

PRAYERS AT AKHTAMAR AND IN ANI

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By Mark Gavoor, Glenview IL, 2 October 2010



Yesterday, October 1, 2010, the Armenian Internet media was abuzz with stories about some people praying in the ruins of church in the historic city of Ani just on the Turkish side of the Turkish-Armenian border. A few weeks ago on September 19, 2010 there was equal buzz regarding a religious service in another Armenian Church in Turkey; in this case on the island of Akhtamar in Lake Van. That's nice, people praying in a church.

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But this was not about praying in churches really. Both events were a mixture of politics, religion, emotion, and international relations.

The Akhtamar service was a Christian mass, an Armenian *badarak*. It was the first service in the renovated 10th century Surp Khatch church on the picturesque island. The Turkish government renovated the church and made it a museum a few years ago. Armenians around the world were of mixed emotions. It was good to see the church restored and preserved but sad that it was not an active functional place of worship. The Armenian Catholicoses of Antelias and Etchmiadzin were invited to participate but decided not to because among other things there was no cross on the church. The service proceeded with the celebrants being from Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul. The Patriarchate is less free or less inclined to insist on a cross being displayed on the church. It was the first *badarak* held in the church in just over 95 years.

"We believe that it is very important gesture towards freedom of faith," the provincial governor, Munir Karaoglu, told the BBC. "Also we believe that it is important to eradicate the prejudices between the Turkish and Armenian people. It could also help improve relations Turkey and Armenia." [BBC](#)

In Ani, it was not a badarak or any kind of Christian service. In this case, the service was one of the ritual prayers Moselms are obligated to offer five times per day. These prayers are called Namaz. This service was organized by Devlet Bahceli, head of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). It was in homage to what Alp Aslan did in 1064 when he conquered the city of Ani. He had the cross taken off of the cathedral and prayed there.

So, this is not just about people praying churches. It is diplomacy and showing the world openness

and a movement toward religious tolerance by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). It is a negation of that by the MHP. And, I am sure there are many more nuances of gray in Turkey than black and white. There seems to be quite a struggle in Turkey to determine what kind of country it will be moving forward.

It is not about people praying in churches. It is about Armenians attending the service because their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents hailed from Van and Surp Khatch is even a more special place for them than it does for other Armenians. It is about Armenian church leaders and others who would not participate because the Turkish government had neither put a cross on Surp Khatch nor have they acknowledged the 1915 Genocide. **Note:** There were reports that a cross was erected on Surp Khatch on the same day Devlet Bahçeli lead the group to Ani. At the time of this writing, I have not seen any confirming photos.

Did I mention that Surp Khatch means Holy Cross? Surp Khatch had no cross until yesterday.

I did mention Alp Arslan took the cross off of and then prayed in the cathedral upon conquering the ancient Armenian capital of Ani.

Can it be that both events ironically or purposely happened the same day? There is a lot going on in Turkey.

How is this not about religion? How is this not about two peoples with incredible overlaps in culture hating each other and small minorities trying to overcome that? I leave that to the blah blah of scholars, historians, sociologists, and politicians. I only know the shades of murky gray that shroud these issues.

I would love to read the sermon from the *badarak* in Surp Khatch. I wonder if any sermon like words were delivered yesterday in Ani?

What would the reaction have been if the Armenians had a service in the conquered mosque in Aghdam, Karabagh? Would it have been as benign as the Armenian reaction to the Namaz in the Ani Cathedral? I hardly think so.

Maybe the Turks should convert the cathedral in Ani and any other shell of an Armenian church left in the Armenian Highlands into mosques. Before I am labelled a heretic by Armenians, hear me out. Our churches have gradually disappeared as their stones have been used for less noble purposes. As mosques, at least they would be restored and maintained. I do not see these treasures being returned to Armenians any time soon.

Yesterday reminded me in no uncertain terms who is victor and who is vanquished in this long sad relationship of Armenians and Turks. It explains why an email from my daughter with a link to a video of the event in Ani had the simple subject "ugh..." It reminded of my college friend Halim. We discussed Armenian-Turkish issues back in the early 1980s. One time out of complete frustration with how to appease me, he snapped and said, "if you have the power, take it back . If you can't shut

up." Halim's outburst made me think of Khirimian Hayrig's *yergateh sherep* (iron ladle) speech.

Khirimian Hayrig's words came to mind yesterday. Yet, I tried to take the high road and be happy someone was praying in the church. I felt less happy when I learned it was a repeat of and re-emphasis of Alp Aslan's act upon conquering Ani.

So all in all, ugh, just another day of being a diasporan Armenian, a grandson of Kharpert and Shabin-Karahisar, looking for closure...

Megha Asdoodzo.

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