is already published recently in the Canadian Armenian theological journal *Luys* XV/4, 2017 (77), p.22-40. Since the topic of the study and materials discussed by the author are of particular interest for readers not familiar with Armenian, the Editorial board found its publication useful.

¹ In general, the present article adopts the academically recognised transcription system of the Library of Congress for Armenian names and terms. See the following link: <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/armenian.pdf>

² Agat'angeghos 1983: 716-900 ("*Darts' P'rkut'ean Ashkharhis Hayastan*").

the martyrdom of Sts. *Voskiank'* and Sts. *Suk'iasiank'*, as well as via the Apostolic See of Artaz and the Bishopric of Siunik'.³

The continued line of bishops, martyrology, and the history of religious persecution bear witness to the fact that Christianity, during its early pre-state era (before 301 A.D.), had already counted among its fellowship a substantial amount of the population.⁴

One of the first testimonies of popular piety is the celebration of the Holy Baptism followed by a glorious procession led by Trdat III and St. Gregory the Illuminator.

“And when the fasting days were over, the blessed Gregory took the troops, the King, the King’s wife Ashkhēn, the King’s sister⁵ Khosrovidukht, all the nobles⁶ and the army to the bank of the Euphrates River and there he baptized them all in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Then they left with great joy, clad in white garments, singing psalms and benedictions, with lighted lanterns, candles and lamps, and in angelic spirits. Having become God’s adopted children, they accepted the inheritance of Holy Evangelium, and having participated in the Saints’ heritage, flourished with Christ’s scent, and returned to the House of God. There, St. Gregory performed Divine Liturgy and ministered communion to everybody and shared with them the Redeemer Christ’s Holy Flesh and Blood.”⁷

Closely related to the “History of Conversion of Armenians”, the testimony of martyrdom of St. Hrip’simē and St. Gayianē is uniquely placed in the original text of *Agat’angeghos*. Nine days after the martyrdom of these virgins, immediately after being released from the *Khor Virap* pit⁸, St. Gregory collected their remains and, according to his vision, built Christian testimonies over the places of their martyrdom.

“One, they built on the North-East of the city (Vagharshapat), where Hrip’simē was martyred together with her 32 companions, the other on the South where her friend the Abbess Gayianē was martyred with two companions, and another one was built near the vineyard, where their shelter was situated.”⁹

It is natural that Hrip’simean martyrdom - one of the main motivations of Armenian conversion - would become a source of popular piety for all Armenians. Both during the days of St. Gregory, and in later periods, it manifested spiritually through mass pilgrimages and popular festivities.

It is worth noting that throughout the process of conversion, the old popular piety for pagan temples, faith symbols, and celebrations did not falter or disappear, but rather was enhanced by the conception, culture and liturgical order of the new religion - Christianity.

³ Ormanian 1912: 22-70.

⁴ See *Agat’angeghos* 1983: 67-68. As King Trdat III imprisoned St. Gregory in the *Khor Virap* pit, he proclaimed a decree to persecute the Christians. See *Agat’angeghos* 1983: 82.

⁵ In the original text: “mets oriord”.

⁶ In the original text: “nakharark”.

⁷ See *Agat’angeghos* 1983: 464.

⁸ Cf. *Agat’angeghos* 1983: 126.

⁹ See *Agat’angeghos* 1983: 428.

St. Gregory, along with his troops, was pursuing the demolition of the eight main Armenian pagan temples. Two of them were in Eastern Armenia, five in the West — in *Bardzr Hayk'*, and one in the South — in Taron. Hence, the official establishment of Christianity was marked by the destruction of these eight “major” temples and worship places of the ancestors. The process began in the East with the temples of Anahit and Tir (Artemis and Apollon). After some time, the destruction of the five main temples in the West followed.¹⁰ St. Gregory proceeded to establish new testimonies of Christian faith in the place of each destroyed temple, thus replacing the old faith with the new one. In the South, in Taron and Ashtishat, after the demolition of the temples of Vahagn and of Astghik¹¹ St. Gregory built altars of Christian faith and ordered that:

“At the same place let them gather to celebrate the Saint's' commemoration, the memorial day of the seventh day of the month of Sahemi (October – A.M.), in order to gather with joy and have a feast. After all, it was here that St. Gregory first embarked on the construction of churches. He appointed priests in those different places and made sure that these places were filled with churches and priests.”¹²

As mentioned earlier, one of the ways popular piety finds its best expression is in collective pilgrimages, where pilgrims ride or walk from far off places to Holy ones bringing with them their offerings for a particular feast day, in order to fulfill their vows. Among these thousands of Holy places that exist, I will reflect on three of them; St. Karapet of Mshoy Sult'an, the Avag Monastery of Yerznka and Mother See Holy Etchmiatsin, all of which, for centuries, have fertilized the popular piety of Armenians.

