RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE MEMOIRS OF CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Abstract

Survivor memoirs of the Armenian Genocide remain an understudied genre, despite their unique value in offering a grassroots perspective on the events and illuminating the processes of remembering the past and coping with the individual and collective trauma. This paper brings together two overlooked aspects in Armenian Genocide studies: first, the fact that many of these memoirs are written by child survivors and frequently focus on childhood experiences, and second, the significant presence of religious elements–references to God, faith, and prayer–in these texts. The content and function of these spiritual reflections range from expressions of astonishing faith to deeply bitter remarks.

The primary aim is to examine the role of spirituality for children as depicted in the survivor memoirs. However, this cannot be done without careful consideration of the fact that most of these texts were written decades after the events they describe. Consequently, the analysis is grounded in a theoretical understanding of narrative subjectivity and the complexities of retrospective narration. The findings reveal the paradoxical nature of survivors' spiritual experience. After the genocide, religious convictions and beliefs do not coalesce into a coherent system; rather, traditional formulations remain detached units that seem true from one perspective, but hollow from another.

Keywords: survivor memoirs; children; spirituality; religion; God; prayer; providence

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Introduction

The Armenian Genocide was not only a devastating catastrophe in terms of human lives, property, and culture; it was also a profound religious and spiritual tragedy, and a theological shock that continues to reverberate. It challenges notions of divine providence, efficacy of prayer, and trust in ethical principles such as justice–not only due to the massive scale of suffering but also because of the spiritual and religious vacuum the events left behind. The genocide irrevocably altered the spiritual orientation and cultural ethos of a people whose identity was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, leaving indelible marks on the soul of a nation once defined by its faith and collective purpose.[1]

Even when lives were spared, the religious consequences could be more devastating than death. From a strictly religious perspective, the forcible transfer of children inflicted an even deeper loss, as it ultimately turns them into the "other" of their original faith, whereas death would render them venerable martyrs of the Church. In that sense, the noteworthy number of suicides during the events was not merely an act of personal desperation to escape abuse but also a Christian rejection of forced conversion.

Before the genocide, the traditional Armenian village life was thoroughly saturated with colourful Christian customs of ancient origin. Christian symbols, contents, and values were vividly present in everyday life, feasts and fasts, work and rest, songs and poems, pilgrimage traditions, customs related to sacred places, prayers for various everyday situations and so forth. In addition, there were plenty of exotic local phenomena, such as drinking songs dedicated to John the Baptist,[2] or sacred springs with sacred fish,[3] that are unknown today even to specialists. For the child survivors, the last times before the catastrophe in this Christian culture were the only happy years in their lives, as Rubina Peroomian has it.[4] In a word, the world they had to leave behind was a thoroughly Christian one.

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1 In Eastern Armenia, most ancient Christian(ized) customs and practices were forgotten, as the principles of atheism, compounded by Soviet persecution of the Church, left a lasting and thoroughgoing impact (cf. Lithuania or Poland). Even today, the Armenian Church is the only eastern Church without a strong monastic movement, which illustrates the depth of the unique transformation that took place. In the diaspora, there was a committed willingness to preserve the Christian identity, but the diaspora setting made this difficult due to the lack of churches, priests, monasteries, holy places, and theological academies, not to mention the fragmentation of families and communities. Compared to pre-genocide culture, the loss of distinctive ethno-Christian traditions and ancient customs related to everyday life largely reduced Christianity to mere Sunday liturgies with declining participation. However, the transformation of Christian identity is a vast topic and would require extensive studies. Personally, I have observed in Armenia that when recounting Christian customs from the pre-1915 culture, the oldest generation may remember hearing about such practices from their parents, while the subsequent generations have no connection to them.

2 Documented in Vahan Hambartsumian, *Village World (Kiughashkharh): An Historical and Cultural Study of Govdoon* (Govdoon Youth of America, 2001), 141.

3 For a vivid description of the sacred fish venerated in the village of Balekhli, see John Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button* (Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), 6. The practice might even reflect a reminiscence of the ancient cult of Anahit.

