

***Enlightenment and Diaspora: The Armenian and Jewish Cases*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and David N. Myers. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1999. ISBN 0-7885-0604-8.**

Enlightenment and Diaspora is another example that the comparative approach is being increasingly made use of in the domain of Armenian Studies. This fresh attitude has to be welcomed unconditionally. This volume of collected papers addresses 'the comparative historical paths of Jews and Armenians in absorbing and disseminating the values of the Enlightenment' (p. 1). It emerged out of a conference conceived by Professor Benjamin Braude of Boston College and held at the University of California, Los Angeles, in November 1995.

This is not the first attempt, of course, to compare certain aspects of Armenian and Jewish history. Previous comparative endeavors, however, had mostly dealt with the Armenian Genocide of 1915 in relation to the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War. Braude refers to that reality in this volume by pointing out that 'the few attempts to compare the history of Armenians and Jews have unfortunately dealt with how they died, not how they lived' (p. 7). The implicit conclusion is that the papers included in this volume constitute an attempt to start filling that gap. According to co-editor David N. Myers, the collected contributions emphasize 'the ongoing confrontation and negotiation between an imagined sense of group identity and a wider political, social, and cultural world. This process of confrontation and negotiation seems especially typical of those extra-territorial groups or communities labeled diaspora' (p. 125); the papers included in this volume admittedly pay relatively little attention to the fate of the Enlightenment in the Armenian and Jewish 'heartlands' (p. 269). Moreover, co-editors Myers and Richard G. Hovannisian admit that most of papers 'do not engage in direct comparative work' (p. 2). Nevertheless, their argument is that 'their mere assembly here represents raw material for the next phase of scholarly labor' (p. 2).

Given the state of research worldwide, the first challenge, which almost all contributors face, is, not surprisingly, the evident lack of uniformity within the scholarly community at large in trying to define the two central terms for this volume – 'Diaspora' and 'Enlightenment.'

The term 'Diaspora' is defined, as a rule, rather broadly throughout the volume. It stands for the network of Armenian or Jewish communities living outside the confines of their respective historical homelands, although Marc Nichanian questions the applicability of this term to the community of Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist monks based in Venice (p. 94). The successes of Armenian colonies in 'accomplishing top level achievements in the most varied fields of life within the structures of a given society' (p. 46) and their ability to develop a high standard of 'Armenian culture, art, and forms of life ... on foreign soils' are repeatedly underlined (pp. 79-80).

The Enlightenment is largely an 18th century European phenomenon. It characterizes the efforts by rational thinkers to approach the natural and the

social worlds as a finite order, without regard to the heavenly world. These thinkers tried to underline the centrality of human concerns, the effectiveness of human rationality, human responsibility and human agency. The Enlightenment marked, according to the late Vahé Oshagan, 'the triumph of rationalism and of empiricism, the scientific spirit, an experimental method, and progress' (p. 145). This period saw a simultaneous sharp decline in the role of religion, which became confined to the status of mere faith. Spheres like economic, intellectual and political-legal life, social values, matters of personal status and the arts, which were all formerly within religion's domain, became autonomous and independent. Braude says that the Enlightenment 'transformed all of European society and affected the rest of the world' (p. 6).

It is beyond doubt that a corresponding change also occurred among minority, stateless groups, like Jews and Armenians, which lived in or on the outskirts of Europe. Braude even claims that the effect of the Enlightenment 'on dispersed communities such as the Jews and the Armenians was far more radical than upon peoples whose territorial-political base could be more or less taken for granted' (p. 6). However, Nishanian points out that 'it is not possible to consider the spreading of the Enlightenment in Europe and among the Armenians using the same categories' (p. 96). For Braude, too, the Enlightenment-inspired European territorial nation-statist models of collective identity are inappropriate for diasporan peoples like the Armenians and Jews. For example, it is now widely acknowledged that, within the European context, states played a central role in shaping the institutions through which various individuals and groups articulated the ideas of the Enlightenment. The states also sponsored the dissemination and development of these ideas. Minority groups did not have states of their own. Professor David Sorkin contends that, in the absence of a state, that same role was played by elite groups and institutions within each community. Among the Jews outside Palestine, for example, Sorkin argues that 'the elite families acted as the state's surrogate or its extensions' (p. 137).

Various contributors believe that the rising commercial classes, the bourgeoisie, acted in a similar manner among the Armenians. These authors repeatedly underline the sensitivity of these classes to and their active support for culture (including Enlightenment institutions) until the mid-nineteenth century.

