

BY ANY MEANS: NON-EXCLUSIVELY CHRISTIAN ARMENIANNES

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By Garen Yegparian, [Asbarez](#), 29 December 2009

We were all raised to believe that "Armenians are Christians", which of course begs the question, "Are ALL Christians Armenians?" Logically, it would have to be so, but that's a fun little game of logic that can be played separately. 

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It's likely your response to the question in the first paragraph was "Of course not! Don't be silly!" But, what about the Catholic and Protestant Communities among us? I know of at least one circle in which the referents were "Hayeruh, gatogheegeneruh, yev Poghokaganneruh" (the Armenians, Catholics, and Protestants). That is, to be Armenian, you had to be Armenian Apostolic. So maybe it's not enough to be "Christian" to be Armenian, you have to be a certain KIND of Christian. But is even this enough? Do you have to go to church every week? Only at Easter & weddings? Does it count if a priest doesn't come and bless the bread, salt, and water (you wouldn't believe what it took to confirm my memory of this triplet) of your home? Where's the cut off?



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Of course these exclusionary lines tend to diminish us in number, though they may have had some utility in centuries past. Today, how many people, given the level of enlightenment humanity has achieved, take items of faith at face value? If someone has trouble stomaching the concept of the nature of Christ as defined by the Armenian Apostolic Church, does that exclude them from being Christian, ergo Armenian? What about agnostics and atheists?

We've built an Armenian identity to which Christianity has been made central. The flavor of what it

was to be Armenian has been so heavily overlain and intertwined with being Christian, that we have extreme difficulty even conceiving of segregating the two.

Obviously, our Christianity has cost us dearly as a consequence of Turkish governments, Ottoman and Republican, using religious antipathy to arouse hatred against us, leading to massacres and the Genocide. Yet that's hardly an argument for giving up something we have cherished for so long. But we're faced with a far more pressing national problem and an associated opportunity for some recuperation.

I would hope no one disagrees that for the purposes on national survival, numbers matter. We have lost the current-numerical-equivalent of millions of Armenians because of not only the Genocide or its precedent massacres, but also due to emigration (and ultimate assimilation into host country cultures, the best example being Poland), and forced-conversion to Islam and its attendant de-Armenianization (and subsequent Turkification, Kurdification, and limbo-ification of the converts' descendants).

With the ever so painfully slow process of Turkey's cultural, political, and ethical maturation, we have an opportunity to reclaim some of our lost, or at least semi-lost, compatriots. These come in five categories, to my mind, though some admittedly overlap: 1- cryptoArmenians-Christian, 2- cryptoArmenians-Moslem, 3- Hamshentzees, 4- Kurdified Armenians, 5- Turkified Armenians.

The first group, Christian crypto-Armenians, is easiest to address. We don't have the religion obstacle I've presented above. Many of these people have pretended to be Moslem, while maintaining Christian traditions in the secrecy (not just privacy) of their homes. Or, they have kept a very low profile. They have lived in our homeland. Over the decades, significant numbers leave Armenia and head to Turkey's "Armenian capital", Constantinople. Or they head directly to Europe. It's my understanding that there's a significant Sasoontzee (non-immediate post-Genocide arrival obviously) community in Holland. With just a little bit of an opening, they would rejoin our national existence.

The Moslem crypto-Armenians are a different circumstance. Here, we have at least two obstacles. One is what I implicitly described above— our collective hesitancy to conceive of an Armenian as anything but a Christian. The other is this group's likely inability to easily fit in with our predominantly Christian culture. Yet they are also shunned by the "real" Moslems, and marry largely only among themselves and maintain their awareness of being Armenian, or at least not being Turkish or Kurdish.

The Hamshentzees are a large population of Islamicized Armenians who inhabit the Black Sea coast area, both in Turkish-occupied Armenia and the Caucasus. In a very quick internet search, I found no population numbers. But in the past, I've seen estimates in the multiple hundreds of thousands. These compatriots have maintained their language (one of the many Western Armenian sub-dialects that used to exist) and awareness of being Armenian, or at least Hamshentzee as different from their Turkish and other neighbors, for two centuries, this despite their conversion away from

Christianity. This group is similar in its challenges to the second. However, there has been some movement over the last few years in reestablishing our sundered connection.

Kurdified Armenians are a very interesting group. Given the still somewhat tribal nature of Kurdish society, clan memory has persisted and some openly remember that their ancestors were Armenians. Others simply continue ancestral traditions which mark them as Armenian— going to Armenian (Christian) shrines, etching a cross in dough before baking it as bread, or carrying tribal names such as Hyedoonli (Armenian home) or Mamgon (Mamigonian). These too are our long-lost cousins. Should we not reintegrate? Here, besides the religious factors, exists a nationality, identity obstacle. But if we can make returning to their roots appealing, we all win.

Turkified Armenians, I would break down into two groups, those who by geography or lineage can be identified as originally being Armenian, and still living in our homeland and those who are just discovering and/or revealing one or more Armenian ancestors, usually Genocide survivors, who got adopted by Turkish families or married and became “Turks” but passed or are now passing on the knowledge of their true nationality to their progeny. This pair of groups, like the Kurds, would be the most difficult to reconnect with. They have their own awareness as Turks now. And, to a large extent, unfortunately, being Turkish and being Armenian are still antithetical propositions. There is an ingrained disdain and hatred towards us coming from the Turkish side that beggars imagination particularly since we're not the ones who have wronged them and there has been precious little contact between us for three generations now. Nevertheless, particularly the group who's “coming out” with revelations of Armenian grandparents deserves an extended hand, particularly in the interest of making progress towards achievement of our national goals.

The Turkish and Kurdish examples above also prompt the issue/question of what I like to call “historical justice”. The de-Armenianization of their ancestors was/is a great loss to the Armenian nation. It was coerced, not voluntary. How is this to be corrected? Obviously, you can't force someone to “become” a different nationality. Yet the injustice is perpetuated down the generations impacting the present via the consequent distorted demography of our homeland.

Returning to the theme of reintegration and reconnection with these forcibly alienated branches of our family, no doubt you're wondering, “How can people who have gone down such a different socio-religio-historic path be integrated into our nation?” Habits, culture, language, self-identification, experience of Genocide, etc. are all different. No doubt but that this will be an extremely difficult and lengthy, multigenerational process closely intertwined with Turkey's evolution into a truly modern, democratic, non-hate-based state.

But let me close with an example of the commonalities that can help us bridge the chasms created among Armenians as a result of Turkish racism. Since a huge area of difference, and the theme of this article, is religious, take this example. I remember vividly, from a lecture about Middle Eastern rugs I attended while in college, the notion of the “sky hole”. This is something the ancient

Mesopotamians noticed when charting the course of the stars. They ended up with concentric circles filling in their maps of the night sky... except, there was a gap, a hole, in the middle. This prompted the notion of the sky hole, the access way to the heavens and figures into the design of rugs that depict a center. It also looks to me a lot like the domes on churches and mosques. So here we have something that not only is common to both Christianity and Islam, but predates both and is native to our Middle Eastern forebears.

I have no doubt that many more such, and even more life-relevant, commonalities exist, can become known and shared, and can pave the way to restoring a huge chunk of our nation currently lost to us. But, we have to get over ourselves and our "Armenian-Christian, period" hang-up. Let's do it.