4 Rubina Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2012), 86. The author of this article has published a book about the colourful Christian customs embedded in pre-1915 Armenian village life: *Vaienneita* ääniä*. Kunnianosoitus kadonneelle kulttuurille* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2015).

However, the religious dimension of events in the studies on eyewitness accounts and memoirs has received little attention. In academic studies, the religious phenomena have been left to theologians, while genocide issues have not traditionally been part of theologians' repertoire. Moreover, Western theologians in general are suspicious of all national and ethnic features of religion, due to the wretched history of nationalism in Europe. Furthermore, modern studies in general have a strong anachronistic tendency to downplay the significance of religion and spirituality in historical societies, and this trend has affected Armenian Genocide studies as well. This being the case, there is a clear need to reexamine survivor narratives through a theological lens. Combining insights from autobiographical theory with systematic theological analysis, the following study focuses on the role of religion and spirituality–that is, God, faith, and prayer–in sixteen memoirs written by survivors who went through these events as children. The latter fact, however, makes the study of the former challenging.

Children as Witnesses: Memory and the Narrative Subject

Most survivors were children who, at the time, did not comprehend the political, cultural, or religious significance of the events; for them, it was simply an unending human tragedy. They were forced to march hundreds of kilometres while starving, moved from one orphanage to another, relocated to new countries, compelled to learn new languages. Typically, only decades later did they begin to reflect on the events and their significance. It was often at this stage that feelings of anger and bitterness began to emerge. Interview studies indicate that nearly all survivors were thinking about the massacres with increasing frequency as they grew older. This indicates that although attitudes towards genocide and the ways of discussing it may evolve over time, time itself certainly does not heal the wounds.[5]

In studies of the Jewish holocaust, writings by child survivors are considered exceptional cases, given that children were the age group with the smallest number of survivors. In contrast, survivors of the Armenian Genocide were predominantly children, and most existing memoirs are written by child survivors. Consequently, these memoirs have often been treated as the norm, with few scholars drawing a line between children's memoirs and others. As a result, discussions on Armenian survivor memoirs have frequently overlooked the significance of the narrators' young age at the time of the events.

If we seek to analyse narrators specifically as children, what implications does this have for our reading of the memoirs? To begin with, we do not encounter the authentic

5 It is not untypical in these memoirs to have remarks such as: "Even after sixty-six years I recall that night with horror." Elise Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth* (New York: New Age Publishers, 1981), 48. See Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 188–189. This is not only a matter of psychological development, for the frustration intensified also due to the aggressive denial policy of Turkey. See Aida Alayarian, *Consequences of Denial. The Armenian Genocide* (London: Karnac Books, 2008).

voice of the child, not to mention his personality, but rather an interplay between the child protagonist and the adult narrator, though the tension between the two is usually implicit. Academic studies on Jewish child-survivor memoirs often concentrate on this very issue.[6]

However, children and adults perceive and articulate the same events in somewhat different ways. Therefore, the author must choose a perspective. Some writers, such as Antranik Enkababian, have consciously chosen to reflect on events from their present standpoint, while most have sought to immerse themselves in their past, aiming to reconstruct their perspective at the time of the events. Nevertheless, this requires the adult to adopt the position and viewpoint of the child. For instance, Kerop Bedoukian, nine years old in 1915, consciously aimed to achieve historical authenticity through his (re)construction of the narrative subject: "I have chosen to remain true to the memoirs of a young boy who, in the manner of a child, was curious about the nature of the world around him."[7] Yet the voice of a child cannot be reproduced; it must instead be constructed through stylisation.[8]

In most cases, these memoirs were written, or given their final form, only after World War II; hence some writers draw comparative parallels with the Jewish Holocaust. For example, Hampartzoum Chitjian reflects on whether God will wake up to assist the Armenians, just as He came to help the Jews, referring to the emergence of the state of Israel.[9] Similarly, Hagopian Taft (b. 1906) even references Auschwitz as a point of comparison:

> We were dumped from cattle cars and forced to move on foot, again in a southernly direction, which we knew led to the parched semi-arid lands of southern Anatolia. Not the sudden death of Auschwitz by lethal gas, but the slow, agonizing, torturous Turkish method: death by starvation, disease, and exposure.[10]

At this point, it may be useful to distinguish between "I the narrator" and "I the protagonist." For instance, in the sentence "He went" the subjectivity belongs to "I the

6 There is a considerable number of studies on the Jewish child survivors focusing on their psychological coping, while the studies related to their memoirs as literary entities are somewhat less common. See Adi Duchin, and Hadas Wiseman, "Memoirs of child survivors of the Holocaust: Processing and healing of trauma through writing," *Qualitative Psychology*, 6:3 (2019), 280–296; Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 141–189.

