OF MINARETS AND MASSACRES

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By Carlin Romano, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 8 December, 2009

Carlin Romano is a critic-at-large of The Chronicle of Higher Education. He was in 2009 a general assignment reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer. In 2006, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in criticism, cited for "bringing new vitality to the classic essay across a formidable array of topics." He worked for many years as a book critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer. He has taught courses in media theory at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. At Bennington College he taught philosophy and was involved in a controversy there,and has lectured at other colleges. - Wikipedia

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The surprise Swiss vote last month to ban new minarets triggered the expected gnashing of teeth from those who believe Islam, the least tolerant of faiths when administered by autocrats and absolute monarchs, should not only be tolerated, but encouraged.

"It is an expression of intolerance, and I detest intolerance," commented French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. "I hope the Swiss will reverse this decision quickly." Commenters expressed similar thoughts on blogs—"Deeply ashamed to be Swiss," wrote Stephanie of Zurich—while voices sympathetic to the vote also quickly flooded the blogosphere. "Google 'Archdiocese of Mecca,'" one poster from Arizona acidly suggested.

Forgive me if I, too, do not weep that 57.5 percent of the Swiss, now hosts to a largely moderate Muslim population of Turks and former Yugoslavs, want to keep their country a quiet car among nations. I am still busy weeping for the Armenians, the first people in their corner of the world to officially adopt Christianity, almost eliminated from history due to regular massacres by the Muslim Turks among whom they lived for centuries.

Is bringing in the Armenian genocide too big a stretch when contemplating an electoral act about urban design rather than a state policy to implement ethnic cleansing? After all, the ban doesn't involve violence (so far), or suppression of religious worship (mosques remain OK). What is the appropriate context when reflecting on such a ban?

One little-pondered aspect of Web commentary on the news these days is how it has tremendously widened the spectrum of "context" in intellectual debate. Examine remarks on the minaret ban and it's easy to feel that no one short of a walking encyclopedia could properly tackle the subject.

What about the Crusades? The Inquisition? America's genocide of Native Americans? Church bells and belfries? Jordanian denial of citizenship to Jews? Nineteenth-century European colonialism in the Mideast? Islamic discrimination against gays, Jews, women, Christians? Serb persecution of Muslims in Bosnia? The Battles of Tours (732) and Lepanto (1571)? Wahhabi fundamentalism? Swiss collaboration with the Nazis? Swiss protection of Jews from the Nazis? It's enough to make one's head swim.

Perhaps we'll all need "Advanced Context" as a required liberal-arts course once the anarchy of cybercommentary takes over all intellectual debate. Allow me, then, in this amorphous, pluralistic environment, to return to the Armenians. Because it may well be that persuading people about appropriate context in large moral matters can't be done a priori, but only, so to speak, pragmatically—you juxtapose the context you think relevant with the issue at hand, and see whether it makes a difference to what anyone thinks. It may also be, in moral matters involving tolerance, that proper context can be sought by connecting it with a concrete, powerful notion in everyday life: apology.

It's an unfortunate modern truism that all genocides aren't equal in their impact. As Richard Bernstein noted recently in the *International Herald Tribune,* the just-finished trial of a key Khmer Rouge figure in Cambodia stirred little attention in America. Yet the morally impoverished reaction over decades to the Turkish government's massacre of up to 1.5 million Armenians that began in 1915—bookended by earlier and later massacres that killed hundreds of thousands—still stands apart because it once stood as the best-known genocide in modern history.

As early as 1895, *The New York Times* ran a report headlined, "Another Armenian Holocaust." In 1915, the *Times* ran multiple reports with such headlines as, "Wholesale Massacres of Armenians by Turks" and "800,000 Armenians Counted Destroyed." In 1918, Theodore Roosevelt declared that "the Armenian massacre was the greatest crime of the war, and failure to act against Turkey is to condone it." British Prime Minister David Lloyd George decried the Ottoman state as "this inhuman Empire." Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who coined the term "genocide" in helping to establish the United Nations Convention on that crime, first used the term in regard to the slaughter of the Armenians.

Thankfully, the quality and extent of scholarship about the Armenian genocide continues to grow,

though it still falls short of that on the Holocaust. Last spring saw the momentous, long-overdue publication by Peter Balakian, the American conscience of the Armenian genocide, of his great-uncle Grigoris Balakian's *Armenian Golgotha* (Alfred A. Knopf), an immensely moving, harrowing memoir that instantly takes its place as a classic alongside Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and Elie Wiesel's *Night.* This fall brought Michael Bobelian's resourcefully reported *Children of Armenia* (Simon & Schuster), which focuses not on the genocide itself but the disgraceful history of how the U.S. government, which once trumpeted Armenian demands for justice, has repeatedly sold Armenians down the river for cold-war solidarity, oil contracts, and strategic cooperation from Turkey.

