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THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE
TEACHING OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY:
SOME REFLECTIONS FOR EVANGELICALS

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This fall semester marks the beginning of my twelfth year as a professor at McMaster Divinity College, and the seventeenth year of my teaching the history of Christianity.¹ My appointment to the Centenary Chair in World Christianity coincides with my relatively recent interest in the disappearance of Christian communities, an interest sparked by my participation in a Bingham conference here at McMaster where I surveyed the disappearance of Christian communities throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe.² It was further informed and inspired by the release of Philip Jenkins's *The Lost History of Christianity*, which traced a similar trajectory of disasters for the church.³ A more recent venture of mine on the Canadian and American churches' response to the Armenian Genocide provided an opportunity to pursue the subject even further.⁴

My purpose in this article is twofold. First, I will draw our attention to the Armenian Genocide as a way of commemorating the Armenian experience of a century ago.⁵ Second, I will

1. This paper was delivered on 19 October 2015 at the induction service of Gordon L. Heath into the Centenary Chair in World Christianity held in the Nathaniel H. Parker Chapel at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario.

2. Heath, "Blood," 97–133.

3. Jenkins, *History*.

4. The work on Canadian churches is complete. See Heath, "Thor," 105–28; and Heath, "Accursed Partnership."

5. The word "genocide" was invented in the 1940s by Raphael Lemkin, in order to describe the Turkish mistreatment of Armenians and the Jewish holocaust under the Nazis. The term is based on the Greek *genos* (people or

provide some reflections for Evangelicals⁶ on the teaching of global Christianity in light of the tragedy. In particular, my comments relate to the inclusion of Eastern Orthodoxy in our history curriculum, and how the experience of the Armenian Orthodox should compel us to rethink some problematic theological assumptions.

*The Armenian Genocide*⁷

The beginnings of Christendom are usually traced to events in the Roman Empire. However, the earliest instance of Christendom can be found in Armenia, a small kingdom on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. Some of the events surrounding the conversion of King Tiridates III and the role of Gregory the Illuminator (the Christian missionary involved in the king's conversion) are a bit uncertain, but what is generally accepted is Tiridates was converted to Christianity in ca. 301.⁸ After his

nation) and the Latin suffix *cide* (murder). The United Nations adopted the term on 9 December 1948 in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, often referred to as the Genocide Convention. The Convention defines genocide as “the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.” It is more than deaths as a consequence of war or localized pogroms; rather, it is a systematic and concerted attempt to wipe out a people. Genocide is a controversial and contested term, but it serves the important purpose of describing an attempt to eliminate a particular people. Despite intense political pressure from the Turkish government, a growing number of nations—Canada included (2004)—have declared that the violence perpetrated against the Armenians was genocide. A great deal of primary source material has been gathered on the genocide, with a well-developed historiography. Nevertheless, the interpretation of these sources is contested, with some denying that genocide even occurred. There is a professional and moral responsibility for historians to use academic freedom properly, but that is not always the case with deniers of the Armenian genocide—especially among a number of Turkish historians.

6. My use of the term refers to the reform movement born in the Methodist Revivals of eighteenth-century England that subsequently spread throughout the globe. See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*; Noll, *Rise*.

7. Parts of this section taken from Heath, “Thor.”

8. Much of the early history of Christianity in Armenia is recounted in a fifth-century document by Agathangelos. See Agathangelos, *History*.

conversion, and with the encouragement of Gregory, he built a series of churches and introduced Christian liturgy. By the fifth century, Eastern Orthodoxy had become fairly well established, and Armenia was what we today call a “Christian nation.”

Little known to most in the West (and the world) is that 2015 is the centenary of the beginning of the Armenian Genocide. The Turkish government excoriates all who dare call it a genocide (as Pope Francis found out when he acknowledged it at a commemorative mass at St. Peter’s Basilica in April 2015), yet some leaders have had the courage to speak about such horrors.

The genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire has the dubious distinction of being the first modern genocide.⁹ Once a mighty empire that twice besieged Vienna, the Ottoman Turkish Empire had devolved into the “sick man” of Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. Niall Ferguson notes that “the worst time to live under imperial rule is when that rule is crumbling,”¹⁰ and that was the case for the Eastern Orthodox Armenians under Muslim Turkish rule. The Hamidian Massacres (1894–1896) that led to 100,000–300,000 deaths were only a prelude to subsequent horrors. The inaction of the European nations “certainly encouraged” the Ottomans to continue in their mistreatment of the Armenians.¹¹ Consequently, further massacres followed. During the First World War, the Turkish government aggressively pursued a policy of genocide against the Armenians within its borders, and estimates of the disaster usually range between 1 million and 1.5 million deaths (there were further mass killings to the south among Syriac and Iraqi Orthodox Christians).¹²

9. Ben Kiernan claims that the German treatment of the Herero and Nama peoples of South West Africa in 1904 was the first genocide of the century. See Kiernan, “Genocides,” 29. See also Olusoga and Erichsen, *Holocaust*.

10. Ferguson, *War*, 176.

11. Somakian, *Empires*, 27.

12. Turkish authorities admit 800,000 deaths occurred (not counting tens of thousands of conscripts executed by the military), but not through genocide. See Dadrian, *Genocide*, 225. Other estimates are higher. For instance, of the 1.5 to 2 million pre-war Armenians, 250,000 escaped to Russia. “Of the remaining

The Armenian Genocide started in April 1915. The methods of eliminating the Armenians were arrests, executions, and deportations. Deportation merely “served as a cloak for massacre.”¹³ Usually males were arrested first, and then taken away and executed en masse. Women, children, and the elderly were then rounded up under the pretext of being “relocated.” Deportation itself was a deadly nightmare, as the following eyewitness account indicates:

Children cried themselves to death, men threw themselves to their death on the rocks while women threw their own children into wells and pregnant mothers leapt singing into the Euphrates. They died all the deaths of the world, the deaths of all the centuries. I saw men gone mad, feeding on their own excrement, women cooking their newborn children . . . people lay apathetically among the heaps of dead and emaciated bodies, waiting for death . . . Yet all this is still only a fraction of what I saw with my own eyes or was related to me by friends or travelers, or by the outcasts themselves.¹⁴

Among the horrors of the “caravans to oblivion”¹⁵ was the mass “sexual violence and gender-specific persecution of victims [usually female],”¹⁶ the Islamization of children taken from Armenian parents,¹⁷ the theft of property and land (never to be returned), the desecration and destruction of churches and holy places, and the extension of genocide to the Assyrian Christians in the Middle East (Syria).¹⁸ The large-scale deportations of the

1,600,000 about 1,000,000 were killed, half of whom were women and children. Of the surviving 600,000 about 200,000 were forcibly Islamised; and the wretched remnant of 400,000 was found, starving and in rags, by the Allies . . . at the end of the war.” See Walker, *Armenia*, 230. Leo Kuper claims 1 million died (see Kuper, “Turkish,” 52). Lorne Shirinian claims between 1.2 and 1.8 million died. See Shirinian, *Quest*, 33. To be added to these figures are approximately 250,000 Assyro-Chaldeans of the Church of the East lost in battle or massacred (see Guant, *Massacres*, 300).

13. Kuper, “Turkish,” 49.

14. Hofmann, “German,” 66.

15. Graber, *Caravans*.

16. Derderian, “Common,” 1.

17. Marashlian, “Finishing,” 121.

18. David Guant’s summary and analysis is a sober description of the massacres of Christians in eastern Turkey and further east and south in modern-

Armenians continued into 1916, but “massacres, deportations and persecutions” continued even in the years immediately following the war and while the Allies deliberated over peace terms.¹⁹

Western leaders expressed outrage over the Armenian tragedy, and leaders such as Britain’s Lloyd George declared that the end of war would bring about the liberation and protection of the Armenians. Beyond rhetoric, however, they did nothing. Domestic and strategic considerations meant that no Western Power was willing to place troops on the ground and guarantee the protection of the Armenians.²⁰ The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) mandated the compulsory exchange of minorities in Greece and Turkey, and that delivered the final deathblow to the church’s presence in Asia Minor.