7 Kerop Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived: The Story of an Armenian Boy* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1978), preface. Bedoukian originated from Sivas (Sebastia) and was nine years old in 1915.

8 Cf. Sur Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 6.

9 Hampartzoum Mardiros Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death. Memoirs of the Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (London: Taderon Press, Garod Books, 2003), 99.

10 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 42. She notes also that "Terrible as was the Nazi persecution of the Jews, that endured by the Armenians at the hands of Talaat and other Ottoman Turks was infinitely more savage and sadistic." *Ibid*, 59.

narrator", the one who is saying "He went"; likewise, in "I saw" two I's coexist, the one who saw (the protagonist) and the one who articulates this (the narrator).[11] In genocide memoirs, especially by child survivors, it is typical that the protagonist yields to the narrator. The protagonist-I seems to dissolve into the collective current of history, while the narrator-I, speaking from decades later, remains ever-present behind the narrative flow, occasionally interrupting the progression of the story. For the reader, both perspectives are always available, offering a possibility of dynamic interplay, but also some insecurity on the coherence of the time frame.

Survivor memoirs are a genre where subtle tensions lie beneath the seemingly simple narrative surface. The process of writing involves selecting and assembling fragments of historical memory, employing techniques of fiction and navigating within their limitations. The challenge is to weave these fragments into coherence, continuity, and meaning– without resorting to too imaginative or artificial narrative devices.

In the case of the Armenians, the aggressive denial of genocide has significantly constrained the use of imaginative devices and literarily sophisticated narrative solutions: instead, the writers seem compelled to constantly substantiate that it did happen. Nonetheless, when crafting a narrative, the author inevitably must construct a storyline and employ storytelling techniques, even when attempting to remain within the realm of authentic memory fragments. The result is a micro-level historiography with a strong narrative charge, where the techniques of storytelling shape the memory material.[12] Ultimately, the significance of the genre lies in the collective testimony of survivors, not so much in individuals' creative efforts.

The narrator is typically neither an atheist nor a devoted believer but a culturally westernized Armenian, somewhat detached from the spirituality of previous generations. In that sense, one may often sense a certain distance between the gloomily reminiscing narrator and the living faith of his/her mother and ancestors. Typically, the narrator recollects their beliefs and prayers, not ours. The problems of memory may also be explicitly acknowledged in the narrative, which paradoxically adds to its trustworthiness. In fiction, the narrator does not pause to deliberate whether he remembers correctly, but in memoir, this gives a taste of authenticity.[13]

Memory is not a mechanistic device but shaped by the reasons for remembering, the purpose of recollection, and even by the intended audience. A text serves as a medium of remembrance and memorizing; it is an intensified memory that transforms into a lasting monument to forgotten realities. The retrospective nature of these texts means that survivors' memories are inextricably linked to the writer's choices regarding what to include, omit, or emphasize. Within the text, psychological realities are always subordinate

11 This differentiation is illuminatively discussed in Amos Goldberg, *Holocaust Diaries as "Life Stories"* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 13–17.

12 For discussion, see Lorne Shirinian, *Quest for Closure: The Armenian Genocide and the Search for Justice in Canada* (Kingston: Blue Heron Press, 1999), 11, 17–20.

