

# RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

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SPECIAL REPORT

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## ARTICLES OF FAITH UNDER SCRUTINY

An increase in 'alternative' religions has alarmed the Church and society, but are these fears justified?

■ **HEGHINE KOSHTOYAN, ARAM MANUKYAN AND HASMIK HOVHANNISYAN**

SINCE the collapse of the Soviet Union and the tragic earthquake of 1988, a host of religious organisations became widespread in Armenia, religious activity that has sometimes been viewed with suspicion by the Church and society at large.

Stepan Danielian, of the Collaboration for Democracy Union, an NGO that deals with religious minorities, said that in 1991, before independence, nine religious organisations were registered. Today, 55 religious organisations are registered in the territory of Armenia.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Molokans, Hare Krishnas and some other movements remain unlisted: because they have too few adherents or for other reasons. But Danielian thinks that Jehovah's Witnesses will eventually be registered under pressure from the Council of Europe.

A spokesman for The Holy See in Echmiadzin, Father Arshak Khachatryan, said that the Armenian Apostolic Church has always been tolerant to the ethnic minorities' faiths.

But the church is less tolerant towards some of the more controversial movements, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, which it views as sects.

"The spreading of sects on the territory

of Armenia is not new – let's only remember the Tondrakians and Pavlikians (medieval religious movements)," he said.

"History shows us that their actions always met with determined action by the Armenian Apostolic Church."

The biggest religious communities after Armenian Apostolic Church are Catholics (more than 120,000), Pentecostals (50,000-80,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (about 30,000). Other religious groups have a much smaller number of followers. "For instance, there are about 1,000-2,000 Mormons, they are rather closed, they avoid the press because, as they put it, their activities are presented badly 99 percent of the time," Danielian says.

Religious minorities have few problems with the authorities -- with the glaring exception of Jehovah's Witnesses. The controversial movement first came to Armenia as far back as in 1975, and has long been in dispute with the authorities and society, particularly in regard to military service. Dozens of members of the movement have been jailed for refusing to serve in the army, a state of affairs that has raised human rights questions in Europe and elsewhere.

Hranoush Kharatian, Head of the Government's Department on National Minority and Religious Affairs, thinks that Witnesses' problems with avoiding military service will be solved with the new law on Alternative Military Service that goes



Following the same book is not enough to guarantee religious harmony in today's Armenia

Picture: German Avakian

into effect in the autumn of 2004. She says: "With the law going into effect, the question of Jehovah's Witnesses released from arrest will be discussed. There are 21 members of the sect in prison today".

Alternative service is for three years, whereas regular military service is two years and there are questions over how fair this one-year difference is. Kharatian says: "There are countries where military service is three years for all. In our country, situated in a conflict zone, even one or two thousand people not wanting to serve in the army may have a negative impact," Kharatian said.

Armenian society has a negative attitude towards Jehovah's Witnesses and other so-called sects. Most of the political parties and press criticize Jehovah's Witnesses. For

example, the leader of the "One Nation" party, Gor Tamazian, has recently urged the Armenian people to fight against the spread of Jehovah's Witnesses.

But Kharatian says that, so far, there has been no study in the society to show whether Witnesses are dangerous or not.

"The main reason for the society's negative attitude towards sects is that they proselytize aggressively in the streets and even disturb people in their homes," says Vardan Khachatryan, professor in Yerevan State University's Theology Department.

Religious identity in Armenia has been associated traditionally with national identity. "History shows that those Armenians, who had rejected Armenian Apostolic Church either willingly or by force, had eventually lost their national roots from the

next or second generation," Father Arshak says.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has itself been blamed for the proliferation of "sects", because, some argue, it does not promote Christian education and upbringing the way it should.

"We hear that allegation quite often," Father Arshak said. "Recently, the press had accused the Holy See of not taking active steps to prevent the activities of various sects in Armenia. I can say that there is really a need to make the Armenian Apostolic Church more active. Our church has very limited resources, we have only 160 clergymen in the whole of Armenia, we have very few operating churches. Thirteen years of independence is a very short time to restore our activities after 70 years of inaction."

## Jehovah's Witnesses: firm believers in the face of persecution

■ **MHER ARSHAKIAN**

SEDRAK Marutovich Ghazarian is an atheist. But every week the 75-year-old former engineer attends the Jehovah's Witnesses' rallies, and every Friday he invites two Jehovah's Witnesses – husband and wife Gagik and Sonya -- into his house to study the Watchtower magazine.