Reflections for Evangelicals

I would now like to shift my focus and offer some reflections on the implications of the genocide for the teaching of global Christianity in evangelical contexts.

day Syria, Iraq, and Iran during the First World War, including communities, such as the Syriac Orthodox, the Assyrian Church, the Chaldean Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Armenian Catholic Church (as well as a small number of Protestant missionaries and converts). See Guant, *Massacres*; and also Khosroeva, “Assyrian Genocide.”

19. By passing a law, which stated that all properties of non-Muslims vacated before the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923) were to pass through the Turkish government, the “founders of the Republic of Turkey finished the Armenian Genocide, by plundering and eliminating the remnants of the Ottoman Armenians, who otherwise might have reclaimed their confiscated property as citizens of the new republic.” See Marashlian, “Finishing.”

20. G. S. Graber suggests this failure implicates the French and British in the disaster in a way similar to the much-maligned Germans (see Graber, *Caravans*, 121–38). As for America, Samantha Power argues that domestic considerations were paramount in the failure of the United States to respond to any genocides during the twentieth century (see Power, *Problem*).

*Include Eastern Orthodoxy in the History Curriculum*²¹

Over the course of the twentieth century, waves of Orthodox immigrants arrived in the West, bringing Eastern and Western Christianities into closer proximity with one another.²² Immigration from Eastern Europe led to sizeable Orthodox Church communities in North and South America, Western Europe, and Australia. Refugees from the Armenian Genocide attempted to escape to the West.²³ Decades later, persecution in the Soviet Bloc motivated many Orthodox Christians to uproot and settle in the West. The end result of such migrations is a fairly substantial Orthodox community that is “eastern” in name, but increasingly “western” in day-to-day living; the present-day exodus of Middle Eastern Christians to the West has continued to bolster the numbers of the Orthodox diaspora. Sadly, for much of the past few centuries, Evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy have been at odds, and the history of relations between Evangelicals and the Orthodox has been “predominantly characterised by a long negative history of proselytism, persecution, mutual suspicion, hostility, fear and ignorance.”²⁴

Over the past few decades, interest in Eastern Orthodoxy among North American Evangelicals has grown, and a significant number of Evangelicals have converted to Orthodoxy—often much to the chagrin of their families, colleagues, or constituents.²⁵ However, despite some innovative thinking among a few Evangelicals, that interest in Orthodoxy is not widely reflected in the history curriculum of evangelical colleges, universities, and seminaries.²⁶ That exclusion is

21. I am using “Orthodoxy” in the most general sense of non-western churches in the East, including both Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian traditions.

22. Bouboutsis, *Singing*; Cowe, “Church,” 430–56; Hackel, “Diaspora,” 539–57.

23. Apramian, *Georgetown*. Some children arrived in Ontario, and were settled in an orphanage less than an hour away from McMaster in Georgetown.

24. Nassif, “Orthodoxy,” 21–22.

25. Gillquist, *Becoming*.

26. Nassif, “Orthodoxy,” 211–48. Interest among evangelical academics can be seen in such works as Stamoolis, *Views*; Payton, *East*; and Oxbrow and

surprising, since the past few decades have been marked by a trend among educators to pay significant attention to the development of global Christianity, as well as to de-westernize the telling of the story. My early educational experience with this issue is anecdotal, but mirrors that of many who were educated in evangelical institutions. Once the class dealt with the church fathers and early councils, the history of Eastern Orthodoxy was virtually ignored. The class skipped over the medieval period (that was “Catholic” history, after all) in order to get to the pinnacle of Christian history: the Protestant Reformation. From that point on, the professor focused on the glories of Protestantism and its offspring, such as the evangelical movement birthed in the eighteenth-century English-speaking world. Classroom textbooks often used by Evangelicals frequently provide scant commentary on the Orthodox experience, with little or no mention at all of the genocide.²⁷ It is no wonder that evangelical leaders, and thus their congregants, know little of Orthodoxy and its travails.