13 E.g. "If I remember correctly, it was Egin"; in Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button*, 18.

to these decisions; yet, at the same time, psychological experiences tend to impose the decision what must be recorded. The passage of time leads to a selective process: some experiences fade into obscurity, while others become unforgettable, though their proportions may be distorted over the decades.[14]

This kind of memory can often prove inaccurate in relation to historical details. Over the decades, places, times, and death tolls may become confused, and in many cases, they were unclear from the outset. This applies to religious phenomena as well. The children did not have the opportunity to grow up within a traditional Christian Armenian culture, with formative experiences such as annual fasts and feasts, pilgrimages to monasteries or sacred caves, witnessing monastic choirs and elders, or Christian(ized) traditions and customs related to agriculture and domestic affairs.[15] As a result, descriptions of Christian customs, including those associated with major feasts, may be confused or mistaken in memoirs and novels.[16] Then again, some meanings may unfold, become distilled, and gain greater clarity over time, as knowledge of the broader events and their consequences has grown.

Among all memories, the experience of facing death is the most difficult to forget. Indeed, many memoirs reveal that survivors struggled with memories of direct encounters with death for decades, despite their efforts to suppress and forget them.[17] The most harrowing moments could remain vividly etched in their minds, even when they longed to erase them. Armen Anush, for instance, who was nine years old in 1915 and wrote decades later, eloquently captures this reality in his account of a tortured priest and the massacre of 75 men:

> Years passed. After my bloody childhood, I lived through the dark adolescence of our generation. I knew men, good and bad, noble and petty, I read the books and the tragedy they convoyed, but I never, ever could forget that day.[18]

In the context of traumatic events, hypermnesia – the abnormally vivid and persistent memory of past experiences[19]—tends to evoke despair and pessimism. Faced with the

14 An excellent discussion on the role memory in the heritage of the Armenian genocide in Lorne Shirinian, *The Landscape of Memory: Perspectives on the Armenian Diaspora* (Kingston: Blue Heron Press, 2004), 34–41. Shirinian's oeuvre has greatly inspired my writing.

15 This is not to say that the orphans could did not maintain their Christian identity; on the contrary, in the dramatic circumstances they could build a very strong Christian identity on tiny components such as a few prayers and private memory fragments (see below). But this very fact again shows how thoroughly the character of Christianity changed, from a bountifully tradition-rich way of life to a fragmentary one.

16 e.g. Dirouhi Ajemian Ahnert even states that the Easter greeting was *Surb Asvadz* ("Holy God"), instead of "Christ is risen". Margaret Ajemian Ahnert, *The Knock at the Door. A Journey Through the Darkness of the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Beaufort, 2007), 48.

17 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 111.

18 Armen Anush, *Passage Through Hell. A Memoir. The Odyssey of a Genocide Survivor* (Studio City: H. and K. Manjikian Publication, 2007), 11. His words bear some vague resemblance to Elie Wiesel's famous utterances in *The Night* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 43–44.

19 Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian, "Psychosocial Sequelae of the Armenian Genocide," in *Armenian*

overwhelming nature of such memories and the inability to process them, many survivors express profound difficulty in initiating their narratives. Ramela Martin noted in her preface: "I find I am frightened of a future filled with the past, filled with memories of terror."[20] Elise Hagopian Taft had to process the matter more than six decades before she was able to start writing:

> For more than sixty years I buried these sights and sounds and experiences of my childhood in the recesses of my mind. I could neither tell them to anyone nor write of them. Whenever the subject came up, I would freeze into silence and withdraw.[21]

Given these circumstances, starting the writing process was often distressing and painful, leading many to postpone the task for decades. In some cases, a dying relative or friend had requested that the events be documented, adding further pressure to undertake the project.[22] Writers thus grappled with the painful tension between suppressing their memories as a means of coping and the obligation to preserve them.[23]

Yet for these very reasons, writing could also serve a therapeutic and cathartic function. Through writing, one could confront traumatic experiences by externalising them and transforming them into objects of reflection. Ramela Martin, a toddler in 1915, examined her own writing process precisely from this perspective: "Writing makes me an observer, and I can examine my life without giving it gloss or glamour."[24]

Many writers were explicitly wrestling with these two approaches during the writing process. Hampartzoum Chitjian, fourteen years in 1915, after having passed the age of one hundred years still continued to describe with vivid detail the scenes of his father being tortured and the piles of bodies he had witnessed. At the same time, he recalled his bitter attempts to forget those images. Ultimately, he was left asking himself: "Did I escape only to relate my experiences as a living witness?"[25] This question alone underscores the profound existential weight that recording memories carried in processing destruction and suffering.

