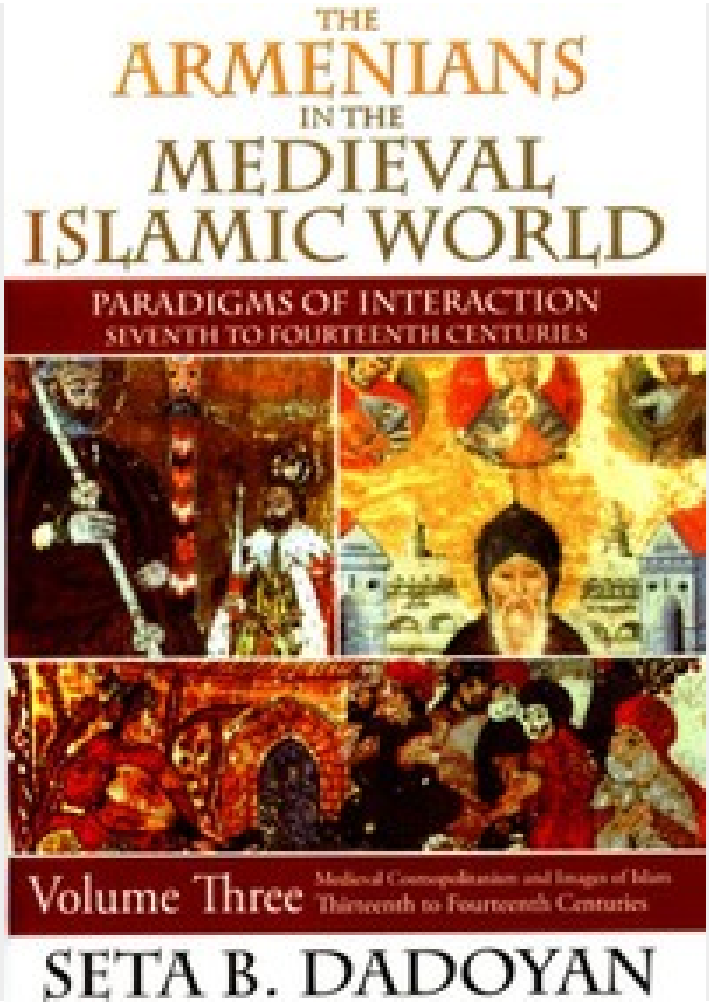
WHEN ARMENIANS MET MUSLIMS

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 6 November 2013

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While the first two volumes were mostly about political and military matters (the eight Armenian Fatimid viziers of Egypt in the 11th and 12th centuries; Armenian military leaders and sectarian dissidents who were frequently allies of the Muslims in the second half of the Middle Ages; the Islamized Armenian-Georgian Danishmandid dynasty of Cappadocia, etc.), the third volume of the Dadoyan opus is mostly about social-cultural exchanges.

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She says Armenian/Islamic close encounters occurred in urban environments and on all levels, such as science, crafts, social organizations, folklore, poetry, music and song. She then builds on her overarching thesis by using the city-state of Erznka--an entrepot of Armenian/Islamic social-cultural give-and-take in the 13th and 14th centuries--as a typical example of Armeno/Islamic interface.

Located at the northwest of historic Armenia, the bustling city-state was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural metropolis with an Armenian majority. It was here that clergyman Yovhannes Erznkaci wrote his influential "Views from the Writings of Islamic Philosophers." In fact, the book was a summary of the "Brethren of Purity" which became a reference for his entire literature, says Dadoyan. The book introduced panoply of new philosophical concepts and a comprehensive reform for the urban youth brotherhoods in Armenian communities, not only in Erznka, but across other Armenian cities in the area.

As well, Erznkaci's famous "Constitution" was an "Armenianized" version of the Islamic original. A dos and don'ts of communal governance, the "Constitution" was adopted by the Armenian brotherhoods and was even used by the Armenians of Eastern Europe as late as in the 19th century.

Erznka, an important stop on trading routes, was additionally the gateway for Ismaeili social-cultural influence on Armenians. It's through this sect that most of the Arabic/Iranian texts became available to Armenians.

Yet eight centuries after the birth of Islam, including the Arab conquest of their country, Armenians were impervious to Islam and the Armenian Church didn't consider Islam as an alternative faith. Until late into the 14th century, the Armenian Church maintained that Prophet Mohammed was an Arian heretic, an anti-Christ, a fabulist. Biased and often-false polemical writings (the cycle of Mahmet legends, for one) by Arab Christians and from Latin sources were the basis of the Armenian Church's anti-Islamic dogma. It's only in 1390 that the Church took on Islam as a rival. The change in attitude occurred because many Armenians were becoming Muslim as a result of forced conversion by their Mongol rulers.

The Church's chief point man against the conversion trend was Krikor Datevatsi. A celebrated clergyman, he penned "Against the Muslims", a scholarly treatise as a chapter in his magisterial "Book of Questions". Datevatsi argued that Christianity was morally and rationally superior to Islam. The "Book of Questions" was one of the most copied and familiar books of the late Middle Ages in Armenia. Datevatsi's campaign was taken up by his student, Matteos Chughayetsi. The latter wrote a polemical tract titled "Various Responses to the Questions of Infidels". Although Datevatsi and his student were attacking Islam, their real target was the Armenians, who often knew little about their Church doctrines and thus were vulnerable to alien religious influences.

It might come as a surprise to Armenians that as of the 7th century, conversions happened back and forth. "In addition, the indigenous syncretism of the Near Eastern peoples was a favorable factor and milieu. Many trends entertained mixed beliefs and practices, anyway. Many also welcomed the rich and colorful Islamic folklore, the arts, and their ways," writes Dadoyan.

As in the first two volumes, Dadoyan furnishes a convincing counter-narrative to what Armenian writers, led by the Church, have written about the era. She is boldly combating "circulating narratives and fixities in mainstream philosophies and epistemologies of Armenian history within the Near East". As she wrote in her earlier volumes, she wants to clear the Armenian psyche of sedimentation… to draw the outlines of a new philosophy of Armenian history based on hitherto undetected or obscured patterns of interactions.
The last sentence of the book reads: "This opus was just a beginning." Despite her trenchant expositions and convincing arguments, Dadoyan believes there's far more to be uncovered to get a grasp of the times.

This third volume is a satisfying ending to the eye-opening trilogy. If the book has a shortcoming, it's Dadoyan's unsympathetic gaze towards the Church's stonewalling of Islam. Islam was more than a competing religion. It was the religion of the conqueror. They justifiably feared that if they accommodated the religion of their conquerors, Armenians could disappear as a nation. The Armenian Church wasn't alone in this policy. The Assyrian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite, Jacobite, etc. Churches adopted a similar defensive policy. A big state like Persia could retain its identity after Islam was forced upon it, but an occupied people of a few million spread over a wide area don't have that luxury.

"The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World" is published by Transaction Publishers (transactionpub.com)