

BOOK REVIEW

Shushan Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion in the Realization of the Armenian Genocide*, St. Echmiadzin, 2020, 230 pp.

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The Role of Religion in the Realization of the Armenian Genocide worthwhile monograph authored by Shushan R. Khachatryan,¹ scholar of Religious Studies, PhD in History was published in 2020, by the recommendation of the Publishing Council of Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin and the Scientific Board of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation.

In her research Dr. Khachatryan scrutinized, from the historico-religious viewpoint, the religious aspect of the realization of the Armenian Genocide, as a factor and a tool (starting from the day of the Ottoman Empire's entry to the Great War (1914) throughout the entire process of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923)).

Identifying the role of religion in perpetration of genocides, as strongly believed by the author, was the most sensitive issue requiring the utmost attention of a scholar, whereas the nexus of religion and genocide could be considered as touchstone in the sense that the issue had not been given due attention to date.²

Khachatryan deemed that the significance of the religious aspect of the Armenian genocide had been "long noticed," while its application in the study of genocides, as maintained by the author, might change approaches or offer methods and research leading to completely different complex solutions.³

The goal of the research was the elucidation of the issue of religious targeting within the context of the Armenian Genocide. Khachatryan put forward the following questions/problems: What would the common questions be when considering the nexus of religion and genocide as a subject of scientific research? Could theological analysis contribute to the development of the topic? To what extent have the genocide scholars tackled the phenomenon of religious targeting manifested during the Armenian Genocide? What assessments have

1 Shushan Khachatryan, PhD, received her Bachelor's degree (2005-2009) and then her Master's degree (2009-2011) from the Department of Theology, Yerevan State University (YSU). From 2011 to 2015, she was a PhD student at the same department. Within the scope of her thesis, she carried out research for her dissertation at Ca' Foscari University in Venice (September 2013 – July 2014). On 28 June 2018 she defended her PhD dissertation titles "Issues of Religious Studies of the Armenian Genocide" and received her PhD in History. Since March 2013, she has been working at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute as a researcher, and since April 2019 as the Head of the AGMI Armenian Genocide Victims' Documentation and Data Collection Department.

2 Shushan Khachatryan, *Կրոնի դերը Հայոց ցեղասպանության իրագործման մեջ* [The Role of Religion in the Realization of the Armenian Genocide] (Echmiadzin: Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin publishing house, 2020), 14.

3 Ibid.

been made and what approaches offered around this issue? Was the religious difference a factor or an instrument in planning and executing the Armenian Genocide, etc.?⁴

The book consists of three chapters, a conclusion, a list of sources and bibliography and appendices.⁵

The author's analytical mind, on the one hand, and rich sources of the work on the other hand (documents of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute and the US National Archive, addresses/calls and declarations written using religious terminology, memoirs of survivors and eye-witnesses, chronicles (Arm. *patmagirk*) and memorial-collections (Arm. *hushamatyan*), Armenian- and foreign-language press of the time, collections of documents of the Armenian Genocide, scholarly studies, etc.) came to account for the success of the monograph.⁶

In the *first chapter* of the monograph (*“Outlines of Religious Studies and Theology for the Research of Genocides”*) Shushan Khachatryan touched upon historico-religious research and their methodological peculiarities. The author broached topics like extermination and killings in religions (from mythological systems to monotheistic religions), the massacre of Canaan nations, the conflict of religions during genocides, Turkish Islam and the Armenian Genocide, the Young Turk policy towards religious minorities, etc.⁷

Taking up the concept of “mythological thinking,” Khachatryan advised to look back at the initial, mythological religious system of a nation/race in order to find out the basis for genocidal ideas. In the case of the Turks, the peculiarities of pre-monotheistic religion - what heroes did they have at that time, were the heroes taken as ideals for the nation fighters for justice, or the incarnation of aggressive force?⁸

Of particular interest is the following observation of the author: “... *In each religion the worldview-based attitude towards the representatives of other religions could be both negative, down to calls to exterminate them, and positive, like, for instance, being merciful to people. The study of the role of morality in a given religion might shed light on genocide studies.*”⁹ Shushan Khachatryan beheld that the conflict of religions is a manifest, facilitating factor in the genocide: “... *The Armenian Genocide was not a genocide committed on religious grounds, however, religious confrontation and religious otherness were among those material factors that made the realization of the genocide possible.*”¹⁰

The author comprehensively described how the political elite used the religion as a means of provoking conflict, and highlighted that the ideology of Islam by its nature could not stay separated from the state and politics and therefore from wars and armed conflicts as

4 Ibid., 15-16.

5 The Appendix to the monograph includes the originals of various calls for holy war issued by the Ottoman Empire, their translations, copies of photos and postcards, see I-LXIII.