Bertha Nakshian Ketchian framed her writing as an act of bearing witness to the Turkish policy of genocide: "My writing is solemn testimony to the atrocities of the Young

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Genocide in Perspective, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1986), 179. Cf. Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 124.

20 Ramela Martin, *Out of Darkness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Zoryan Institute, 1989), v.

21 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 59.

22 Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha. A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide 1915–1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 287; Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, xv-xvi.

23 Marc Nichanian, "Testimony: From Document to Monument," in: Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 45.

24 Martin, *Out of Darkness*, v.

25 E.g. Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 111.

Turk government that robbed me of a normal childhood, my family, and my legacy."[26] Others, such as Hagopian Taft, wrote with the specific intention of passing on their heritage to future generations, stating that she recorded her experiences "so they would know something of their roots, the mass deportations, the atrocities perpetrated by the Turkish government in 1915 and hereafter."[27]

Theology of Genocide Memoirs: A Field of Paradoxes

Survivor memoirs are not ordinary reading; in a certain sense, they can be regarded as sacred documents. Broadly speaking, they hold a sacred status for all who respect and honour the memory of the victims. However, since April 2015, they have acquired an additional, though still not fully defined, ecclesiastical significance, as the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide have been canonised as saints,[28] albeit within an unforeseen category of sainthood. This development underscores a potential tension in academic study: the imperative to honour the suffering of victims and sacredness of these texts may conflict with the objective of engaging with them as problematised documents subject to critical scrutiny.

Theological texts, whether ancient or modern, typically exhibit some conceptual coherence, a hierarchy of thoughts, and an underlying schematic structure– usually an implicit systematic framework that articulates the relationship between God, humanity, and the world. Survivor memoirs, by contrast, do not present theological arguments or doctrinal assertions; instead, their "theology" may consist of raw and anguished exclamations, desperate remarks that defy systematisation. Rather than structured theological reflection, they offer a torrent of forceful outbursts–expressions of suffering that resist codification into a structured theological system.

How, then, should one proceed? Any theology of genocide should take seriously the approach of Elie Wiesel, who repeatedly underscored the inexplicability of the Holocaust. Even in interviews, Wiesel repeatedly responded by subverting or expanding the given paradigm, dismantling its implied logic and instead turning to paradoxical notions. When asked whether forgiveness died in Auschwitz, he replied: "In Auschwitz, everything died, in every way."[29] His conclusion was that Auschwitz cannot be understood either with or without God, rendering any response–whether humanistic or theological–ultimately inadequate.

This kind of paradoxical approach, which challenges established paradigms, can serve

26 Bertha Nakshian Ketchian, *In the Shadow of the Fortress* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), x.

27 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, vii.

28 Shushan Khachatryan, "A Resumption of Canonization after Centuries-Long Hiatus: The Armenian Genocide through the Lens of Neo-martyrdom," *SCRINIUM Journal of Patristics and Critical Hagiography* 20, no. 1 (2024): 178-216.

29 Elie Wiesel, *Evil and Exile* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 153.

as a methodological tool for theologising about the memory of genocide. The subject itself resists binary logic, as religious themes in survivor memoirs often appear two-sided and paradoxical, defying systematic analysis and escaping logical scrutiny. Whenever survivor memoirs engage with religious or philosophical questions, they frequently present contrasting perspectives, attitudes, and notions. Thus, following the spirit of Elie Wiesel, I will now proceed by questioning certain dichotomies.

To begin with, in the case of survivor memoirs, the question of whether a particular narrative element is "retrospective" or "authentic" is not necessarily a crucial issue. First, in the face of total destruction, all subsequent narrative decisions become a secondary concern. Second, from a psychological perspective, ideas often evolve over time, and this does not have to indicate distortion or alteration; processuality can be seen as their mode of existence. A certain sensation may have been intensely present during the events as an immediate yet indistinct feeling, only to be explicitly formulated decades later. In this sense, the distinction between "authentic memories" and "retrospective interpretations" is not an either–or matter; rather, these two categories overlap and permeate one another. This means that a given expression can be both "authentic" and "interpretative" as both notions refer to the same reality; comprehensions and expressions may develop and mature over time.