The pensioner welcomes us, limping and smiling broadly. The old men of the Hunan Avetisian street building are playing backgammon in the yard. "We were playing backgammon at the moment when the barbecue was delayed", Sedrak Marutovich says.

He comments on Armenian Apostolic Church, "There is nothing there to believe in".

He opens "Get Closer to Jehovah". "Whose name is Jehovah?" Gagik asks Sedrak Ghazarian. "It is the name of Father, God, don't you understand?" Sedrak Marutovich replies.

Sonya explains: "Jesus means Jehovah is our salvation".

"It happens this way as well? I did not know", Sedrak Marutovich replies.

How did the Jehovah's Witnesses find him? It turned out that his wife, Hripsimeh, was a member of this organisation. She died in January 2002 from heart attack. Gagik

recollects that Sedrak Marutovich's sick wife was baptized as a Jehovah Witness in the tub of his apartment bathroom.

At present Sedrak Marutovich, in his words, assesses Jehovahs highly - not to steal, not to kill, not to lie.

"Do you really want to become Jehovah's Witness?" he is asked. "Unfortunately I do not want," he answers. As he states, obligatory faith is not to his liking. But it is a different sort of "dislike", dissimilar to most other cases.

"Ordinary people do not like us, but the girls prefer our boys", says one of the "old residents" of the organization, Sonya. Why? "They

are more virtuous", Gagik says.

Sedrak Marutovich has his reason for studying the Bible. "I was dismissed from work, I have to do something, don't I?"

There are about 500 Jehovah's Witnesses established a sort of kinship among themselves in Kapan, which, according to them, is stronger than blood ties. Lianna Sardarian is harassed by her husband for being a Jehovah's Witness. She refuses to go to the birthday parties of her relatives. "The holidays that are against the Bible - human birthday, Christmas, Easter - are not attended by us", she explains. She works as a teacher in Kapan college. After

reading the Bible, she has a difficulty in reading other literature. "After reading Bulgakov's Master and Margarita I was horrified and threw this book away altogether", the teacher says. Prior to her work at the college, Lianna was expelled from a school for being a Jehovah's Witness.

Taxi driver Albert Davtian does not take seriously people's attitude to Jehovah's Witnesses. "They show disrespect not to Kapan resident Abo but Jehovah himself", he says. Albert fought in the Artsakh war, during which his wife and son turned to Jehovah. When Albert came home on leave, he was urged to join.

The Karabakh war participant's answer was short: "Get out of here!". Later returning to the battlefield, he prayed to Jehovah to survive in the trenches. "I felt Jehovah's assistance during those battles", Albert says.

Karen Mkrтчian, 36, was baptized as a Jehovah's Witness in 1994 in Zaporozhye, Ukraine. He often visits families. "We continue the work of Christ", Karen clarifies. Several times he visited an apartment with a Jehovah woman where they talked with a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. On a recent visit, the door was opened by the male head of the family.

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### Eyewitness

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# Insulted, but unbowed

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“Get out”, the husband tells them before they can utter a word. Karen’s wife is also a Jehovah’s Witness, a baptized preacher. Karen has a son as well. “My son is in the sixth grade, and he is not yet baptized”, Karen says.

Visiting apartments is one of the promotional undertakings of this religious organisation. Last week they visited the Harutyunians. Only one woman, Elena, was in. “Don’t you want to live a better life in the future, ma’am? The young Jehovah said at once. “I am living for today”, was Elena’s answer. “Don’t you want to be happy in the Paradise”, the young man kept asking. “I am not happy even in this world”, Elena says, asking them not to tell her fairytales.

Nevertheless, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not get discouraged. They were never treated adequately anyway. Arthur is 15. His father was killed in the Artsakh war. Four years ago, his teacher called him to the blackboard and urged his classmates to taunt him for being a Jehovah’s Witness. It was only last year that Arthur managed to change school. On Saturday, May 8, he and his brother attended a rally where they listened to the assistant preacher Frunz Arakelian’s “public speech” on the topic “Let’s act honestly in all times”. Frunz Arakelian asks, “Whom would we like to resemble with all our hearts. Certainly Father Jehovah, the thought of resembling Father Jehovah will make us be honest”, he says.