Moreover, it is acknowledged by more than one contributor that, among the Armenians, 'there was no clear division between lay and clerical enlighteners' (p. 143). It is undeniable, of course, the Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin was alarmed with the "heretical" ideas (a mixture of constitutional monarchy and republicanism) espoused by the enlighteners in the Madras Group of Armenian merchants in the late eighteenth century. The Catholicos ended up excommunicating Movses Baghramian, one of the Group's principal members, and ordering Shahamir Shahamirian, another member, to burn all remaining copies of one of their controversial publications. Overall, however, the Armenian Enlightenment is depicted in this volume as having been a diverse enough philosophical and cultural movement to embrace not only critics of established

religion, but also those who tended to view the Armenian clergy as the guarantors of national culture rather than as enemies of the Enlightenment. The latter group was ready to work in harmony together with the religious elite of priests and scholars. This divergence from the European model is explained in the volume by the centrality of religious identification to Armenians (and Jews). Hence, it is suggested that the Armenian clergy felt less threatened by enlightened ideals and was not necessarily against those who promoted them. Indeed, the seemingly paradoxical role played by the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century Armenian Catholic monk, Mekhitar Sebastatsi, and by the Mekhitarist congregation that he founded in disseminating lay ideas comes under repeated and careful scrutiny throughout this volume.

The evaluation of the exact role of Mekhitarists in the Armenian Enlightenment brings us inevitably to the thorny issue of the latter's chronology.

Most, not to say all, contributors will agree with Levon Boghos Zekiyan's claim that the Enlightenment movements among the Armenians 'were remarkably delayed in comparison with their Western parallels' (p. 51). Oshagan rightly suggests that the very concept of the Enlightenment is somewhat unfamiliar to Armenian literary (we may also add, social) historians. His own definition of this crucial term is very broad. The Enlightenment, he argues, 'is in reality an ongoing process that only changes its name with the passage of time,' for 'the history of the diaspora shows that every time Armenians have come into fertile contact with the outside world, they have experienced a revival' (p. 180). Oshagan cautions, however, that 'these disparate, uncoordinated, and often random and contradictory states of revival in widely separated communities, acting under different influences we call Armenian Enlightenment' did not merge 'into one current of thought' (pp. 178-179).

This loose definition of the term 'Enlightenment' appears to lead, however, to certain internal inconsistencies in Oshagan's contribution. He first says that 'the seventeenth century ushered in a new spirit in the Armenian communities in the West' (p. 146). It was 'a period of slow revival of learning in the monastic centers in Armenia... The main operatives were printing and education' (p. 149). Oshagan sees no evidence, however, that 'Western culture was seen as the source of the inspiration for this Enlightenment' (p. 149). Western political and moral ideas were still not welcome among the Armenian elite. He later describes Eremia Chelebi Keumurdjian (1637-1695) as 'the first Armenian lay intellectual of note cast in the Western tradition of the Enlightenment *philosophe* Humanist. As such, he inaugurated the start of the Armenian Enlightenment' (p. 151). Other sixteenth and seventeenth century figures like Stepanos Salmastetsi, Mikael Sebastatsi and Catholicos Hakob Jughayetsi are also described as the earliest activists of revival in Armenia (p. 177). However, Oshagan suggests elsewhere that Enlightenment ideas did 'not seem to have fermented in the minds of eighteenth-century Armenian intelligentsia' (p. 145) and that contacts between Armenians and eighteenth-century Europe 'were marginal to the mainstream cultural reality' (p. 146).

The words 'revival' and 'Enlightenment' are unnecessarily used here interchangeably, thus confusing the reader. The latter is also left to deduce that, for Oshagan, there were individual Armenians living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'cast in ... the tradition of the Enlightenment *philosophe* Humanist,' but they were all long before their time, for there was no Armenian Enlightenment as a coherent movement.

If this interpretation is correct, then things had not, according to Oshagan, changed much a century or so later. He says that scholars like Baghtasar Tpir and Shahan Girbied were active 'as agents of enlightenment in the Western Armenian world in the eighteenth century,' but they 'never added up to an elite or a class of people capable of generating a revival, much less of receiving potent, foreign influence.... Each worked more or less on his own' (pp. 153-156).

Most other contributors focus on a narrower time-frame and appear to be more consistent not only in the use of their definitions but also in their subsequent conclusions. According to Zekian, 'Armenian literature opened up to modernity already in the second half of the sixteenth century' (p. 77), but he consciously refrains from using the actual term 'Enlightenment' up until the end of the eighteenth century. Rubina Perroomian, too, argues that Armenians had not yet experienced revival in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

It is in the above-mentioned Madras Group that Zekian, Nichanian and Vazken Ghougassian see the first exponents of Enlightenment among the Armenians. Oshagan, too, is full of praise for the outstanding members of this group – Movses Baghrarian, Shahamir Shahamirian and Harutiun Shmavonian – and the ideas they advocated. 'The Madras group was by far the most important movement to emerge as the spirit of enlightenment gathered pace among the Armenians,' he claims (p. 165). Oshagan notes, however, the absence of any 'trace of the deism of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists' (p. 170) among its members.