As pointed out in the last quote by Agat'angeghos, St. Gregory the Illuminator was building living testimonies over the pagan temples. He placed Holy relics inside these newly recognized Christian places of worship in order to give them a specific sacredness. Thus, St. Karapet of Mush, established by the Illuminator, was one of the most sacred and honoured places of pilgrimage for Armenians.

“And Gregory ordered them to set a day for great celebration to commemorate the martyrs, replacing the previously celebrated day of Amanor, associated with the Host Vanatour; and the day of Navasard. This was done in order for the people to gather on the commemoration day of the blessed John and God's Holy martyr At'anagines and to celebrate it in the same province.”¹³

In addition to the information we have been provided by Agat'angeghos, Hovhan Mamikonian in his book, “History of Taron”¹⁴, states that on his way back to Armenia from Ceasarea, immediately after his consecration by Bishop Leontius of Caesarea, St. Gregory took with him the relics of St. Karapet (John the Baptist, the Forerunner) and another martyr St. At'anagines.¹⁵ As previously mentioned, he destroyed Demeter's and

¹⁰ Cf. Agat'angeghos 1983: 436-454.

¹¹ Cf. Agat'angeghos 1983: 452.

¹² See Agat'angeghos 1983: 457.

¹³ See Agat'angeghos 1983: 466.

¹⁴ See Hovhan Mamikonyan 1989.

¹⁵ Cf. Agat'angeghos 1983: 454.

Gissane's pagan temples of the Stone Mountain situated in the place called *Innaknean*¹⁶ and established the Monastery of St. Karapet, also known as "St. Karapet of Mshoy Sult'an",¹⁷ the "Sites of *Innaknean*" and the "Church of Glak."¹⁸

Veneration of Saints and holy relics by the Armenian Faithful

In the Armenian Church, St. John the Baptist is recognized as the second greatest Saint after the Virgin Mary. St. John also has a primary place in the Armenian Liturgical calendar. According to the Church Liturgy, the commemoration of St. John in the Armenian Church is celebrated four times a year corresponding to each of the four seasons; one celebration is fixed and the other three are movable. These days are: (1) January 14 (fixed) - celebration of St. John the Baptist's birthday - eight days after Christmas; (2) "Commemoration day of the Beheading of John the Baptist (moveable) - the Saturday following Easter; (3) "Celebration of John the Baptist and Bishop At'anagines" (moveable) - the Thursday of the day of Holy Etchmiatsin - to commemorate the day of receiving the relics of St. John and Bishop At'anagines; (4) "St. John the Baptist and St. Job the Just" (moveable) - the Thursday of the third week of Assumption. In addition, St. John also has a pre-feast day, prior to the January 14th feast. This day takes place on January 6th, following the Christmas celebrations.

It should be noted that during these repeated festivities throughout the year, especially the ones during the summer, thousands of Armenian pilgrims would come to the monastery of St. Karapet of Mush from different regions, with various wishes and desires, but especially with a hope for healing.

Through these pilgrimages people sought the fulfillment of a variety of wishes and objectives, including the healing of diseases and requests for the protection of St. Karapet. The fulfillment of various wishes by St. Karapet was so prominent that he came to be known as "*mourazatour*" or "*mouratatour*" — one who makes wishes true. This is reflected perfectly in the songs of pilgrimage sung by the people. For example, the lines, "many pilgrims are all over, both on horseback and on foot", or "a saint, who fulfills the wishes of both the rider and the walker, and does not ignore anyone". Here, "going on foot" or "walking" often meant that people were barefooted, while "going on horseback" or "riding" usually signified that people were coming from far away.¹⁹

With deep sorrow, we must mention the fact that this richness of popular piety and spirituality, kept and transmitted by the Armenians from generation to generation, throughout the centuries, was completely destroyed by the Turkish people and Kurds during the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

¹⁶ Innaknean translates from Armenian as "having nine water sources." It was located in Western Armenia in the Taron Province and was known as a region of extensive water springs.