A similar lecture takes place a few days ago in one of Shahumian street apartments owned by a local wealthy member of the organisation, Haykaram Avetisian. Coincidentally, the priest of the city’s

Saint Mesrop Mashtots Church Father Sahak Martirosian lives in this building. People say he insults Jehovah’s Witnesses publicly and even initiates criminal proceedings against them. Father Sahak considers this to be libel and exaggeration, but adds: “I would rather prefer an atheist than a sectarian in general”.

He views Jehovah’s Witnesses as “strayed folk”. He is even against reproaching the Witnesses, although he is convinced that “the sectarians are pimples on human body”.

Artashes Sadeghian is of the opinion that he was a “pimple” before becoming a Jehovah’s Witness. “In the early 1990s I was notorious. I drank, fought, used hashish -- my daily dosage of hash if weighed was over 300 grams!”

Other Witnesses reminisce about those years when they hid themselves upon seeing Artashes in the street. Artashes says that he got familiar with the Bible during the military service.

Father Sahak has no doubt that by becoming Jehovah’s Witnesses, people generally solve a social problem. The Witnesses don’t comment on this. They just say: “We extend a helping hand to one another”.

At present, Jehovah’s Witnesses are not persecuted in Kapan, they can be met in the city streets just like to the representatives of other active religious organisations – Seventh Day Adventists, Adherents of Holy Saturday, Christians of Gospel Faith”. Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kapan are essentially an organisation victorious over the state, since despite harassment, they remain resistant believers.

■ *Mher Arshakian is a reporter for the Ayb-Fe newspaper*



Jehovah’s Witnesses of all ages attend a service in Yerevan last week

Pictures: German Avakian

## “People have the wrong idea about our organisation”

“Anna” is 35, married, a mother of four and a Jehovah’s Witness. Her husband, however is not. Initially suspicious of the faith, she tells **Hasmik Hovhannisyan** about why she converted and what her faith means to her.

“One day, I started looking through the book a witness had given me. The book was like this – a thought and a related chapter and verse from the Bible. The book seemed to be a guide as to where in the Bible can one find answers to specific questions. There were things about the world structure, God’s purpose for us and the world. I started reading the Bible with that book. The book raised questions that I always used to wonder about, and indeed, I would find the answers to all those questions in the Bible. This is how I started studying their literature. Then, one day, I expressed a desire to participate in one of their meetings.”

“I finally decided to take a new look at my life and

to start living in accordance with the Bible’s principles. I started attending their meetings regularly. I would feel God’s presence more strongly after each of these meetings. I would get filled up with unimaginable happiness, I would feel extremely grateful to Jehovah the God that created me, that gave me all this, guided me in order for me to understand this science, to understand him.

“People have the wrong idea about our organisation. Organisations that do not accept us often distort facts about Jehovah’s Witnesses, ascribing all possible worldly sins to us. We preach the truth, and people are afraid of the truth. We are guided by the Bible. The Bible is like bread. Whatever we eat, we eat it with bread. The Bible is our spiritual food.”

### Anna’s Husband

“I have always been indifferent to religion and faith. It is true that I have attended church every once in a while since I was a child, I am baptized, but, in reality, I am not concerned with questions like that in real life.

“In the beginning, when my wife started going to that organisation, I had some reservations. I was concerned with the fact that Jehovah’s Witnesses were referred to as a sect. I didn’t like that name, because I knew that sects are those who deviate from the teaching of the Bible.

“I started studying that faith and their ideas in a logical way. I met a few Witnesses that used to come to our house. They were all polite, friendly people. I was particularly impressed with their patience and tolerance.

“The more I studied, the more I would get convinced that the rumours about Jehovah’s Witnesses are ungrounded. The changes that had taken place in my family members were proof of that. Happiness and peace grew stronger day by day in my home. I fell in love with my wife all over again.”

“I would love to become a Jehovah’s Witness myself, but I first need to make changes in my life. For example, I have to give up smoking, because Jehovah’s Witnesses keep their bodies clean from all kinds of impurities, including tobacco.”

“Now I am trying really hard to overcome that unhealthy habit.”

## Waiting for a thaw in frosty relations

Gyumri’s Baptists tread a fine line in dealing with each other, and the established church

### ■ AGHASI ABRAHAMYAN

THE HISTORY of the Evangelic-Baptist church in Gyumri goes as far back as the 1920s, when the two coexisted. Virtually identical in their mission (the key difference being that Baptists profess the dogma of the “conscious baptizing”), in 1922 these two churches were unified, accepting the condition of the Baptists that only the baptised can be members of the church. The number of baptised members in Shirak region is 427, plus about 600 children and youngsters.