There are two reasons why this lack of knowledge of our new Orthodox neighbors is problematic. The first relates to love of neighbor. As George Marsden writes, the Christian love of neighbour necessitates the study of history:

Grass, *Mission*. On a related note, over the past few decades, there has been a surge of interest in Tradition among Evangelicals. See Foster, *Celebration*; Webber, *Roots*; Williams, *Retrieving*; Williams, *Evangelical*; and Thomas Oden’s Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series.

27. For instance, a widely used text in Canada is Justo Gonzalez’s two-volume *Story*. Students would hardly be familiarized with the genocide reading the following: “In 1895, and again in 1896 and 1914, thousands of Armenians living under Turkish rule were massacred. Approximately a million managed to escape and, as a result, by the twenty-first century there were significant numbers of Armenian Christians in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Greece, France, and the Western hemisphere—many of these demanding that Turkey acknowledge a genocide that official Turkish history denied.” Gonzalez, *Story*, 379. Texts with no mention at all of the genocide include Peterson, *History*; Shelley, *History*; Johnson, *History*; and Cairns, *Christianity*. There is a brief mention in Dowley, *History*. One notable and encouraging exception is Daugherty, *History*. Daugherty draws attention to the genocide and urges western historians to pay more attention to Eastern Orthodoxy.

The basic reason why we who are Christians should teach and learn history is so that we may better understand ourselves and our fellow men in relation to our own culture and to the world. Since the Christian's task is to live in this world and to witness to the love of God as manifested in Christ, it is essential for us to understand ourselves and the world as best we can. Love is the Christian's central obligation, and understanding is an essential ingredient in love. If we are going to love others, it seems evident that we should try our best to understand them.²⁸

It may be an overstatement to say that a lack of interest in the past is an indication of a lack of love for others, but it is fair to say that it is difficult to grow in love for the Orthodox without knowing their past.

The second reason relates to culpability in genocide. Evangelicals can be notoriously ahistorical, living a here and now "me-and-my Bible" type of existence, and having a spirituality marked by a focus on a future life with Jesus in heaven. In both cases, they are living in a way that is relatively oblivious to the past. That type of spiritual myopia is morally bankrupt and incompatible with Christian charity, especially when it comes to genocide. Richard G. Hovannisian argues that there are "striking similarities" in the methodologies and objectives of Armenian Genocide and Jewish Holocaust deniers, and that denying the events is cause for alarm, for in the denial of the past the "process of annihilation is thus advanced and completed."²⁹ While the evangelical proclivity to ignore the past is not the target of Hovannisian's critique, willing ignorance of the genocide is actually—to use Hovannisian's terms—an advancement and completion of the genocide. If there is no memory of the Armenians, eventually it will be as if they never existed.³⁰ By choosing ignorance of the past, Evangelicals will have contributed to the further elimination of the Armenians' existence as a people.

28. Marsden, "Perspective," 31–32.

29. Hovannisian, "Denial," 201–2.

30. What to do with such memories is another question, for including such horrors in our telling of the church's story raises difficult theological and pastoral issues (see Volf, *Memory*; Guinness, *Unspeakable*, 170–81).

Avoid Triumphalistic Narratives of Twentieth-Century Church Growth

“We are now in the time of the final ingathering before the end”³¹ is the kind of optimistic narrative frequently heard among Evangelicals enthralled by the explosive growth of Christianity around the globe. Certainly the twentieth century was one marked by dramatic and positive shifts for Christianity. As Philip Jenkins notes, the center of the church today is the Global South, not the West.³² Statistics support such claims: by 2050 there will be over 1 billion African Christians, 655 million Latin American Christians, and 600 million Asian Christians. By the same year, more than half of all Christians in the world will be either African or Latin American.³³

While such growth of the church has simply been remarkable, the Armenian Genocide is a stark reminder of the darker aspects of the church’s experience in the twentieth century. Evangelical narratives often ignore the unpleasant reality that the church may be growing in one region and facing extinction in another. The Armenian experience is a check on simplistic and triumphalistic narratives of “onward and upward” for the church, and is a rebuke to what Douglas Hall (and others) call a “theology of glory.” He writes:

Accepting the humiliation of Christendom is hard for all of us, because we have been conditioned by the kinds of assumptions [about the nature of Christendom]. As Karl Rahner has put it, we have been taught to believe that the church should baptize, marry, and bury everybody . . . We are a society that respects winners, and that means Christian winners too: big, successful churches! To put this in the more technical language of theology, we have been indoctrinated in a theological and ecclesiastical triumphalism—a theology of glory (*theologia gloria*) that is only made worse by our cultural ideology of success. From the supposed height of being the religious winners, the model of the church as a minority, a diaspora,

31. Johnstone, “Harvest,” 383.

32. Jenkins, *Christendom*.

33. Jenkins, “Changes,” 15–30.

seems for all the world like losing . . . In my view, we shall have to exchange the theology of glory for the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) as Luther called the true theology.³⁴

Hall was not writing about the Armenian genocide, but his point, nonetheless, applies to it. The evangelical telling of the story of Christianity must reject triumphalistic narratives of constant success and growth. Rather, it needs to recount a story of the entire church's history, a story nuanced by accounts of both growth and decline, success and failure, power and humiliation, and peace and the cross.

Avoid Simple Providentialist Story-Telling

As the book of Job illustrates, there are those who assume that, if bad things happen, it is necessarily due to God's judgment. Eusebius (ca. 260–339) and those historians of Christianity who followed in his wake, such as Socrates (ca. 380–450), Sozomen (ca. early fourth century), Philostorgius (ca. 368–439), Theodoret (ca. 393–458), and Bede (ca. 672–735) wrote their histories with those very assumptions in mind. God's providential activity was clear to them; when the church struggled or was persecuted, it was due to God's judgment for sin. Conversely, when the church grew, it was due to God's blessing for obedience. That providentialist way of writing church history remained the norm up until recent history, and consequently, it is no surprise that Evangelicalism has often been marked by such an approach.³⁵

The problem with providentialist history is that drawing such simple correlations is simply wrong. At first glance, it has the guise of being biblical (e.g. Old Testament blessings and curses come to mind), but it is not a necessary correlation that can be supported by the biblical text. The problem of evil and suffering in our world is more complex than asserting that bad things

34. Hall, *Future*, 33–34.

35. For a detailed analysis of early evangelical writing of history, see Schmidt, "Reviving." For thoughtful contemporary evangelical commentary on providentialist writing, and the writing of Christian history in general, see Bebbington, *Patterns*. See also Heath, *History*.

happening are necessarily and always a result of God's judgment.

This is crucial, for if Evangelicals fail on this front, they condemn all who suffer; any who are afflicted must surely stand under God's judgment. Thus, the Armenians, who have not yet been able to return to their ancient homeland (and most likely never will), would seem a century later to still be under God's judgment. A different story needs to be told of the church's history, one that reflects the deep mystery of God's providence. Sadly, when it comes to providence and the telling of the church's story, Evangelicals often make the same mistakes as Job's so-called comforters. To claim that we know with certainty that the Armenian Genocide was a result of God's judgment for sin is biblically untenable, theologically flawed, pastorally harmful, ecumenically divisive, and historically irresponsible.

Recognize the Complexity of Church-State Relationships

There is glee among some Evangelicals over the disestablishment of the church and the concomitant loss of Christendom in the West. The disestablishment of the church is portrayed as "God's gift to the church in our era,"³⁶ "the beginning of a new flowering of Christianity,"³⁷ and a cause for celebration.³⁸ Douglas Hall states, "the end of Christendom could be the beginning of something more nearly like the church,"³⁹ and Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon declare that the decline of Christendom is an "opportunity to celebrate. The decline of the old, Constantinian synthesis between the church and the world means that we . . . are at last free to be faithful in a way that makes being a Christian today an exciting adventure."⁴⁰ Likewise, the contemporary *missio dei* movement disengages the mission of God from what is seen to be a corrupting and crippling relationship with the state.