¹⁷ See <http://www.houshamadyan.org/arm/mapottomanempire/bitlispagheshvilayet.html>

¹⁸ St. Karapet monastery was also known as Glag Monastery (Arm.: Glagay Vank') referring to its first Bishop named Glag.

¹⁹ Harutyunyan 2001: 21-28; See Baghdassaryan A., Dilanyan Y., K.Khudabashyan 2001: 29-38.

Sacred places of pilgrimage

For the occasion of the 1700th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Christianity in Armenia as a State Religion in 2001, a number of pilgrimages were organized. One was led by His late Eminence Archbishop Mesrop Ashjian to Western Armenia and Cilicia. There are six volumes of video cassettes based on this pilgrimage, one of which contains footage of the Taron region. It was with deep regret that while watching this footage, we came to realize that the sacred stones and *Khach'kars* of St. Karapet of Mush had become construction material for the stables and houses of the Turkish and Kurdish population living in the surrounding area. Was this the destiny of the many sacred places; Churches and Monasteries? To become victims of destruction and cultural genocide along with the more than 1.5 million Armenian victims.

Another Holy place of pilgrimage — the Avag Monastery of Yerznka — shared the same destiny as St. Karapet of Mush.



St Karapet monastery of Mush, in Taron Region, before its destruction

After the conversion of Armenians, St. Gregory the Illuminator spent the last years of his life in isolation, fully devoting himself to solitude in the Monastery of *Maneay* — the *Maneay Cave*²⁰ of the mountain Sepuh (Sepul). Towards the end of 325 AD, or the beginning²¹ of 326 AD, he died in total solitude. Historian Movsēs Khorenat'si writes that the shepherds found his breathless body by chance, and buried him at that very place without even recognizing him. It was only later on that a monk named Garnik discovered his grave and took it to Tordan.²²

This sacred place on the face of Mountain Sepuh — the Avag Monastery — was

²⁰ *Maneay ayrk'*

²¹ Cf., Ormanian 1912: 115-118.

²² Movsēs Khorenat'si 1913: 244.

also known among Armenians as “*Hankist Lousavorch'i Vank*” or “*Maneay Cave*”. In the XII century, an important Clergy School was developed here which served as a significant cultural and theological centre in the Western part of Eastern Armenia. The famous Vardapets of the Armenian Church — *Hovhannēs Pluz of Yerznka*, *Movsēs of Yerznka*, *Kirakos and Gēvorg of Yerznka*, *Hovhannēs of Hamesh* and many others, all lived and worked here. The famous “*Mshoy Charēntir*” — the Homiliary of Mush — written in the Avag Monastery in 1200-1202, can now be found at the Mesrop Mashtots' Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) in Yerevan. The remarkable story of “*Mshoy Charēntir*” is a true example of the extent to which Armenians are bound to their spiritual and cultural values. During the 1915 Genocide, a courageous woman, after losing her husband, children, and all her relatives, put herself aside and devoted what energy she had left to save half of the “*Mshoy Charēntir*”. With God-given strength, she carried this heavy homiliary hundreds of miles, all the way to Etchmiatsin. Miraculously, the second part of this homiliary was found in 1927 and was also brought to Armenia to be reunited with its other half.²³

The Armenian Church devoted three main Holy Days for the great St. Gregory the Illuminator — St. Gregory the Illuminator's Commitment of the Pit; Discovery of the Relics of St. Gregory the Illuminator; and St. Gregory the Illuminator's Deliverance from the Pit. Hence, on these days, pilgrimages were organized to the Avag Monastery where sacrificial animals were offered by the faithful in honour of the Illuminator's memory. The existing photograph²⁴ of this traditional folk pilgrimage was taken in 1907 and can be found in “*Amēnoun Tarets'uyts'ë*” (Everybody's Almanach) of T'eodik printed in 1923. There is a great sense of national and ethnic tradition evident in this collective photograph — clergymen and women in traditional Armenian dresses. All would become victims of the exiles, deportations and massacres of 1915.

Yet, it can be considered a fortune, that after the great loss of people and land, spiritual and cultural values, and the overcoming of terrible century-long nightmares, a small part of Eastern Armenia has been preserved and remains today, existing as the current Republic of Armenia, and within it, the Holy See of Etchmiatsin — the spiritual centre of all Armenians. By international standards, Holy Etchmiatsin is a unique place; for 17 long centuries, almost uninterruptedly, it has inspired Armenians and has been the centre of their national spirit.