The pastor of Gyumri Armenian Evangelic-Baptist church Ruben Pahlevanian says that the relations with the Armenian Apostolic Church are normal. “We do not have contradictions in ideology, we accept Nikian (apostolic) symbolism, the Holy Trinity, believe in Jesus Christ’s resurrection and Second Advent. We accept the cross as a symbol of Christ’s salvation mission, not as an object for worship; holy offerings – as an act of goodwill, not sacrifice. If there is any coolness in the relations with the Mother Church, this has to do with specific individuals.”

The Gyumri Evangelic-Baptist Church, was officially registered as far back as 1926, it was re-registered in 1965. Re-registration also occurred in 1992 and 2000 according to Armenian law. “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations”. They have two church buildings, and there are



Evangelical movements are proving popular throughout the country

missions in Artic, Maralik, Marashen, Kamo, Amasiya, Harich, Pempashen and Haykavan.

The Armenian Evangelical Association of America visited the country after the 1988 earthquake as a helping hand of Diaspora Armenian evangelical churches, to help all the needy irrespective of their creed. Pahlevanian says that one of the main directions of his church’s activity is the improvement of relations between Christian churches.

“If there is sympathy, there is also cooperation”, the Reverend says. “We avoid giving any assessment about the activity of any church”.

The Armenian Evangelic-Baptist church helps its needy countrymen, including parentless children. Any person living abroad – Armenian or any other – sponsors a local resident. There are about

100 families benefiting from this assistance, as well as two charity canteens for 150 elderly and numerous children’s groups.

The Reverend is unhappy with the absence of direct contact with the Evangelical church of the city’s Austrian Quarter. “It is a pity, we would be considered more Christian if the churches of the same creed did not pay attention to the small differences of purely formal worship and cooperated more closely”, he says.

The Austrian quarter of Gyumri was built with the funds of the Austrian government and the Armenian community of this country, after the 1988 earthquake. By the benefactor’s demand, the quarter was populated by homeless families of those who were disabled in the disaster. The first of the Evangelical church loyal members to

have stepped into the quarter was American-Armenian Levon Yerakian, whose son-in-law, Toros Piliposian, heads the Austrian quarter’s Evangelical Church. He transformed his apartment into a social centre for adherents. A church is built adjacent to the house where 100 little children, 25 young boys and girls, 40-50 adult members attend a Sunday school, and the church also funds social programmes.

Soul hunting is not a practice in Evangelical churches. “We have not knocked on any door and do not allow it. Everyone is free in his belief, obligation is against our creed”, Piliposian says.

Piliposian is the President of the quarter’s school council. He says the Armenian Apostolic Church is tolerant towards his church: but admits he was once invited for talks and was and warned not to preach against the cross and sacrifice.

“We preach for the crucified Christ, the cross without Christ has no value”, he says.

This problem, as Principal of School No 40 Anahit Papoyan informed us, caused certain discord in the school. For the present, relations are settled and the school’s Armenian language teacher, Marineh Vardanian, who is knowledgeable about the history of the Armenian church and gives religious lessons to grades 4 and 5, does not express any discontent.

■ *Aghasi Abrahamyan is editor-in-chief of the Kumayri weekly*

## Mormons: building on strong foundations

### ■ AGHASI ABRAHAMYAN

GYUMRI, Armenia’s second city, is home to a large Mormon community, numbering 165 worshippers, which became established during the construction of a new district funded by a wealthy American, John Hantsman.

It was the organiser of the Hantsman district construction work, Roy Stevens, and his wife, Carol, who first spread the word about the Church of the Latter Day Saints in 2000 ... and their message got through to many citizens.

Hrach Tonoyan, a 46 year old family textile worker, is the head of the Gyumri chapter. He recalls: “It was back then that I first heard about the Church of the Latter Day Saints. In an arts center, communion meetings were held on Sunday. We attended to find out what creed was professed by the participants. We acquired literature, and learnt about a constitution of their own.

“Both the creed and the constitution were to our liking, and our family, four of us, were baptized on June 17, 2000.

The faith’s creed – loyalty to Jesus, obedience with commandments – are rigorously observed by the baptized believers of the Gyumri church (Baptism takes place from the age of eight.)