Moreover, a narrator may bridge the gap between retrospective reflection and the original perspective during the very act of narration itself. In his vivid account, Chitjian, at the age of 102, drifts into an emotional flow that carries him from the present moment back into the midst of the events, wailing: "Where was God at that time? Why was this happening? What was happening to us? When was my father coming home?"[30] He begins with questions from his present perspective and ends up immersed in the original situation. Here we also face the dichotomy of spoken and literary expression being blurred. Many memoirs contain such rhetorical questions that represent retrospective reflection amidst the historical narration: "Where was God on those terrible days?"[31] "How could He allow such an unconscionable act?"[32] Indeed, one might say that in survivor memoirs, God is a question rather than answer, unlike in standard Christian writing.

Moreover, it seems that both the urge to forget and the urge to remember coexisted already during the events themselves. The compulsion to forget was intensified by physical exhaustion and mental numbness:

> I wanted to block out the memories of death; death and tragedy all around me. I had no idea where I was, or with whom, or what treatment, if any, I had been given. I remember nothing of this period, neither by day or night.[33]

30 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 93.

31 Khachadoor and Helene Pilibosian, *They Called Me Mustafa. Memoir of an Immigrant* (Watertown: Ohan Press, 1992), 28.

32 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 5.

33 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 63.

Even the very concept of childhood can be questioned in the context of genocide. There are compelling psychological reasons to argue, as some survivors–particularly women–did themselves,[34] that children who went through the genocidal events were no longer children but had, in effect, become adults, regardless of their age. For example, Taft Hagopian reflected decades later in her memoirs: "I was fast becoming an adult before outgrowing my childhood."[35] Girls and women ceased menstruating, and many who became pregnant because of repeated sexual violence underwent abortions through "local means." However, the young survivors realised the scale of their physical and mental agony only long afterwards.[36]

Furthermore, one may question the modern tendency to separate what is considered "genuinely spiritual" from what is perceived as merely cultural and social conventions. The approach to this distinction inevitably shapes the way we interpret survivor memoirs, even in their smallest details. For instance, they contain numerous religious utterances and expressions, such as "Glory to God," which may easily appear to contemporary readers as nothing more than formulaic cultural conventions.[37] Yet this very division is, in many ways, artificial. There is no objective boundary between a "cultural convention" and what is "genuinely spiritual," given that the same words can be spoken with differing attitudes and intentions, and in any case, momentary emotions are not a criterion of spirituality. In fact, no definitive criteria exist for determining what constitutes something "genuinely spiritual." In the context of life and death, even the most conventional phrases–or indeed, their very absence–may carry profound significance.[38]

Similarly, it has become customary in modern discourse to presuppose a sharp distinction between believers and non-believers. However, in survivor memoirs, the meaningfulness of such a division is highly questionable. In the daily struggle between life and death, such distinctions lose their meaning, as both the foundations of faith and the certainties of atheism, humanism, and common sense are profoundly shaken. Moreover, even before the genocide, ordinary Christians in Armenian villages did not construct their identities around such distinctions. To be Armenian was to be Christian, and the nature or inner quality of one's Christianity was not a matter of debate in the way it is in modern Western culture.

34 Ibid., 70, 80.

35 Ibid., 52.

36 Ibid., 55.

37 Cf. the cases in Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 7, 49–50.

38 For example, even a phrase like "May God help us all," when spoken by a starving priest amidst death and despair, can carry a unique resonance and haunting effect, as illustrated in Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 67.

Spirituality of Children during the Genocide

With these reflections on the narrative context in mind, we now turn to the core question. The spirituality of children can be approached through three intertwined themes that appear from time to time in survivor memoirs: the nature of God, the problem of providence, and the role of prayer.

God. Christian theology is founded on paradoxes of the human-divine unity of Christ and the triune character of God. However, the modest theology reflected in survivor memoirs is not less paradoxical, shaped as it is by the surreal circumstances in which ethical and normative principles suddenly ceased to exist. Genocide represents an extreme form of human suffering and, as such, raises theological, ethical, and psychological questions in their ultimate forms.