Precisely because the Armenian genocide remains unfamiliar to many, it's necessary to at least sketch what happened.

In 1908, the original Young Turks, officially the Committee of Union and Progress, or CUP, began their takeover of the collapsing Ottoman Empire by forcing Sultan Abdul Hamid II to re-establish the empire's constitution, leading many to see the CUP as a reformist movement. The supporters of the Sultan, who himself saw Armenians as "degenerate" infidels, fought back, spurring massacres of Armenians in 1909, before the CUP deposed him. But as the Ottoman Empire lost most of its European territory during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, and Muslim refugees flooded into what is now Turkey, anti-Christian sentiment and Turkish nationalism both intensified.

In 1913, three extreme nationalists among CUP leaders who would become the architects of the Armenian genocide—Ismail Enver, Ahmed Jemal, and Mehmed Talaat—staged a coup that gave them complete government control. As World War I ensued, the CUP leaders, in a military alliance with Germany, increasingly bristled at the 1914 Armenian Reform Agreement that granted European powers the right to inspect the empire's treatment of Armenians.

In response, Talaat and his colleagues formulated a policy of eliminating the empire's Armenians once and for all—a policy postwar evidence showed he expressed directly to Germany's ambassador, Hans Freiherr von Wangenheim. In November 1914, the Sheik-Ul-Islam of Constantinople issued a jihad against Christians, and the looting of Armenian and Greek businesses in Western Turkey—a kind of Ionian Kristallnacht—began. In 1915, the CUP arranged for the release of some 30,000 criminals from Ottoman prisons to form *chetes* (mobile killing units) that would become the storm troopers of the genocide.

In April 1915, the deportations, executions, and rapes of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire began. On April 24, the day on which the Armenian genocide is memorialized worldwide, the CUP arrested some 250 of Constantinople's Armenian leaders and intellectuals, including Grigoris Balakian, and imprisoned them in the east—most would subsequently be killed. (When Lenin exiled many of Russia's leading intellectuals in 1922, he explicitly contrasted his generous decision in letting them live with how the Ottomans treated the Armenians.)

That year, 1915, saw the awful crescendo of the genocide as the CUP government forcibly deported Armenians eastward, tortured, massacred, and starved them on death marches, confiscated their property, killed almost all of the arrested 250 leaders, and resettled Muslim refugees on Armenian land. The United States knew all about it as Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, a hero of the era who eventually lost his position for trying to protect the Armenians, reported to Washington that "a campaign of race extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion."

By August, U.S. diplomats estimated that more than a million Armenians had been killed. In 1916, Interior Minister Talaat ordered the massacre of Armenian refugees still surviving in the desert town of Der Zor, which came to be known as the Auschwitz of the genocide. It is now believed the Turks slaughtered up to 400,000 Armenians there. Grigoris Balakian's memoir, like other accounts, achingly details the astonishing, grisly savagery of the killings—the beheadings, disembowelments, and mutilations to which Armenian men, women, and children were subjected. He also acknowledges the existence of righteous Turks who saved Armenians. Indeed, Taner Akçam, the brave Turkish historian whose *A Shameful Act* (Metropolitan Books, 2006) is a monument in this field, dedicated his book to Haji Halil, a courageous Turk who, at the risk of being hanged, protected eight members of an Armenian family by hiding them in his home.

After World War I ended, when the victorious Allies set out to dismember the Ottoman Empire, it looked for a few years as if Armenians, like Jews after World War II, might see justice done by international powers and institutions. The three chief perpetrators of the genocide—Enver, Jamal and Talaat—fled Constantinople for safety abroad. The American King-Crane Commission, and a fact-finding mission led by General James Harbord, confirmed the extermination. For a brief period in 1919-20, Ottoman courts, under pressure from the British, prosecuted some of the perpetrators and sentenced the CUP leaders to death in absentia. (Armenians seeking revenge assassinated Talaat and Jamal, who had escaped arrest, within the next few years.) The prosecutions produced hundreds of pages of evidence that remain key to showing the genocide issued from official government policy.