In separate times, Tonoyan, as head of the branch – a position he attained in 2002 – can

provide food to the needy from the Yerevan branch, however this aid is not permanent so as not to encourage idleness and sloth. There are also cases when the church meets the medical needs of its members. Funds are raised through tithes (10% of income), and the sick and hungry are allotted hardship payments.

Tonoyan, joined by two American missionaries, elders Okin and Grifet – said that Christian rituals are conducted in the Mormon Church. “We do not enter homes”, the missionaries said.

“We have never been treated rudely but before introducing ourselves we have to necessarily state that we are not Jehovah’s Witnesses”, Okin and Grifet, who have identification cards attached to the chest, say.

Mormons have a big problem with misconceptions about their faith. They say many people are not aware that polygamy has been rejected by the Church. The newly converted Mormon church members must abstain from alcohol and tobacco, and must lead a healthy way of life.

There are no obvious contacts with the Armenian Apostolic Church, they say, except for what they claim is “false information” disseminated by the Church about Mormonism. In contrast, ties with the relevant government bodies are quite close, certainly with the assistance of the Yerevan branch.





Amidst the devastation of the earthquake, thousands sought spiritual guidance and hope in the arms of numerous religious organisations

Picture: Ruben Mangasaryan

**I**MMEDIATELY after the earthquake of 1988, the Hare Krishna movement descended on the devastated Spitak region.

An Eastern faith with Hindu traditions, for a short time their young adherents accosted people in what remained of Spitak's streets, trying to convince them to buy expensive, beautifully bound religious books. Largely unsuccessful, they disappeared from Spitak as suddenly as they appeared.

The Head of "Collaboration for Democracy" NGO, Stepan Danielian, says that the Hare Krishna movement in Armenia had its proponents as far back as in Soviet times. "Today only a few members of their community stay", Danielian says.

After the earthquake, in Armenia as a whole and especially at the epicenter in the Spitak region, any number of social, mental, emotional and spiritual fervent activities were launched boosting revival of spiritual life. Combined with the problems of nascent independence, the region became a fertile ground for various religious groups.

Armenia at the time faced a spiritual vacuum. For more than 70 years, the people, brought up in the spirit of atheism, were deprived of spiritual communication -- there was not a single active church in the whole Spitak region. After the fall of Communism, therefore, both the Armenian Apostolic Church and other religious movements arrived on the scene simultaneously.

In Spitak, the consequences of human and material losses were mixed together; hopelessness, emotional breakdown, sorrow and mourning became the defining values of human existence. The grief over lost relatives made people vulnerable to the overtures of many movements: Armenian Evangelists, Hare Krishnas, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Seventh Day Adventists, the New Brotherhood Church and Jehovah's Witnesses were as active in the region as the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The pastor of Spitak Saint Resurrection Church, Father Avetik Soghomonian, is still aggrieved over this situation. Without true apostolic precepts, he insists, people live by a wrong creed; a way of life alien to the Armenian people. They fell a victim to the foreign sponsors us-

ing the Armenian people's impoverished social conditions for their own interests, he insists.

"Sectarrians are secluded from society, from our Apostolic church. They are isolated, become followers of suspect ideology. They destroy the family, disrupt the unity of Christ's community. They disorient the people about the national church, rise against the state and authorities. They do not celebrate any of church or state holidays. They do not participate in rituals, have no national mentality, are self-interested. No national value interests them", Father Avetik states.

Father Soghomonian isn't critical of all these movements: the Armenian Evangelists, he says, represent a Christian protestant movement that consider themselves a branch of the mother church. Starting from 1988, they took under their control a large number of the population. Alongside spiritual activity, they implemented charity programmes. Through their investments, a school was built in Spitak, a children's dental center opened and repair works were under-

taken. They still continue their activity in the region, alongside educational and health programmes. There are no obstacles for their activity which is unimpeded and free.

But the Armenian Apostolic Church

*"Your brain seems to be in a sort of shackle, and you start thinking only about one thing - salvation"*

views the other religious movements as sects and considers them dangerous to the country. The Church qualifies the Jehovah's Witnesses as the most dangerous, having penetrated Armenia already in 1975.

There are only three baptized Jehovah's Witnesses in Spitak. All wish to

remain anonymous. One, A. A., a baptized Jehovah's Witness, returned to the Armenian Apostolic Church. He recalls: "Those joining this sect are mostly highly educated persons. In Armenia the center is in Yerevan. I was baptized there. I was dressed in long white clothes and plunged in the water seized by the hair. It was very interesting."