6 Ibid., 18-19.

7 Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 16-17.

8 Ibid., 27-28.

9 Ibid., 28.

10 Ibid.

well.¹¹ Considering atheism, juxtaposed also with positivism, biological materialism, social darwinism, etc. as the Young Turk “ideological core,” Khachatryan drew the attention of the readers to the anti-Christian worldview of each of them, simultaneously emphasizing the importance of making it a subject of research.¹²

Within the context of the study reference was made to the issue of conversion of the Armenians during the genocide: “*Conversion must be scrutinized through complex and sequential processes – the rite of consecration, the social significance of the converted, and its effects during the Armenian Genocide and later.*”¹³

Khachatryan also presented the theological efforts in the study of genocides. She discriminated the following issues as base points of the common topic for further research in Theology and Religious Studies; viz. the theodicy¹⁴ of genocides, the meaning of sacrifice in genocides, the issue of extermination of pagan races of Canaan, the theological reflections of Catholic and Protestant missionaries about the genocide of Armenians, the semantic connection of mass killings with religious semiotics, the topic of canonization of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide, as well as theological analyses of the Armenian Genocide.¹⁵

According to Khachatryan, the issue of religion was not properly addressed in the studies of the Armenian Genocide leaving the field open for religious scholars and genocide scholars. Religious Studies scholars have paid special attention to the general problem of religion and violence scrutinizing religions and their features and characteristics that were viewed as a base for various forms of violence throughout different periods.¹⁶

The author presented and commented on the ideas of other genocide scholars, who either had dedicated brief analyses to the topic, or expressed their general stand on the religion-genocide problem (Raphael Lemkin, Leo Kuper, Vahagn Dadrian, Leonard Glick, Richard L. Rubenstein, Steven L. Jacobs, Ronald G. Suny, Taner Akçam and others).¹⁷

Historico-religious studies on the Armenian Genocide, as Khachatryan asserted, should cover specific issues, such as viewing the inter-religious fabric of the Ottoman Empire, interactions, animosities and conflicts between Turkish Islam and Christianity, the role of all those factors in the religious and psychological behavior of the planner-perpetrators and the horde of implementers of atrocities.¹⁸ While studying the precursor to the canonization of the Armenian Genocide martyrs, the author clearly stated: “*The percept of the sufferers of the Armenian Genocide as martyrs was not conditioned by some all of a sudden ideas or triggered by an event: it has always been in the perceptions of the Armenian people. However, official steps in the [last] 100 years had been undertaken by the Church indeed, the*

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 29.

13 Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 30.

14 Theodicy (from the Greek words “theos” (God) and “dikē” (law, justice)) is a set of questions and theories that discuss, on the one hand, the role of the good and evil in human suffering, putting forward many why-questions connected with the omnipotency, benevolence and mercifulness of God, and on the other hand, refer to the “power” of evil and its presence throughout the history of mankind, see Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 31.

15 Ibid., 31-41.

16 Ibid., 42.

17 Ibid., 42-52.

18 Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 55.

*Armenian Apostolic Church, the adherents of which were martyred as an absolute majority; even there were those, who called the Armenian Apostolic Church a “Martyr Church” in various memoirs, testimonies, historical documents and papers.”*¹⁹

Presenting and analyzing major occurrences paving the path to and maturing the idea of canonization, mentioning the progression steps, elucidating events that have received public response, the ceremony of canonization of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide on 23 April 2015, Khachatryan arrived at the following conclusion: “After a long break, through the canonization of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide the canonization procedure of Armenian Apostolic Church was restored through canonization of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide. However, it is important to understand that canonization is not making someone a saint: by canonization, the Church proclaims loudly that She recognizes Her martyrs as saints. Besides, it is important to understand that it is true that the Armenian Church has performed collective canonization, but it does not mean that the Church has made around 1.5 million people massacred during the Genocide saints, as no number has been mentioned... One can only hope that one last ecclesiastical canonical solution will be worked out and they will be mentioned also in the Armenian Book of Divine Liturgy.”²⁰

The *second chapter* of the monograph under the title of “*Religious and Ideological Grounds for the Realization of the Armenian Genocide*” was dedicated to the Young Turk attempts of the adaptation of European philosophy and olden and novel Turkic teachings, due to which a syncretic ideology with a pan-Turkism-positivism-modernism mixture was created. In this chapter, a special place was given to the Young Turk religious policy, as well as the role of the holy war declared in November of 1914 in the genocide of the Christians of the Ottoman Empire. The author, describing and analyzing the dangerousness of the Young Turk ideology, arrived at the conclusion that the fundamental cause for the Young Turk anti-Christianity lay with ideology, political views and the general frame.²¹ Khachatryan strongly believed that the ideology of the Young Turks, Ittihadism, at the last stage of its existence, i.e. in 1908-1918, was adamant about massacring Christians.²²