36. Bayer, *Church*, 2.

37. Frost, *Exiles*, 7.

38. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 21.

39. Hall, *Christendom*, 51.

40. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Aliens*, 18.

If only Christian history and life were as simple as the binary world of bad Christendom and good Post-Christendom. When Evangelicals reflect on the factors that led to the spread of the church, they often think of the tireless work of godly evangelists, missionaries, and preachers, men and women motivated by intense religious zeal. They also look back longingly at the impact of revivalism that stirred hearts to attempt great things for God. Yet a closer look reveals a more nuanced and complicated story.

One does not have to support a notion of Christendom to recognize that the church's fortunes are often inextricably linked to the actions and attitudes of the state. The early apostles benefited from Roman protection. Christians in Persia had the emperor Constantine's intervention on their behalf. St. Patrick sought the conversion and protection of local kings. Missionaries in northern Europe in the early modern period lived during the "church of the nobility" (*Adelskirche*), and were successful in encouraging rulers not only to protect their mission outposts but also to "divert colossal, staggering resources" to the missionary enterprise.⁴¹ Martin Luther had the German princes. British missionaries had the British Empire.⁴²

When a state turned hostile, moreover, the story often took a dark turn. Losing state protection often meant devastating losses or even the extinction of Christian communities, such as those in North Africa, Central Asia, Japan, and the Middle East.⁴³ For instance, in his reflections on the collapse of the Church of the East, Christoph Baumer notes that the genocide and persecution of the Armenian and Syrian Christian was due to a hostile religion (Islam) and state, and a church unable to protect itself from such threats. He writes:

In his *Refutation of Christianity*, he [Muslim theologian Ali at-Tabaria, a former Christian] wrote that no religion without a concept of holy war could survive. He referred to the triumph of Islam, which

41. Fletcher, *Conversion*, 155.

42. Stanley, *Bible*.

43. Jenkins, *History*; Heath, "Blood," 97–133; Heath, "Persecution," 15–21.

had succeeded and greatly weakened Christianity everywhere, that no one met it with armed force. A passing glance at history shows that, in confrontation with an aggressive religion equipped with military means, only a religion supported by another armed power can maintain itself over the long term. Regions that once had predominantly Christian populations were either radically cleansed of Christians—as happened, for instance, in Anatolia and North Africa—or the Christians came to constitute only a small minority, as in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. In contrast, in Christian Europe, it was military operations that either stopped Islam or repulsed it—as, for example, at the Battle of Tours and Poitiers in 732, the *Reconquista* of Spain in the fifteenth century and at both sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1638.⁴⁴

For Baumer, it is clear that the outcome on the battlefield led to conditions that adversely affected the church and its long-term viability. The Armenian Genocide is not only a reminder to us to avoid simplistic and naive celebrations of the demise of Christendom, but also an example of the complex interplay between church and state that has marked the history of Christianity since its inception. This story may not be all that appealing for a group that loves to recount the exploits of pastors, missionaries, and revivalists, but nevertheless it is one that needs to be told.

Conclusion

Christianity is a global religion with ancient roots in the East, and any narrative of its development must include the complex details of the triumphs and trials of the Orthodox Church. British historian Sir David Cannadine recently said of complexity:

The world is not simple. The world is complex, and we ignore those complexities at our peril. And it is the job, it seems to me, of responsible journalists and of responsible political leaders and of responsible scholars to say the world is very complicated, and people who say the world is very simple—simply built around binary

44. Baumer, *Church*, 267.

divisions—should not be trusted, should not be believed, and should not be voted into office.⁴⁵

The genocide of over a million Armenian Orthodox Christians is just one more example of the messy and complicated nature of the story of Christian history. As for lessons for Evangelicals at this centenary of the genocide, my hope is that they will rethink how they tell the history of the faith, taking into account both the Orthodox disaster and diaspora, and while telling their story, avoid erroneous triumphalism, shun simple providentialism, and recognize the complexity of the church's relationship with the state.

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45. Cannadine, "Undivided."

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