

## Religion as a Survival of National Identity: the Case of the Republic of Armenia

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Religion has always been of interest to social scientists and even the earliest sociologists considered religion as one of the important concerns for their discipline, mostly because religious practices and beliefs were found in all social institutions. However, the position of the institutionalised religion was questioned by many social thinkers (see Ellul, 1976) and it was argued that as a result of scientific and technological development, urbanisation and the growth of rationality and the capitalist economy, modern societies will experience a decline of religion and religious thinking (Aldridge, 2000). Despite this modernisation argument and the suggestion that increased modernisation leads to secularisation, we can still witness a strong religiosity in the modern developing world.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is clear that expectations of widespread secularisation were mistaken, nevertheless, this thesis continues to receive both support of the proponents and criticism of the opponents. Yet, this paper adopting Berger's (1999b:2) position, which states that *"the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so then ever"*, seeks to examine this question, particularly focusing on the republic of Armenia. Moreover, the paper argues that in the Armenian culture religion or more precisely Christianity is not only a foundation of social life, but it also creates a strong sense of religious-national identity (Redgate, 2000). The establishment of Christianity as the state religion of Armenia in 301 has been one of the major contributors to the shaping and maintaining a separate identity as a nation. This was a new period that had a profound effect on the spiritual, social and cultural life and the political orientation of Armenia (Hovhannisian, 2004). The notion of being 'the chosen people' (Smith, 1992); the first Christian people who received the word of God directly from the apostles, and *'where God's grace has been manifested'* (Panossian, 2006, p. 44) has remained with the Armenians and became a *"core element of their national identity"* (Ibid) even under Soviet regime. Armenia was the only country where Soviet authorities after unsuccessful

attempts, decided not to oppose the religiosity and the apostolic church in this society, and in the 1920s Christian worship had been allowed. This decision was made after the vain attempts to repress religiosity and institutional religion. Moreover, the Soviet Union even called on the church to help rally people to fight in World War II (Kaeter, 2004). This strong attachment to church and religiosity is still a distinctive aspect of national identity in this culture, which is evidenced in everyday life through social and cultural symbols and meanings people attach to them. However, before discussing these cultural and social aspects it is important to examine the figures of religious development in Armenia. According to the Armenian Sociological Association (ASA) in 2006, 96 per cent of the Armenian population belonged to the Armenian Apostolic church, where 45 per cent attended religious services a few times a year, 44 per cent<sup>1</sup> regularly attended church and 10 per cent never attended religious services (ASA, 2007). The percentage of those who belonged to the Armenian Apostolic church in 2008 increased by 2 per cent: 98 per cent in 2008 compared to 96 per cent in 2006. There was also an increase (around 15 per cent) in the proportion of the population attending church a few times per year<sup>2</sup> and a decrease (2 per cent) in the proportion of those who never attend church<sup>3</sup> (ASA, 2008). According to this statistical data the institutionalised religion in this society is not on the decline but also is not witnessing a ridged transformation into “*a personally satisfying system of beliefs*” (Hunt, 2002, p.29). Many social thinkers (Luckmann, 1967; Bellah, 1970; Davie, 2000, 2002) suggest that in the contemporary society institutionalised religion changes its expression and becomes more individualised. This argument is particularly relevant for Western Europe and the USA. In Switzerland, for example, in 2007 there was an increase (around 11 per cent) in post-traditional forms of religiosity compared to 1989 (Nicolet, and Tresch, 2008). From the early 1980s, the research in the USA showed an increase (at around 9 per cent) in the proportion of the population choosing a faith that was outside of the three major traditions (Roof and McKinney, 1985). Yet, in Armenia those who did not fall into the main religion formed only 2 per cent in 2008. Moreover, there is a negative public attitude to these ‘other’ religions, which is evidenced on media; online forums, blogs etc. One of the examples of this

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<sup>1</sup> Responses ‘Once a month’, ‘Once a week’, ‘A few times a week’ and ‘Every day’ were added together.