But then, as Bobelian relates, the Armenian struggle for justice derailed. President Wilson's push to expand the tiny 900-day Armenian Republic that emerged from World War I along borders that would be promised in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, collapsed when he suffered a stroke in 1919 and Mustapha Kemal (later "Atatürk") forcibly began the establishment of the future nation of Turkey. (Kemal recaptured lands meant for Armenia as European powers dithered.) In 1921, Turkey and the Soviet Union divided historic Armenian lands among themselves. A truncated Armenia survived only as Soviet Armenia. After Kemal drove the Greek Army out of Turkey in 1922, getting in one more Turkish massacre of Armenians and Greeks in Smyrna (now Izmir), the European powers signed the shameful 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, recognizing the Republic of Turkey as the successor to the Ottoman Empire without even mentioning Armenia.

Bobelian ably covers the sorry story from then to the present. Repeated efforts by Armenian activists

to enlist world powers in support of Armenian claims fell on deaf ears. After World War II, U.S. cold-war aims drove an almost 180-degree turn in U.S.-Armenian policy from Wilson's idealism, dictating a realpolitik alliance with Turkey against the Soviet Union. Bobelian thoroughly reports how Turkey has continued to obstruct Congressional resolutions and any serious U.S. or world action to hold it responsible for its virtual annihilation of the Armenians.

On the eve of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to the White House on December 7, the AP reported: "Breaking a campaign pledge, Obama has refrained from referring to the killings as genocide, a term widely viewed by genocide scholars as an accurate description." The same week, *The New York Times* reported that "Ottomania," or nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, is a hot new trend in Turkey.

Now let's talk again about voting against two new minarets in Switzerland.

The Swiss vote is a signal rather than an endorsement of intolerance. The Swiss, while facing only a sort of creeping, minor Islamicization of their society—requests for girls to be excused from swimming classes, or separate cemeteries of the sort Swiss Jews already have—are aware of the gargantuan intolerance shown by some Muslim societies against minority Christians. While they may not seriously fear such a consequence, many of them plainly want to draw a line in the sand and say: We will not become a Muslim-dominated society, and we will stop that process early.

Swiss Muslims may protest that it is unfair to burden them with the worst sins of fellow Muslims. But isn't that sociological fix the precise reason groups of believers historically split off from their brethren, forming sects or new religions? So long as Muslims anywhere keep their place in the House of Islam everywhere, they bear some responsibility for the actions of their fellow believers. That's particularly so when they don't powerfully denounce evil acts, or acknowledge the fear and hostility such acts evoke. That is where apology comes in.

The explosion of Net criticism of the Swiss for their vote recalls the last major moment in which the cry for Christian apology to Muslims rose up alongside the usual silence about the need for Muslim apology. That was Pope Benedict XVI's bizarre magical military tour of Turkey in 2006, protected by helicopters overhead and Turkish SWAT teams deployed on every flank in case someone decided to nail him on his first visit to a Muslim land. The pope, who has his own problems in regard to personal and institutional behavior in World War II, had, after all, said unkind things about Islam.

There he was in the NATO republic whose foremost motto remains: Those who forget the past sometimes don't want anyone to remember it, thank you very much. One might recall, in this regard, the remark famously attributed to Hitler, speaking to his generals, eight days before invading Poland in 1939: "Who, today, speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Benedict played along. He largely kept quiet about arriving in a land whose predecessor state, the Ottoman Empire—many of whose leaders became central figures in the Turkish Republic—committed the largest genocide in history against Christians. To this day, the Turks have never apologized, never offered a lira of reparation,

never returned stolen property or land. Turkish newspapers, astonishingly, kept asking whether the pope would offer yet another, fuller apology for his remarks on Islam. News reports from elsewhere kept mentioning that Turkey was "99-percent Muslim." They didn't say why.

By contrast, how intolerant is it to deny a religion a minor aspect of its ritual behavior, as the Swiss are doing by banning minarets? How intolerant is it not to apologize? Whether we owe tolerance to the intolerant is one of the great logical challenges within ethical theory. Simply declaring that we do, as so many commenters on the minaret vote urge, fails to convince if one believes tolerance, like some other ethical duties, arises out of implicit or explicit social contract, and should be reciprocal.

I, for one, find that context, apology, and intolerance matter in the following way. If you steep yourself in the atrocities of the Armenian genocide, not to mention the many intolerances exhibited by majority-Muslim societies toward Christians, Jews, women, gays, and other non-Muslims, one's conclusion is not an absolutist moral judgment, but a decision on who owes a greater apology to whom, a decision on how to allocate one's moral energy.

The day that Turkey apologizes and pays reparations for the Armenian genocide, that Saudi Arabia permits the building of churches and synagogues, that the Arab world thinks the homeland principles it applies to the Arabs of Palestine also apply to the Armenians of Turkey—on that day, I will find time to commiserate with the generally kind and hard-working Muslims of Switzerland.

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