Adherents may attend sermons for years, and read all the distributed literature, but can still fail to reach the level of "baptized", A.A. says. You need to read a lot: there is practically no time left for private life, and you forget your circle of friends and your relatives, according to A. A.

"Your brain seems to be in a sort of shackle, and you start thinking only about one thing - salvation that is possible only through the way mentioned by them. It was very depressing. And in the course of five years I have not found the answers to the questions troubling my soul, my soul did not find peace, it grew even more restless. Later starting from 1998, I did not attend the sect for three years, did not

# AFTERSHOCK

Armenia's devastating earthquake in 1988 provided fertile ground for a number of religious organisations seeking new members. **Fahrad Apujanian** reports from Spitak

read at home as well. I got indifferent to everything", he says.

S. E. and E. H. are practicing Jehovah's Witnesses and are neighbours. S. E. lost her mother in early childhood and was raised by her stepmother. She married but soon lost her husband, and had to live in her father's house where, to put it mildly, a highly unpleasant atmosphere reigned and she was exposed to her father's drunken violence and abuses. She married a second time and is now bringing up her three children in poverty. S.E.'s "house" is little more than a dilapidated hut. When I visited her "house", the young woman was deeply immersed in reading the "Watchtower" -- the Witness's journal -- while the children huddled together in a corner. There was an imprint of indifference on everything.

The other two Witnesses in the region share S. E.'s tragic story. E. H. is beautiful and charming. Like her neighbour S. E., she, too, found herself in an extraordinary situation: her husband was convicted of murder and imprisoned.

L. P. is a divorced mother of two. Her brother committed suicide under vague circumstances. One of her children fell in with drug addicts, and has been missing for more than 10 years.

Father Avetik claims that adherents of what he views as sects are suffering a form of mental disorder. "They do not have leaders from the past, they act themselves as preachers of the truth, and do not have eyewitnesses' evidence that would pass on the truth to them. There is logical blindness in all of this, they do everything blindly. They consider themselves the saved and the rest -- strayed. They do not respect the Church, the cross, priests, traditions, the past, the tombs", he says.

The head of Spitak municipality, Vahe Ghochikian, says that everyone is free to choose any religious belief. "But that does not mean however that we protect the teachings diverted from the true religion. We have to fight not against the sect members but the teachings of the sects", he says.

Sixteen years have passed since the earthquake. Spitak still lives with its problems, but as it rebuilds it looks towards a better future.

■ *Fahrad Apujanian is the editor-in-chief of "Lusardzak" newspaper*

## PAST TENSE: EXPERIENCES IN THE SOVIET UNION

**"The Pentecostal movement has existed in the Spitak region since Soviet times. In the mid-1980s I was a member of the Spitak regional committee of the communist party and coordinated antireligious activity or, as it was called at the time, "was engaged in atheist education of the proletariat".**

**On the suggestion of the KGB, I participated in "a raid" on a group at the moment of their conducting a church ritual -- they were simply reading the "Gospel" in a choir.**

**This was viewed as a genuine emergency in those times. This story is 20 years' old, but today I come across many group members who are "Pentecostals with a long record". There is nothing strange or extraordinary about them, they are just ordinary people with daily concerns. They are sometimes visited by the preachers from Vanadzor, Gyumri, Alaverdi. The number of adherents within the Pentecostal movement surpasses 2000."**  
*Fahrad Apujanian*



# OTHER WORLDS

The mountains are home to two very different faiths that have found refuge and acceptance away from society at large. **Hamlet Khachatrian** profiles the Yezidis, while **Manvel Mikoyan** spent time with the Molokans

THE BIGGEST minority group in Armenia, the Yezidi Kurds, live in the remote mountains of Aragatsotn, north-west of Yerevan.

They lead a hard life – shepherding is the dominant work – and, despite religious differences, have long been accepted by the Armenian community at large.

The immigration of Yezidis started in the first half of 19th century. The second, the biggest inflow, occurred in 1915-20, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Some of their villages are populated by Yezidis only, but there are also villages with mixed population.

Their national identity is a complex question, not yet answered to any satisfaction. Within Armenia, the Yezidis stress a different ethnic identity from Kurds as a whole, based on their idiosyncratic faith, which incorporates elements of sun-worship, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Outside Armenia, many Yezidis claim Kurdish identity.