The Mother See of Holy Etchmiatsin

Holy Etchmiatsin is the embodiment of St. Gregory's vision, the vision he had at the time of the conversion of Armenians. Historian Agat'angeghos asserts that in this vision²⁵ of the Illuminator, Jesus Christ descended to Vagharshapat from Heaven and

²³ See Acharian K., *Hrach'ya Acharian* — 125, in: “*Harach*”, 76e Année, Nr. 20.188, Paris, 15 juin 2001, p.2.

²⁴ Cf., T'eodik 1923: 350.

²⁵ See Agat'angeghos 1983: 414-242.

pounded on the pagan *Sandaramet* temple with a golden hammer. The Illuminator, with the help of King Trdat III, the *Nakharars*, and the faithful, following Divine directions, destroyed the temple and established in its place the Mother See, named Etchmiatsin, which means the place of “the Descent of the Only-Begotten”.

Ever since the 4th century, Holy Etchmiatsin has been, and still is, the most sacred place in Armenian Christendom, thus making it the main pilgrimage site for Armenians. It has played a unique role in inspiring and motivating Armenians. Being well aware of the vital and spiritual importance of Etchmiatsin, foreign invaders tried to “move” the cathedral of Holy Etchmiatsin and deprive Armenians from their divine spiritual ground. In the beginning of the XVII century, the Persian Safavid King Shah Abbas I deported thousands of Armenians from the Ararat valley. In 1614, he moved 15 stones displaced from the cathedral, its candlesticks, the Right Arm of St. Gregory and other relics to Isfahan, with an intention of building a new Etchmiatsin there,²⁶ in order to eradicate the nostalgia of the Armenians deported to Persia. It did not happen - and could not happen of course - as Holy Etchmiatsin is sacred and Holy only on her Mother land, where the “Only-Begotten descended” and where the first Catholicos of all Armenians continues to invite the children of the Armenian Church to come together and build the “Holy Altar of Light.”²⁷

The Armenian Catholicossate of the Great House of Cilicia

As political power changed hands during the course of history, the central location of the Armenian Church shifted accordingly. By the end of the 5th century the Catholicossate had already moved away from Etchmiatsin; first of all to Dvin (484-931), then under Catholicos Hovhannēs Draskhanakerts’i to Dzoravank’ and to Aght’amar (931-944), thereafter to Argina (944-992), Ani (992-1065), Tsamndav (1062–1105), Shughri (1105-1125) and Tsovk’ (1125–1149). Since more favourable political conditions had by then been created in Cilicia, the Armenian Catholicossate subsequently relocated as a result, initially to Hromkla (1149-1292), and later to the new capital of Sis (in 1293).

When the Armenians lost their last Christian state in Cilicia to the Mamelukes in 1375, the Eastern Armenian monks, together with their leading Vardapets, who were the most vehement opponents of a union with the Roman Catholic Church, wanted to relocate the seat of the Catholicos from Sis to Etchmiatsin, which had been the original home of the Catholicossate.²⁸ Gregory IX Musabegiants, who resided in Sis as Catholicos, did not wish to leave his place of residence on account of his age and because of the responsibility he felt towards his people in Cilicia. The Synod of Etchmiatsin subsequently elected Vardapet Kirakos Virapets’i as the new Catholicos in 1441.

²⁶ See Ōrmanian 1914: 2325, 2328-2329.

²⁷ Cf. Hymn of Holy Etchmiatsin.

²⁸ Ōrmanian 1914: 2100–2116; Kirakosyan 2014: 588.

Nevertheless, a new Catholicos, Karapet of Eudocia, was appointed in Cilicia in 1446.²⁹ Tracing its descent to him by succession, the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia still exists today as a second Armenian Catholicosate, with its respective jurisdiction. After the massacres in Cilicia of 1920 and 1921 onwards, and a subsequent period of uncertainty, its seat of residence was established in Antelias, a suburb of Beirut, in 1930.