For Zekian, the Armenian Enlightenment's second main phase or what he calls the 'full secularization period' extended from the 1840s until 1915. It witnessed 'the end of the cultural domination of the Church and of the clergy,' 'the intellectual emancipation of the popular masses' (p. 68) and a full literary renovation. This period made the accomplishments of the previous generation of Enlightenment thinkers the common property of the whole people. Oshagan's own understanding of the significance of this period is broadly in line with Zekian's. The Madras Group 'would never have succeeded in getting the renaissance off the ground in both Eastern and Western Armenia were it not for the intellectuals and poets who took the relay in the early nineteenth century' (p. 178). Among Armenians living in the Russian Empire, for example, nineteenth century intellectuals like Khachatur Abovian, Rafael Patkanian and Stepanos Nazarian 'tried to combine two hundred years of European cultural evolution, starting with classicism and the Enlightenment and ending with the romantic revolution and nationalism, into one coherent national culture' (p. 178). Perroomian's contribution to this volume also focuses by and large on this period,

although she neither engages in defining the term 'Enlightenment' within the Armenian context, nor proposes any neat chronological framework to trace its trajectory.

These chronological frameworks appear to leave the Mekhitarist congregation on the fringes of the Armenian Enlightenment. The Mekhitarist translations from various periods of European literature and their establishing of schools in various locations with Armenian concentrations are repeatedly underlined and praised as necessary building blocs for the future 'awakening' of Armenian culture. Due and special attention is paid to the Armenian language dictionary prepared by Mekhitar himself, as well as to Father Mikayel Chamchian's comprehensive *History of the Armenians* (1784-86). Both, after all, appear to have been influenced directly by the Enlightenment's notion of taxonomy and order. Oshagan argues, however, that the main concern of the Mekhitarists in the eighteenth century 'was to prepare the essential tools for a renaissance rather than to respond to Enlightenment ideals.... They were committed to a national revival and were clearly aware of the Enlightenment movement in Europe but chose not to echo it, first because of its anti-Vatican stance and secondly because of its manifest atheism' (p. 162). Nishanian concurs that one finds no echo of the ideas of the Enlightenment in the Mekhitarist publications of the eighteenth century. Both Oshagan and Nishanian underline the fact that the Mekhitarists never translated the authors of the European Enlightenment. Even 'Voltaire was translated as a classical dramatist and playwright, never as a *philosophe*' (p. 93). Hence, the voice of critical rationalism did not reach the Armenians (p. 164). Even Mekhitarist publications from the nineteenth century, i.e. after the emergence (and even the gradual demise of the activities) of the Madras Group, do not convince Nishanian to equate the attempt to make up 'for lost time half a century later' with the arrival of the time of the Enlightenment among the Armenians at large (p. 96).

Thus, there is apparent confusion of the applicability of definitions originating in Western European experience to changes occurring within the Armenian context and, to a lesser extent, in delineating a fixed chronological framework to study these changes. This leads the reader to deduce that there is still a long way to go for Armenian Studies experts to study the details of these changes in Armenian thought and mentality and to reach conclusions that will be broadly acceptable to the scholarly community. Another, albeit more difficult, possibility is to try and come up with a different framework and terminology to analyze the experience of Armenians and, perhaps, other non-European peoples with similar historical trajectories. In this regard, comparing the Armenian experience with those of Jews and other non-European or stateless peoples is an essential first step to finding out their points of commonality, as well as those of divergence from the European mainstream.

The co-editors claim that another central theme discussed in this volume 'is the triangulated relationship among Enlightenment, diaspora, and nationalism' (p. 3). Actually, this nexus is analyzed in some detail only in one contribution: that of Benjamin Braude. He argues that the Enlightenment totally undermined

the previous bases for collective survival and identity. The fall of the poly-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious, dynastic empires and the rise of the European nation-states dealt fatal blows to the traditional diasporan existence of stateless, minority peoples, like the Armenians and Jews. Life in exile was rendered much more intolerable for the latter than it had ever been before. Therefore, new forms of identity had to be and were actually invented. These new forms mostly used the old familiar words and texts, but unfailingly altered their meaning. Braude further argues that post-Enlightenment nation-statist ideologues and historians among Armenians, Jews, Greeks (and perhaps other peoples) ignored the apolitical quality of the pre-modern national existence of their ancestors. They reinterpreted the medieval dynastic monarchy and the attachment to a homeland to fit the model of their own contemporary agenda, which encompassed a new and powerful yearning for the "native" homeland. Consequently, exile and diaspora were henceforward twinned as negative expressions of extra-territoriality. In historiography, medieval religious millenarianism was now seen as a forerunner for modern nationalism. Although these changes in the modes of thought occurred slowly, claims Braude, this transition was not without internal disputes and rivalries between modernizers, influenced by the West, and exponents of the traditional religious worldview, rooted in the East.

None of the Armenian Studies experts touch upon this issue in their contributions to this volume. The subject of studying anew the emergence (or as others prefer to call it, the making) of modern national (including Armenian) identities in light of new trends in contemporary historiography has largely remained outside the focus of attention of historians and related specialists dealing with the Armenian past. Even the most timid attempts in this regard have at times received very hostile criticism. The inclusion of Braude's contribution which puts the picture within a broader, methodological framework, in a volume which deals specifically with Armenians and Jews, and will therefore be read more widely among Armenian Studies circles, may help to re-transfer this debate to the place where it belongs – the realm of scholarly research and inquiry.

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