However, Thar Abasian, the former director of Avtona village school in Talin, who has a doctorate in history, insists Yezidis and Kurds are different peoples.

"It is a fact that we are completely unrelated to Kurds. We, Yezidis, are an Aryan nation and have always lived with

Armenians. We have survived massacres, and travelled a long way. Only in Armenia have we felt ourselves to be a nation. We had our culture and alphabet, our schools", Dr Abasian says.

Mraz Bsharian, the head of Gyalto Yezidi community in Talin, says: "History is not forgotten and never will be. No Yezidi can forget the losses we suffered during the Armenian Genocide. Turks massacred us, too, because we are not Muslims. And but for Armenian commander Andranik, Yezidi commander Jangir Aga and others, there would be just one Armenian and one Yezidi in the museum only."

The Yezidi communities are structured along religious and clan lines. Each community is governed by a sheikh: this "post" is inherited. The authority of the sheikh is recognised by all. Their only place of pilgrimage is the tomb of the founder of Yezidi ideology, Prophet Sheikh Adi, in the village of Lalesh, in the Mosul region of Iraq. Their sacred books, "Revelation" and "the Black Book", espouse Yezidi beliefs on nature, the creation of the world, the animal world, daily life, marriage and divine eternity.

Despite their acceptance and relations with the Armenian community, Yezidis' day to day life is a world apart. Their level of education is much lower than that of



Making their homes in the mountains, Yezidis make up Armenia's largest ethnic minority.

Picture: Ruben Mangasaryan

Armenians. As of 1989 – the most recent reliable figures – just 1.3% of Yezidis had been through higher education, and 20% of them had no secondary education. The situation has since deteriorated, particularly for the girls who get married at a very early age (13-14).

"I am greatly concerned because of the

life and in education system is in the past, but no substitution has been developed yet. This is also a point of concern for Yezidis. And we are concerned as well."

"Today the Yezidi minority does not have the state support", says Rostam Aloyan, the director of the Alagyaz secondary school in the Aragats area. In the absence

Tsaghkahovit, Norayr Hakobian, says: "While there are no Yezidis in our community, we have friendly relations with the neighbouring Yezidi communities."

"We have always been together, in joy or in sorrow, have always been supporting each other. Considering Armenia to be their homeland, they do their utmost for the stability and development of country. As always, during the Artsakh War, they were by our side, in the same trench. Many of them died", Hakobian says.

"Years have passed, but all the Yezidis and even Armenians have vivid memories of the [early 20th Century] Yezidi leader Usuh Bek", the head of the Shami-ram community (Ashtarak region), Mraz Usuhian says. He devoted his life to the establishment of the Armenian state, and was a member of the Military Council of the First Armenian Republic.

Since early 1990s for economic reasons many Yezidis left Armenia. However, Yezidis believe the emigration is temporary: they have no other motherland but Armenia.

■ *Hamlet Khachatrian is the editor-in-chief of Talini Ashkhar newspaper*

'We have survived massacres, and travelled a long way. Only in Armenia have we felt ourselves to be a nation'

fact that Armenia seems to have forgotten the minorities after the independence", says the head of Shenavan village (Aparan area) Andranik Karapetian. "It is understandable that the authorities today are more preoccupied with the economy, the Karabakh Conflict, but would the involvement of the main minority, the Yezidis, in the political decision-making do any harm? It is true the Soviet policy of involving minorities and ensuring their participation in the public

of this support very complicated processes evolve that do give grounds for anxiety. How can you not be concerned, when our ethnic identity is not recorded in the new Armenian passports? When authorities up to this day refrain from giving a practical solution to the issue of Yezidi-Kurdish separation, that is, there has been no definition given as to whether the two are different groups or not?"

The head of Armenian community of

## Molokans: a glimpse inside a closed society

Yakov Ivanovich Shubin, 76, considers Armenia his homeland. We talk in his courtyard – to be invited inside a Molokan home is highly unusual – sitting on mats brought from the cattle-shed. "If my grandfathers thought this way, why should I have a different view? We have lived here for so many years without even a single case of ethnic, religious discrimination."

Molokans are a spiritual Christian sect that emerged in Russia in the early 18th century. The name Molokan – from the Russian *moloko* for milk – derives from their belief in the Gospel "spiritual milk" – what they see as the true teaching of Jesus – as well as their custom of drinking milk on fast days. They have a different interpretation of the Bible, theology, and the commandments.