As in many cities and towns in Eastern and Western Armenia, the Armenians of Cilicia celebrated their holidays and feasts with rich traditions and customs. They have always maintained and nurtured their own local customs, and because of this, Cilicia has been a country with an enormous wealth of cultural activity and living tradition. The most popular feasts among the Cilician Armenians were: New Year's Eve, Holy Nativity and Epiphany followed by the blessing of water, during which the cross is immersed in the water, symbolizing Jesus' descent into Jordan river, and holy Myron (chrism) is poured in, symbolic of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, Presentation of our Lord to the Temple (Tearñēndařaj), Feast Day of Vardan and His Companions (Vardanank'), Feast of Carnival (Boun Barekendan) and the Great Lent, the Mid-Lent (Mijink'), Palm Sunday and the Holy Week, Holy Easter, Green and Red Sunday, the Feast of Ascension of our Lord (Hambardzum), the Feast of Pentecost (Hogegaloust), the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary followed by the blessing of grapes (Astvatsatsnay Verap'okhoum – Khahoghōrhñēk'), Feast of the Holy Translators (Srbots' T'argmanch'ats') and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.³⁰

In addition to the national and religious festivities mentioned above, the Armenians in Cilicia celebrated other feasts, including the commemoration days of the Saints of the Armenian and the Universal Church. These occasions were not secular, as each event had a divine blessing. During the year, in churches and homes, especially in households having the saints' namesakes as members, special remembrance holidays would be held to venerate and honour the saints through prayers, pilgrimages and various sacrifices of blessed animals in order to fulfill their solemn promises or personal vows through charitable works.

Among many the most popular saints of the Armenians in Cilicia were: St. John the Baptist as the Forerunner (Sourb Karapet), Saint Gregory the Illuminator, St. George the Warrior (Sourb *Gēorg Zōravar*), St. Sargis the Warrior and his son Martiros, the Sts. Sahak and Mesrop, St. Step'anos, Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, St. Jacob of Nisibis, the Sts. Apostles Peter and Paul, etc. On the occasion of the feasts of the above-mentioned saints' days, and many others, thousands of pilgrims and clergy would go to the churches and monasteries to mark the day of the corresponding saint by praying and participating in the Divine Liturgy, enthusiastically celebrating popular festivities as well.

²⁹ Ōrmanian 1914: 2142–2144.

³⁰ For more about churches and places of pilgrimage, festivals, religious traditions and customs in Cilicia see www.houshamadyan.org

Armenians in Cilicia preserved the original spirit and meaning of the holiday traditions almost fully intact from one generation to another. Losing their great kingdom in the late Middle Ages, they were able to maintain their national identity by preserving and living their unique national and ecclesiastical heritage and outstanding national achievements.

As the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia has been headquartered in Antelias after the Genocide, Catholicos Sahak II Khapayian and his Coadjutor Catholicos Babgēn I Giulesserian decreed some yearly celebrations that slowly became popular traditions and part of the Armenian Church calendar. One of the major celebrations was the Antelias pilgrimage day which coincided with the celebration of the day St Gregory the Illuminator was thrown in the pit. Taking into consideration that the Catholicosate's main church was named after Saint Gregory the Illuminator and that in the old days every monastery or holy site had a pilgrimage day, it was deemed convenient to honour the first Armenian Catholicos and thus Antelias also had its own pilgrimage day. Therefore, it can be seen as a revival of one of Armenia's traditions to express popular piety and devout faith.

On the Saturday evening before the celebration, devout pilgrims gather in the church to spend the whole night praying in the church and the monastery. On Sunday morning, thousands of pilgrims gather to take part in the Holy Mass. The Holy Mass is followed by a procession honouring St. Gregory the Illuminator, Saint Nicholas, Saint Sylvester and Saint Barsam. Finally, the current Catholicos of Cilicia blesses all the pilgrims with the right hand of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

From 1954, another fervent pilgrimage date was fixed for the Sunday closest to August 15, Assumption Day, named the Bikfaya pilgrimage. On 12 September 1953, there was the consecration of the chapel named after the Mother of God. It was built in the summer residence of the Catholicosate, on one of the beautiful hills of Bekfaya. Year after year, thousands of Armenian pilgrims celebrate the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God, attending the Holy Mass, the blessing of grapes and the blessing of the meat-offering.

It is from here and many other sacred places that popular piety emerges: faithful pilgrims journey and stay overnight in the lodges and courtyards of the monasteries, they ask the priests to bless their offerings, burn their incense and light their covenant candles, participate in the Lauds and Vespers prayers and the Divine Liturgy, and go back to their homes having fulfilled their vow and with a joy and satisfaction in their hearts. Usually on these occasions music, popular games, festivities and folk dances are also organized, which reveal the whole beauty and richness of the traditional Armenian culture. It is worth saying that Komitas Vardaped, the great Armenian composer, often used these types of events as sources for collecting Armenian folk songs.

On the topic of pilgrimages, it is valuable to note that church celebrations and Saints remain dear to the hearts of all Armenians. It is in the commemoration of Saints

and the celebration of festivities that popular piety feels all the more real and tangible.