When examining the cases, Khachatryan noted that regarding Christians, the Young Turks had adopted a policy of collaborating with them at first, on the surface, and then exterminating them later. They had intertwined the ideologies of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism rendering no future role to pan-Islamism.²³ The use of the religious difference as an instrument was considered by the author as a material element in the genocidal plan of the Young Turks, and in this sense, it served to secure the consent of two weighty Islam-worshipping layers in the Empire - the spiritual crust in the first place and then the Muslim [population].²⁴

Khachatryan, introducing the motivations for participating in the jihad and the implementers thereof, stated: “*The Young Turks were using the religious peculiarities of Islam for their own political purposes. The jihad was a pretext and a weapon in the hands of the*

19 Ibid., 57.

20 Ibid., 74.

21 Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 85.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 89.

24 Ibid.

Young Turks; it did not find supporters in the entire Islamic world, but put down deep roots in the Ottoman Empire."²⁵ The author presented one by one the Sultan's calls for war, the five fatwas of the Ottoman Sheikh ul-Islam, Enver Pasha's address to the Ottoman army, the jihad pamphlet and the leaflet in Ottoman Turkish and Russian.²⁶

In effect, the texts of various calls for jihad were developed targeting Christian "infidels," the fight and the war against them were considered as a sacred religious duty. The texts of those calls were meant to secure a mass campaign against the already targeted groups.²⁷

In the *third and final chapter, Religious Means of Realization of the Armenian Genocide*, the author presented eyewitness accounts of jihadist statements and calls against the Armenians and the response of the press of the time, examined the phenomenon of ritualization of violence and killings during the Armenian Genocide. Referring to specific religious targets (clergy, cross, holy places, etc.) the author viewed ritualization as an example of the religious factor of realization of the Armenian Genocide.²⁸

Khachatryan described the acts of barbarism against the clergy, the ritualization of violence, ritual killings, the desecration of the cross during the Genocide, the crucifixions of people, the manipulation of Jesus Christ's name, religious blasphemy, profanation, labeling, calls, religious vandalism of Christian sanctuaries.

The architects of declaration of jihad, as interpreted by the author, were the Young Turk leaders, who were using religious terminology in their calls, citing the Quran, so that the call for jihad would be allowed to the masses and committed under the guise of legitimacy, as per the Islamic law.²⁹ Suggesting to the readers to follow the impacts of the jihadist calls, Khachatryan stated that one of their first effects on the drafted Christian men of the Ottoman Empire appeared in 1914, right after the declaration of jihad, and the later massacres also had their roots in jihad and were connected with the declaration of jihad.³⁰ That, as strongly believed by the author, had theological grounds, and the Turkish Islam had had theological contribution to the atrocities, granting the Turkish and Kurdish religious mob the privilege of massacring the Christians and particularly Armenians.³¹

As an undeniable presence of the religious factor in the realization of the Armenian Genocide, the author described the manifestations of religious contexts during the assaults. She also mentioned that the massacres were committed with special cruelty, accompanied by torture, ritualization, use of "Christian" context - crucifying, murdering on church altars, etc.³² Speaking of barbarianism against the clergy, the author cited multiple testimonies about the Christian clergy who were killed with special cruelty. The tortures administered to the clergy were mainly based on false accusations.³³

25 Ibid., 97. In her monograph the author introduced written documentations of the jihad calls translating some of them into Armenian for the first time, highlighted their substantive significance, made relevant observations and conclusions.

26 Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 103-114.

27 Ibid., 116.

28 Ibid., 18.

29 Ibid., 124.

30 Ibid., 125.

31 Khachatryan, *The Role of Religion*, 127.

32 Ibid., 131.

33 Ibid., 142-143.

With regard to profanation of Christians and their relics and sanctuaries, Khachatryan noted that the churches were deliberately turned to brothels subjecting girls to sex slavery.³⁴

The author mentioned that under both the conversion and death threat the Armenians demonstrated a unique religious and psychological behavior: performing religious and ritualistic imitations in borderline situations of life (even in the conditions of Islamization, Armenian orphans in Mardin Turkish orphanage were finding symbolic substitution of Christian rituals and sacred ceremonies).³⁵

By unwinding, systematizing and analyzing disciplinary topics *The Role of Religion in the Realization of the Armenian Genocide* monograph ended in momentous conclusions. Recognizing the importance of Shushan Khachatryan's research, we deem it expedient to have her book published in English.

34 Ibid., 149.

35 Ibid., 150.