Exiled from Russia for their differences with the Orthodox Church, the first Molokan groups settled in Armenia's Sevan district in 1836 during the rule of Tsar Nikolai I. They later established the Fioletovo settlement in the Lori region in 1842, entered Tashir in 1846 and Lermontovo in 1847. They number about 5,000 in Armenia.

Molokanism was a religious means of protest against slavery and the Church. Social tensions gave birth to many unorthodox practices – priguns – mystical ecstatic cults

characterized by religious ecstasy, jumping, flying, trembling, etc, eschatologists (doommongers who awaited the end of the world) and chiliasts, who believed in the 1,000 years of God's kingdom on Earth.

In Soviet times, the Molokans did not accept their children joining the Communist Party youth movements. They viewed the Pioneer tie as a "red snake" and banned their children from wearing it.

The Lermontovo community numbers 960 residents, of which 770 are Molokans, 140 are Armenian and 50 are Yezidi. The Head of the community, Edik Chakhalian, views reconstruction of the village's dilapidated school as top priority.

The population here is engaged in farming and cattle breeding. They grow cabbage, turnip, potato and carrot. In the past they exported pickled vegetables to Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia, but at present their market is limited to Armenia.

According to Chakhalian, the Molokans pay all their taxes and the young men carry out their military service.

Shubin is the leader of the community's 50-strong *priguns* – another 100 are *priguns-maximists*, (an even more secluded sect, who refused to speak to us) while the rest are *postoyanniye*.



Yakov Ivanovich Shubin: 'Armenia is my homeland'

Picture: Emil Yavrian

He explained that one of the core differences from the Russian Orthodox Church is over holidays celebrated by the Orthodox Church but not mentioned in the Bible. He enumerated the holidays acceptable to them – including Christmas and Easter. Every Saturday sect members are required to bathe in order to participate in religious gatherings on Sunday.

But the reclusive Molokans cannot completely cut off modern influences. Shubin is upset about some young Molokans who marry outside the community (including marrying Armenians), and is concerned about alcoholism and other social problems (drinking alcohol

and smoking are prohibited by Molokans).

"Molokans became spoilt: there are a lot of drunkards, people are corrupted. Some have been banished from our sect".

Shubin has six children (three sons and three daughters). He notes: "My elder son is a normal person, but the younger one is a drunkard, he does not let me live in peace. I built a house on the outskirts of the village, married him off, he had four children. He started drinking, divorced his wife. Now my son lives with us. What can I do? I have to be tolerant; I cannot call the police, can I?"

We visited the house of the *pos-*

*toyanniye* leader, Ivan Ivanovich Tanaev, 77. It was pouring with rain, and he invited us indoors. He explained the difference between his order and the *priguns*, and with the Orthodox Church.

"We believe in the living and only saviour Jesus Christ: we are far from the cult of iron crosses and the Church", he said. "At the same time, we cannot prohibit our believers from visiting church. But young people seldom attend our gatherings".

In the village of Fioletovo, the only community that is almost exclusively Molokan, Ivan Zadorkin, 30, returns from his fields. He is not very satisfied with the Molokan

way of life. "We do not sell anything, we hardly meet our daily needs. There are eight in the family – five brothers and three sisters. All of us live by hard labour."

In Lermontovo and Fioletovo, no TV antennas are visible. Molokans, especially *prigun-maximists*, are prohibited from watching TV or listening to the radio.

"TV is secretly watched in young families", says Fioletovo's secondary school principal, Vanadzor resident Valeri Mirzabekian, who has worked in the village for 30 years.

Of 230 school children, three are Armenians. The building is repaired and in good condition. "The children do quite well in the first three grades", Mirzabekian said, "After becoming literate they attend school only intermittently until the eighth grade. This year's ninth grade has no pupils, and there are only five in the tenth grade. The seniors are frequently absent also during the farming season, helping their parents. The Armenian language, strange as it may seem, is a foreign language, like English, to Molokans. The boys study it in the military service, but the girls do not even have time for thinking of it."

The leader of Gugark Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Bishop Sepuh Chuljian, is tolerant, even respectful, towards the Molokans. They are pious, modest and hard-working. They keep themselves to themselves and, in contrast to the evangelical faiths emerging in Armenia, they do not try to take on new converts.

■ *Manvel Mikoyan is the editor-in-chief of Loru Marz*