Going on a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

From the early centuries of the Christian Church, prayerful Armenian pilgrims made their way to the sacred places where Jesus lived and died and appeared after his Resurrection. Armenians, like many Christians from different nations, came to walk in the footsteps of Jesus as an act of devotion, penance or thanksgiving, or to seek blessings or miracles. Many travelled on foot. Their journeys involved enormous effort and self-sacrifice, and they faced great hardship and perils. The pilgrims who had come back from the Holy Land were named among the Armenian “*Mahtes*”. This wording was frequently used among Armenians to refer to pilgrims to Jerusalem and means ‘He who has seen death’. This may be derived from the fact that a journey to Jerusalem involved a great many dangers.

The most popular celebrations for Armenians

According to recent statistics,³¹ the most popular celebrations for Armenians are the following: The New Year, Christmas, Presentation at the Temple (*Teārnēndaṙaj*), Saints Vardanank’, Holy Easter, Ascension, Transfiguration (*Vardavaṙ*), Assumption of Mother of God, Exaltation of the Holy Cross, April 24th, St. Sargis, St. James of Nisibis,³² St. George,³³ Carnival of Great Lent,³⁴ Great Lent,³⁵ Palm Sunday, Annunciation and Holy Translators.³⁶

Some of these have national character, such as the Sts. Vardanank’, Transfiguration, Holy Translators and April 24th. While some aspects of the celebrations are of pagan origin, such as the lighting of bonfires at the feast of the Presentation or the sprinkling of water on Transfiguration, they have been adapted to a Christian feast.

The most popular Saints are: St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Hrip’simē, St. Gayanē, St. Sargis, St. James, St. George, St. Sahak, St. Mesrop, St. Grigor of Narek, and St. Nersēs the Gracious. The popular Saint Translators comprise — Yeznik, Yeghishē, Koriun, Ghazar of P’arpi, and Movsēs of Khorēn. Also significant, from the new period, is Komitas Vardaped, who, with millions of Armenian Martyrs, was not just individually but collectively canonized on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide by the Armenian Church on April 23, 2015. It should be noted that even before this event, Komitas Vardaped was already regarded as a Saint and enjoyed the unconditional admiration of all Armenians.

³¹ See Mkrтч’yan 2001: 395-404.

³² *Surb Hakob Mtsbnay Hayrapet*.

³³ *Sourb Gēorg Zōravar*.

³⁴ *Barekendan*.

³⁵ *Medz Pahk’*.

³⁶ *Targmanich’ Vardapetk’*.

It is interesting to note that the names of almost all the Saints mentioned above, to this day, continue to be common names given to Armenian children by their parents, which again is a sign of reverence and belief.

April 24th is not a Church Holy Day in a classical sense, but after the collective canonization of millions of Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide — as mentioned above — from this day on in the Liturgical calendars of the Armenian Church April 24 has been referred to as a Feast of the Armenian Genocide Holy Martyrs. It is still a day of prayer and meditation, and a day of special worship and requiems for the blessed memories of more than 1.5 million Armenian martyrs and victims of the year 1915.

Not one of the religious pilgrimages has resulted in such an immense participation of all age groups, as April 24th in *Tsitsernakaberd* in Yerevan, *Genocide Memorial Church* in Deir ez-Zor in Syria and *Genocide memorial* in Bikfaya, Lebanon.

Armenian folk and church traditions

There are national traditions and corresponding pagan celebrations related to almost all of the Church Festivities. For example, during the Presentation at the Temple, parallel with the Church Liturgy, people have preserved the pre-Christian tradition of purification by fire. In fact, immediately after the pre-feast of the Presentation at the Temple, people participate in bonfire celebrations. Newly married couples and the young gather around a fire and jump over the flames, for the purpose of purification and fertility. Afterwards, grandmothers collect the ashes and spread them over the yards and fields expecting to fertilize the land, or take the ashes to the roofs of their houses to ward off evil.³⁷

Even the song Ascension “*Jangiulum*”, the collection of water from seven different sources, the flower bouquets, and finally the “lot” — “*Vijak*” of Ascension — do not have a direct Christian context.