<sup>2</sup> 60 per cent in 2008

<sup>3</sup> 8 per cent in 2008

deprecatative attitude towards other religions is the article posted by Armenian Union "Say NO to Jehovah's Witnesses" (Armenian Union, 2008). Norris and Inglehart (2004) argue that this revival of traditional religion has been observed in almost all post-soviet countries (In Borowik, 2007). However, in the case of Armenia it is important to note that Armenian Apostolic church and religion survived not only the Soviet regime but also the pressure from foreign occupations from the first century (West, 2009). This is a crucial factor, as it demonstrates people's attachment to religiosity and church for many centuries. Returning to the idea of a religious-national identity through culture and other social factors, it is important to discuss and explore its formation, influence and expression in everyday life. Among important aspects that unite all of those who form a nation are common religion and common language (Llobera, 2005). The Armenian language and Christian religion are closely linked and play a significant role in the formation of religious-national identity. The invention of the alphabet by the saint Mesrop Mashtots was followed by the translation of the bible, moreover, it was no more than a means of translating the 'divine breath' ( Hofmann, 2007). This link between language and religion is still strong in the modern Armenia and for Armenians in other parts of the world, where the role of the schools and education system is significant. For example, in 2009 at the annual symposium for Armenian teachers at the Diocesan Centre in New York, Armenian school teachers and participants discussed ties between language and faith, and focused on ways they could help students identify these connections in the classroom (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 2009). Armenian children are taught about this connection at school and not only in other parts of the world, but also in the Armenian primary schools. Moreover, the influence of religion is also present in children's centres, particularly art education centres. Among one of these educational centres is the National Centre of Aesthetics, which was created in 1980 (National Centre of Aesthetics, 2010), the purpose of which, is to introduce children to their cultural identities as Armenians through Armenian art, folklore and religion (Garoian, 1994). It is important to note that there is no documented evidence of their curriculum, because the work of the museum and centre was outside of Soviet guidelines of acceptable art education. However, one can witness the strong link of Christian religion and art education by attending the Children's Art Museum<sup>1</sup> in Yerevan. On the official website

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<sup>1</sup> The museum and Centre are organised to complete one another.

of the Museum most of the artworks of Armenian children relate to Christianity and contain religious images, while the artworks of children from other parts of the world include different aspects of their culture (Children's Art Museum, 2010). Moreover, the National Centre of Aesthetics also has lessons that explore the bible, where children create artworks based on the themes from bible (National Centre of Aesthetics, 2010). It is important to note that the Armenian Apostolic church plays significant role in this environment and contributes to children's development as artists. Usually priests or ministers are guests of honour on any exhibitions along with politicians, teachers, and professional in the sphere of art (see Mkrtchyan, PanARMENIAN Photo, 2010). Along with school and children's centres there are other agents of socialisation such as family, media etc. that influence and construct certain knowledge, experience and understanding of religion in this society. "The Armenian Alphabet", which is an animation about the creation of the alphabet, is a vivid example (The Armenian Alphabet, 2009). Moreover, various occasions, rituals, symbols construct certain understanding of a person's national identity, and if we consider that most of these aspects in Armenia and for Armenians worldwide relate to their religion or more precisely to Apostolic church, we can understand the connection between national identity and religion. This attachment and identification of national identity through religion is also expressed by many social movements and public protests against discrimination and religious intolerance in countries such as Turkey, Georgia etc. One of the examples of the public's disapproval was the demonstration that took place on the 24<sup>th</sup> November 2009, when many Armenians marched towards the Georgian Embassy in Armenia. The protest was organised against the Georgian Government's intentional neglect of the numerous ancient Armenian Churches within its borders, as well as its restriction against officially registering the Armenian Apostolic Church as an active diocese in the today's Georgian State where several hundred-thousand Armenians reside (Armenian-American Students and Activists United, 2009). It is important to note that the majority of protesters were young people, students and activists. The latter demonstrates young people's attachment and interest in the institutionalised religion in Armenian society, which is not evidenced in many parts of the world such as England, Wales, United States of America and Australia etc (Collins-Mayo, 2010). Studies by Smith (2005), Robbins and Francis (2009) illustrate common features of young people's religiosity in different parts of the world. The findings of these studies suggest that there are some secu-

larising tendencies among young people in Wales, England and USA, particularly in relation to Christianity. On the other hand, they also show signs of spiritual adaptation, which can be viewed as the process of religious transformation. Students' protest against Georgian Government in 2009 is one of the examples of the Armenian young people's attachment to the Apostolic church, nevertheless, this question needs to be explored in order to understand the dynamics of youth's involvement and attitudes towards institutionalised religion in Armenia.

The attempt of this paper was to present in short a society, which as it was suggested by Berger (1999b:2) "*... is as furiously religious as it ever was*", and to challenge the secularisation theory by introducing a strong religiosity in modern Armenian society. The attempt was to illustrate how cultural differences change attitudes towards religion and develop religious-national identity even in modern times. The paper suggests that it is important to consider and differentiate cultural, social and geographical factors when we discuss religion and religiosity, particularly in a relation to the secularisation theory. Many thinkers rejecting secularisation theory argue that contemporary societies witness the transformation of religion, which can be described as the alienation from the institutionalised religion but not from other forms of religiosity (see Luckmann, 1967; Halman and Pattersson, 1995). Yet, this paper suggests that "*...in some places*", in this case in Armenia, the institutionalised religion is inseparable from the cultural, political and social life and still is an integral part of national identity. In conclusion this paper suggests that a sociological investigation of the Armenian religiosity and its link to national identity would help to understand some nuances of the persistence of institutionalised religion, and would highlight the importance of geographical location, accordingly of historical development in the sociological theory of religion.

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