

# OUR MUSLIM BROTHERS

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By Dr. Henry Astarjian, The Armenian Weekly, 24 June 2011

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*and media outlets. A conference is scheduled in Yerevan in October about non-Apostolic Armenians, including converts to Islam. Scholars, politicians, activists and journalists are to take part in the discussions. Hamo Moskofian, regular contributor to Keghart, has frequently written about the Hamshens and Kurdified Armenians. Aliye Alice Alt, a Hamshen living in Germany, participated in the [Unity Symposium](#) in Montreal in March, sponsored by various local groups, including Keghart.com. Recently Vahram Aghajanian's article [Muslim Armenians Vital to Our Nation](#) highlighted a new dimension, leading to heated give-and-take on the web. We are grateful to Dr. Henry Astarjian for bringing to our attention his "Our Muslim Brothers" article which deals with the issue and asks pointed questions such as "Could we have true brothers who are Muslim? Are they not Armenians because they are not Christians, and Apostolic at that?" It was originally published in [The Armenian Weekly](#).-Editor*

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Even after 65 years I can almost feel it: the backhanded slap my father unleashed on me for expressing an opinion that was as sinful as condoning adultery. It hurt, and I carried its psychological scars until very recently. That was not the norm for my father's authority; I had the utmost freedom to talk to him and express diverse opinions contrary to his—but not this one. His was constructed by his Armenian nationalistic upbringing tainted with Ottoman norms, which had prevailed in the overall thinking of Cilician Armenians. Mine was not.

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My unorthodox expression came at a time when he was talking with his friend Aharone about Christianity, especially the Apostolic Church and Armenian nationalism. For them, the true Armenian was Christian and belonged to none other than the Armenian Apostolic Church. Catholics and Protestants were a sort of Armenians, their ethnicity somewhat diluted by their religious, spiritual allegiance to Rome, and that of Evangelicals to America, not Etchmiadzin. Both sects, in their thinking, were people who had betrayed their Mother Church for money and position, and therefore also their nationality. In a sense, they were ranked as second-class Armenians.

Some 25 years later I heard the echoes of that conversation from Beirut, where Antranig Urfalian had published his memoirs. In it he had quoted my uncle, Dr. Krikor Astarjian, who as a keynote speaker of a graduation ceremony in Nor Marash High School in Beirut, had said, "A real Armenian is Apostolic." Seated in the front row listening eagerly were Armenian Catholic priests, bishops, and archbishops, Protestant pastors and preachers, who were all guests of their Apostolic counterparts.

"You," he declared, addressing the front row, "ought to be ashamed of yourselves for being tavanapokh (converts of faith). You have betrayed the Armenian nation by defecting to an alien religion. It is incumbent upon you, if you are true Armenians, to return to the Mother Sea." A deadly atmosphere, full of emotional diversity and upheaval, had ensued. Urfalian says he remedied the faux-pas by taking control of the microphone and saving the proceedings.

My father and Aharone had some anecdotes to prove their point: In the pre-genocide era, when Armenian fedayees, organized by Armenian Revolutionary Federation, bore arms to defend their villages, their families, and their property, the non-Apostolic Armenian churches erroneously believed that they were exempt from the Ottoman plans and actions against the Armenians, because they enjoyed the protection of America and the Vatican. So, based on this, their support for the fedayees was weak, to say the least.

They were not alone in this delusion. Some Apostolic clergy believed that the cause of the Turkish atrocities had been the Armenian fedayees, who had provoked the government with their armed attacks. Some Apostolic clergy who held this view even turned in some fedayees to the Ottoman authorities in lieu of protection.

All their calculations were wrong. With Ottoman-Turkish planning and implementation, the Turks and the Kurdish tribes committed the Armenian Genocide, and they did not discriminate between Apostolic, Catholic, or Protestant Armenians. They implemented the plan regardless of faith: They were Armenians, and that was enough to be slaughtered.

Today's argument is an extension of the one that earned me a backhanded slap some six decades ago. The issue is resurrected by the plans to settle a few dozen Muslim-Armenian families in Karabagh; these are the Hamshens of Central Asia. Armenian Muslims! The social impact of this on Karabagh Armenians and, by extension, the rest of the Armenians of the world is speculative. There are over 400,000 Hamshen who live in the Trabzon area and Georgia. This is a sizable population, larger than the population of Artsakh, who speak modified Armenian, consider themselves Armenians, and demand recognition as such. (see Alice Aliye Alt's Hamshen Armenians in the Mirror of History).

Obviously this new ethnic situation does not sit well with the chauvinist Turkish government who has done everything to evade the mandates of the Lausanne Treaty, to which it is a signatory. They have already denied the Greeks', Armenians', Assyrians', and other minorities' rights proscribed by this treaty. The Hamshens' rise in ethnicity awareness is another problem for the Turkish government to deal with.

Recently Ismet Shahin, one prominent Hamshen-Armenian in the Istanbul political world, decided to form a new political party after being ostracized by the Turkish political establishment. Similarly the political establishment denied seven Turkish-Armenian politicians the opportunity to run for parliamentary elections on June 12.

A similar subject begging development is the issue of some 700,000 or more Turkish-Armenians who are descendants of those forcefully converted to Islam during the genocide of 1915. These people should have the full right to openly claim their Armenian ethnic origin, and to choose the religion they wish. It is incumbent upon all Armenian political parties and entities, especially the ARF World Council, which is scheduled to convene shortly, to raise awareness on this vital issue and coin a strategy for action. The church hierarchies of the four major Apostolic Seas have to take the initiative in this matter, and bring their flock home.

This whole problem raises vital questions, which the Armenian intelligentsia has to address with an open mind: Is it mandatory for an Armenian to be a Christian, and an Apostolic at that? Can an ethnic Armenian be a Zoroastrian? Can s/he be a Muslim? Were the pre-Christian Armenian tribes Armenian? Were the Arshagunis, Bagratunis, Artashesians, Tigran the Great, and other Tigrans, Christians? Are Hamshens not Armenian because they are Muslim? Should Hamshens not be wholeheartedly welcomed to our national cradle because they are not Christians? Could we have true brothers who are Muslim? Are they not Armenians because they are not Christians, and Apostolic at that?

These questions earned me a backhanded slap when my father, with Aharone, and later my Uncle Krikor, insisted that Apostolic Christianity defined one's Armenian-ness and that a true Armenian was Christian Apostolic.

After reading this column, a lot of people will wish that my father was alive now to teach me a lesson. So do I, albeit for different reasons.