The feast of Transfiguration, as mentioned, was the combining of the religious commemoration of Christ’s Transfiguration and the Armenian pagan feast of Amanor (Armenian New Year or Navasard) by St. Gregory. This feast was devoted to Astghik (Greek Aphrodite) — the goddess of love, beauty and waters. The old Armenian Transfiguration — *Vardavar* — coincided with the harvest; hence, people expressed their appreciation to the goddess for all the crops and harvest they gathered. The same tradition has been adopted by the Armenian Church, and the believers continue to express their feelings via the new religion. They give husks, flowers and roses not only to the Church but also to each other. The water games, the sprinkling of water on each other and the releasing of pigeons are well known,³⁸ popular and favoured traditions among Armenians.

The blessing of grapes is related to the Day of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin

³⁷ Petrossian 1993: 82-83.

³⁸ Cf. Petrossian 1993: 222-224.

Mary. Armenians have a wonderful ancient custom of offering the best parts of the first fruits to God. During the pre-Christian period, the gift was presented to non-gods. Now, consecrated by the Church, this tradition is reserved for the Virgin Mary.³⁹

It is natural that people throughout the centuries have created many religious symbols and traditions. For example, St. Sargis,⁴⁰ whose stories and legends relating to his life and times have been passed down through history. Here, with reference to popular piety, we can observe that St. Sargis has become a symbol of the fulfillment of wishes of love, as people attribute to him a legend where he carries away a young girl whom he loved. Young girls or loving couples make "*Pokhints*" (a mixture of flour and grains) and place this on the roofs of their houses. St. Sargis rides his horse during the night and leaves marks of his horse-shoe on the *Pokhints*. The next morning, the young people eat that *Pokhints* and wait for the fulfillment of their desires. For this occasion, young girls often fast for three days and then break their fast only the night before the St. Sargis feast day by eating a very salty pastry — *gat'a*. Afterwards, they go to bed without drinking water in the hope that in their dreams, their beloved will bring them the water. If this happens, they can expect their wish to come true.⁴¹

Thus, from these descriptions one can see the religious culture of simple people, the brilliant expressions of their faith and their dreams, and the spiritual origin of these expressions. This includes the festivities of pre-Christian folk traditions, which came to adopt Christian forms.

Veneration of "*Khachk'ars*" (Cross Stones)

Before concluding, I would like to reflect on two more aspects of popular piety, which have particular significance in the religious life of Armenians. One is the exceptional respect towards the Cross Stones (*Khachk'ars*) and the other is the sacrifice of animals (*Matagh*) for the pilgrimages.

Armenians venerate Cross Stones (*Khachk'ars*), which is to say, they pay respects to them because they are sacred and holy objects, and because they have reverence for what the *Khachk'ars* depict.

Armenians do not worship Cross Stones in the sense that the word "worship" is commonly used in modern English or other languages. In older translations, one finds the word "worship" used to translate the Greek word *proskyneo* (literally, "to bow"). Nevertheless, one must understand that the older use of "worship" in English was much broader than it is generally used today, and was often used to refer simply to the act of honouring, venerating, or reverencing.

Armenians have always had a very special respect and admiration for Holy Crosses. While for the Eastern Orthodox churches there exists the exceptional

³⁹ Cf. Petrossian 1993:238-239.

⁴⁰ "*Gandzasar*", I, Yerevan, 1992, p.294-314.

⁴¹ See Petrossian 1993: 88.

devoutness for Icons, it is the *Khachk'ars* that play the same role among Armenians, because for them these are a symbol of life, not of Jesus mortal, but of Jesus Alive, born from the Alive. A Cross Stone symbolizes the Victory over Death achieved by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some scholars assume that the heritage of the Urartian monuments served as a foundation for the formation of *Khachk'ars*. Others look at them as being derived from simple Christian tombstones. However, in the Church, a strong opinion is upheld: the initiator and the creator of the *Khachk'ars* was St. Gregory, although, throughout history, they have undergone a process of perfection. Historian, Agat'angeghos, states that when St. Gregory was released from *Khor Virap* pit, he embarked on his mission of spreading Christianity:

“He was showing the locations of where to build churches in all of the cities, villages and fields of Armenia. But he was not establishing foundations publicly nor was he installing altars in God's name, as he was not yet consecrated, but only was fortifying the places and thus, was erecting the symbol of the divine Cross. At the roads, on the streets, in the squares and at the crossroads, he was erecting this same Sign worshipped by everyone and there to guard and protect.”⁴²

Thus, St. Gregory was giving a fully Christian look to the pagan country. Surprisingly enough, the spreading of *Khachk'ars* in Armenia has exactly the same character as stated by Agat'angeghos. Armenians enjoy having pilgrimages to *Khachk'ars*, in front of which they light their candles, worship and pray.

