FROM OPPRESSED TO OPPRESSOR?

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Category: Opinions

Avedis Kevorkian, Philadelphia, PA, 27 February 2011

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There was a report from Armenia, just recently, that requires us to talk honestly–or, at least, raise some questions about a subject that is dear to every Armenian: the Church.

It seems that the Armenian Church is party to the persecution of very minority sects–the Pentecostals and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
Perhaps it is time to formulate another Kevorkian’s Law: “The larger the majority, the greater it fears a minority however small.”

We seem to see it everywhere in the Middle East. The larger the Muslim majority, the more it oppresses the non-Muslim. We see it in Turkey which is, by recent accounts, ninety-nine-percent Muslim, and yet it persecutes in one way or other its Christian and Jewish minorities. There are scores of other examples, so let us not be diverted from our original direction.

The Armenians have been persecuted (supply your own harsher verb, if you wish) for its Christianity almost as soon as they converted 1700 years ago. One would suppose, therefore, that when the Armenians finally achieved independence and formed their own state, the Armenians would be the most tolerant of people–“We have suffered for our belief throughout the centuries, let us now be generous in our view of others.”

But, it appears not.

A report by Forum 18–a news organization devoted to religious matters–says that a Pentecostal pastor faces criminal charges because he tried to stop an Armenian television crew from filming. without permission, on the private property where his group meets; it doesn’t have a church building. The journalists “did not seek permission to enter the property, refused to leave when asked to do so, and were filming a report hostile to the church,” the report says.

This is not the first time Armenian media have been involved in encouraging "intolerance of religious minorities," according to Forum 18.

The incident followed an earlier report that a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses had murdered his parents. That report was challenged by the Witnesses, saying that neither the parents nor the accused son were members or ever attend a Meeting. That didn't matter to the Armenian media, which continued to repeat (and embellish upon) the original report.

The false charge, however, apparently gave the Armenian media another excuse to belabor the minority sects.

The involvement of the Armenian Church?

Two priests led the television crew to the private home where the Pentecostals held services. There were no services going on at the time. In fact, the owners of the property tried to prevent the television crew from entering the property, but the crew even went upstairs to continue filming. When the pastor arrived, he tried to prevent the filming, covered the lens of the camera with his hand and, he claims, "gently tried to get the cameraman to leave."

Before the incident with the Pentecostals, the two priests had taken the crew to where the murder had taken place and, after the Pentecostal incident, the two priests went to the site of the Armenian Church "to give an interview alleging that such 'sects' teach people to kill their parents."

The charge against the Pentecostal pastor is that he is in violation of Article 164 of the Criminal Code which makes it illegal to prevent a journalist from doing his job–"Obstructing the lawful professional activities of a journalist." What is ironic, a spokesman for the Yerevan Press Club said, was that the "prosecutors are not usually so quick to defend journalists and start criminal proceedings" when the media is the aggrieved party.

The pastor told Forum 18 that the police had refused to answer his question, when he asked what was "lawful" about the journalists' activities.

Asked whether he thinks the journalists or the priests initiated the hostile coverage, the Pentecostal pastor laughed. "It's impossible to be certain but, as they say, all roads lead to Rome."

"In the footage of the news the same priests and a government official were discussing the 'erosive deeds of *aghandavorner* .' It is therefore not difficult to conclude who was behind this incident and who provided the means to accomplish it." the pastor is quoted as stating.

Those who read the reports from Forum 18, as I do, know that the Armenian Church as well as the Armenian media are, and have been, hostile to the minority sects.

Armenia's present "Religion Law" has been subject to criticism by a Commission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE) which have called for its re-drafting.

All of which raises the question why Armenia, of all nations (and, Yes, the Church, too), should be hostile to other religions. Incidentally, Article 226 of the Criminal code makes it illegal to incite "national, racial or religious hatred." (No comment.)

It has always been my unstudied belief that when majorities are against minorities it is because the majority really isn't sure of itself, isn't confident in its status, has misgivings about itself and, thus, tries to stifle other views–"We can't defeat them with arguments, so let us prevent them from existing." The most powerful person, the most powerful organization is the one that permits–if not outright encourages–criticism.

I tremble at the thought that after centuries of persecution, the Armenian Church has survived only to join the not-sure-of-itself majorities who deny others the right to their own views and, in this case, their own approach to religion.

Or, is it the nature of religion itself that says "Mine is the only right path and it is my duty to lead you on that one true path" In effect, "My god is better than your god, and if you don't believe it, I will kill you to prove it."

Haven't we Armenians heard that often enough to want to be in the forefront of tolerance to all?