

THE LATEST EPISODES OF THE POLICY OF DENIAL: RELIGION IN THE SERVICE OF POLITICS

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"If the Holocaust was a hoax, why not the Armenian catastrophe also? If Anne Frank's diary was faked, who is to say that certain documents signed by Talaat Pasha weren't forged as well? ... The Turkish attack on truth exemplifies the new governing narrative, the one in which truth is fugitive." Terrence Des Pres, *On Governing Narratives: The Turkish-Armenian Case*.

According to the Armenian American comedian/painter, Vahe Berberian, the archetypical Armenian, after 10 minutes into any conversation with foreigners, informs his/her interlocutor of the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 and the failure of the international community to make Turkey, the perpetrator, acknowledge its massacre of the largest Christian minority community in the Anatolian part of the Ottoman Empire, apologize for its human rights atrocities, and make the necessary material and moral amends.

As an Armenian, I attest to the truth of such anecdotal evidence. Similar encounters usually begin with a simple interest in the *-ian* suffix Armenian family names carry. Intrigued and enlightened by the explanation, inquiries are then made about the current political, economic, and social situation in Armenia. Naturally, the proper information is imparted; however, to be completely truthful and not misleading, one adds, "But I don't live in Armenia. I was born in Cyprus. My family settled in Larnaka after the 1909 Adana massacre."

Fascinated by the fact that more than 7 million Armenians live in the diaspora as opposed to the 2.5 million in Armenia and surprised by the impossibility of going back to ancestral lands, most people express their incredulity at the Turkish government's continued denial of the facts and the moral dimensions of this history.

Such discussions may further the dissemination of critical information about the first genocide of the twentieth century, yet, far from generating a cathartic effect, they rouse feelings of injustice, oppression, cruelty, and gross immorality in every Armenian.

As early as 1894-95 the sultan's policy was to deny the very massacres he had committed, and this has been the policy of every successive Turkish government down to the present. Turkish efforts to deny the Armenian Genocide not only undermine and vilify a human rights crime of enormous scale but also according to Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* is akin to criminal behavior.

In 1915 alone, the *New York Times* published 145 articles on the Armenian massacres, reporting that the Turkish slaughter of Armenians was "deliberate," and that it was "systematic race extermination." There are some 4,000 documents totaling about 37,000 pages in the US National Archives alone written by American diplomats that report in depth the process and devastation of the Armenian Genocide.

In 1915, Henry Morgenthau Sr., the US ambassador in Constantinople, defied diplomatic convention by personally protesting the atrocities and raising money for humanitarian relief. When he left his post in 1916, he wrote, "My failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians has made Turkey for me a place of horror."

Morgenthau was joined by former president Theodore Roosevelt, who called on the administration of Woodrow Wilson "to take effective action on behalf of Armenia. ... The Armenian massacre," Roosevelt believed, "was the greatest crime of the war, and failure to act against Turkey is to condone it; because the failure to deal radically with the Turkish horror means that all talk of guaranteeing the future peace of the world is mischievous nonsense."

Despite general consensus that genocide should "never again" be allowed, the twentieth century was one of the most deadly on record. The oft-cited "Who after all, speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?" declared by Hitler in 1939 encouraged him to carry out the next genocide of the century, the extermination of the Jews, followed by the Khmer Rouge's annihilation of 2 million Cambodians, Saddam's Kurdish Hiroshima in 1987, and the Rwandan Hutus' systematic slaughter of 8,000 Tutsi a day for 100 days in 1994, just to name a few, were carried out with little or no foreign intervention.

In the mid-nineties, there seemed to emerge a culture of apology. President Clinton apologized to the black families involved in the medical experiments at Tuskegee. The US Bureau of Indian Affairs marked its 175th anniversary by apologizing to Native Americans. The Catholic Church of France asked God's forgiveness for its silence during the Holocaust. The Austrians returned artworks that were pillaged by the Nazis from Jewish families. Swiss banks negotiated settlements with Holocaust survivors and families of Holocaust victims.

Similarly, the time has come for the closing of the Armenian wound and for the archetypical Armenian to shift the focus of his/her small talk. Apparently, Turkey does not think so, as the policy of unremitting denial recently resurfaced for the sake of scoring political gains in the upcoming parliamentary elections in June 2011.

Interestingly, the two latest episodes are religious in nature in a so-called secular country.

First, it was expected that more than 10,000 Armenian pilgrims from Turkey and the diaspora were going to attend the Mass at the Holy Cross Church of Akhtamar on September 19, 2010, the first Mass in nearly a century. However, only several hundred turned out after Turkish officials refused to place a cross atop the dome and the general feeling that the Mass was a mere propaganda ploy by the Turkish government.

Second, interestingly enough, on Friday, October 1, the day the cross was placed atop the church at Akhtamar, thousands of Turkish nationalists performed Muslim prayers in one of the most important Armenian churches of the Middle Ages in a high-profile ceremony sanctioned by Turkey's government. The 11th century Holy Virgin Cathedral at Ani is located in Kars, less than one kilometer away from Armenia.

A statement issued by the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin describes the latter action as "a political provocation" and "an attempt to deny the Armenian origin of the Cathedral of Ani that was deprived of prayers as a result of the Armenian Genocide." The statement, expressing Armenian sentiment worldwide, observes that "the Turkish authorities continue their actions aimed at extermination of Armenian memory and appropriation of historical shrines and cultural values."

Politics, policy, party line, propaganda, puffery, publicity, power play, prerogative. Still, after 95 years, the Armenian people and history are waiting for that honest Turkish leader who will acknowledge his ancestors' biggest crime ever, who will apologize to the Armenian people, and who will do his best to make material and moral reparations.