Sacrifice of animals (*Matagh*)

The sacrifice of animals - *Matagh* - is closely linked with pilgrimages. Evidently, the origins of *Matagh* have pagan, or pre-Christian background, however, this religious tradition was practiced both by pagans and by Jews. The Armenian Church inherited this old custom, consecrated it and gave it a charitable character.

Assyrians criticized Armenians as following the Jewish law of engaging in the sacrificing of animals. St. Nersēs Shnorhali (Nersēs the Gracious) explains, in a short but important document,⁴³ the nature of this custom ordered by St. Gregory the Illuminator. After accepting Christianity, pagan priests were complaining about their livelihood. The Catholicos consecrated this custom of the sacrificing of animals, so that the newly converted priests could make a living by accepting 10% of the sacrifice made by the faithful.

Thus, the Catholicos St. Nersēs Shnorhali advised that the believers should make the sacrifice on the day of Holy Easter and on memorial days for the dead. They had to sanctify their offering, by first feeding the animals salt that was blessed by a priest. After the sacrifice, one tenth was presented to the Church and the rest distributed charitably:

⁴² See Agat'angeghos 1983: 438-440.

⁴³ See Nerses Shnorhali 1871: 252-264.

“they should first feed the hungry and needy, and then, if anything is left, feed their relatives and loved ones.”⁴⁴

We can see that this popular Armenian custom of sacrifice has first and foremost a charitable purpose, so that through the Church, a living for socially marginalized people is provided.

Conclusion

The popular piety of Armenians has always been encouraged by the Church and clergy. Even today, in the framework of celebrations of the Church, this phenomenon is highly supported and developed.

With her limited number of clergy, the Church does not have the necessary strength to fight previous and newly emerging sects and their preachers, not in Armenia nor the Diaspora. The strength of our Church lies in the unity with her believers and is based on their strong sense of belonging, which they express, by their living faith in the Holy Church. The complicated Church Doctrines, and even the Liturgy, though beautiful and mysterious, sometimes use outdated formulations or languages which are not for simple people. The people, without opposing the Church Doctrine, and in harmony and faith with the general spirit of the Church, through natural impulse have their own way of living and expressing their faith. These expressions are in the form of prayers created by people in modern languages or local dialects, songs, psalms, etc.

The opportunity of expressing popular piety with all its pluralism in daily life through various methods can only motivate popular piety and strengthen the Church. Popular piety in its forms of expression may seem a bit simple and sometimes naïve, but that simplicity very often has a deep spiritual base. As we have shown in this presentation, the source and inspiration of such popular piety is always the Church by its living spirituality, historic mysticism and realizations through Church sacraments.

The centre and at the same time the purpose of people’s spiritual life, in the past, today and in the future, was and will always be, the revealing God, for He is the Carrier of everything, and He is the Creator of life and the meaning of all of our existence.

Popular piety will always be closely connected with Jesus Christ, with the crucified and truly resurrected Creator, who is the proof of God’s promise. The highest criteria of a believer’s life and the inner dynamism of their faith is following the life of Christ and His teachings.

The popular piety, being simple and naïve in its manifestations, is nevertheless aimed towards the highest Truth of the Christian faith and revelation. The fact that there is a God, Whom we can address, Whom we can talk to, Whom we can pray to, the very fact that He is an — *“Khorhurd khorin anhas ev anskizb’n”* — an unspeakable “Mysterious Sacrament”, a “Mysterium tremendum et faszinosum” — is the essence of the existence and the center of the spiritual life of the faithful.

The popular piety of Armenians sprung from the sacred sources of the Holy Church and the Christian Faith. It has never been merely a theoretical or sentimental

⁴⁴ See Nerses Shnorhali 1871: 252-264.

phenomenon, but rather a religious reality with flesh and blood. It has an existential value, a national and cultural identity, a spiritual-ethical firm principle, for the defense of which, people in the past and present have always been ready to meet the most severe conditions, including individual and collective martyrdom. The Armenian people, who share their faith with their sister churches, by the Grace of God being baptized as Christians more than 1700 years ago, will definitely continue to build the “Holy Altar of Light”, which the only-begotten Son of God has established in the land of Armenia. The Armenian people in the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Artsakh (Karabagh) and in the Armenian diaspora, spread all over the world, must keep alive the lantern of faith, which is above the altar of Holy Decent, and is lit by the tears of the Great and Holy St. Gregory the Illuminator.

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