But how to formulate the core problem? What is the ultimate question? From a practical perspective, it may be encapsulated in a single word. Already during the death marches, children were asking the simple yet profound question: Why? As Armen Anush recalls, "'Why? Why?' I kept asking myself but couldn't come up with an answer."[39] Given that the Armenian worldview was fundamentally religious, this was, at its core, a theological question.

The question "why" could be directed toward what theology calls the problem of divine attributes. Elise Hagopian Taft, eight or nine years old during the deportation, remembers wondering how their God could be so powerless:

> In my young mind I kept asking myself why we had been born Armenians, and why our God and Jesus Christ were apparently unprotective and less powerful than the so-almighty Allah and Prophet Mohamed of the Turks.[40]

Attributes such as "unprotectiveness" and "powerlessness" are certainly not present in any conventional theological scheme. This in turn illustrates the helplessness of traditional theological paradigms when confronted with the reality of genocide.

Where was God? How was He like? The question weighed heavily on children. Armen Anush described moments when religious beliefs clashed with the brutal reality of the death marches, rendering religious truths into clichés that seemed somewhat absurd:

> Mother stroked my hair and said, "God is almighty, son." Yes, God is almighty, but the rain began falling nonetheless, gently at first, then with vengeance. We walked […][41]

39 Anush, *Passage Through Hell,* 47.

40 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 57.

41 Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 35 (see also the case of a starving priest in p. 67).

In such circumstances, the only way to sustain faith was to situate God's existence beyond the cruel immediacy of lived reality. Serpouhi Tavoukdjian recalled her father's words, "God has purpose in all, though we may not see it."[42] Notably, such expressions often appear isolated and self-contained, lacking any indication that they belong to a coherent, internalised belief system. Rather, they function as discrete aphorisms–simultaneously resonant and irrelevant–offering meaning while failing to integrate with the surrounding narrative. And they are typically voiced by characters other than the narrator.

Nevertheless, despite the agonising inconsistency with theological realities, and the collapse of existential normality, faith in God could still endure and even sustain the deportees, serving as their last and only hope. As Hagopian Taft relates: "I had been 'skin and bones' after my father's death and only my faith in God and the memory of my parents and brother Garo sustained me."[43]

Providence. The religious question was not solely about God. Many memoirs convey a profound sense of disappointment in the Christian world, culminating in feelings of utter abandonment and isolation. While this sense of dejection was certainly present during the genocide, it appears to have only deepened over the years. Thus, for many survivors, the question of why was directed not so much at God as at the Christian nations and Allied forces–why had they not protected the Armenians? After recounting horrors so unbearable that many lost their sanity, including the mental collapse of her own uncle, Hagopian Taft posed the anguished question: "Where were all the so-called God-fearing Moslem and Christian people of the world?"[44] This may seem like a retrospective reflection, yet it was present from the very beginning. Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, thirteen years old in 1915, affirms that "everybody wondered" this very question at the outset of the events.[45] Later, she recalls:

> We still prayed that by some miracle of God, one or another of the Christian nations (who, surely, were aware of these deportations and massacres) would somehow, save us from our fate.[46]

Once again, we encounter a paradox: destruction was all-encompassing yet trust in God remained manifest against all realities. The unfolding events followed the inexorable logic of evil, leading towards utter devastation, yet within this trajectory, some still perceived moments of divine guidance or protection.

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42 Serpouhi Tavoukdjian, *Exiled: Story of an Armenian Girl* (Takoma Park: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1933), 61.

43 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 74.

44 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 59. "Not a finger was raised by the Christian nations to stop the wholesale murder of our people!" Ibid, 45.

45 Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl* (Watertown: Baikar Publications, 1985), 46.

46 Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl*, 57.

Many memoirs recount moments where survivors perceived God's providence at work in specific situations. While this belief was undoubtedly present during the events themselves, in some cases, it seems to have emerged as a retrospective interpretation. For instance, Antranik A. Enkababian recalls a harrowing choice he faced at six years old–either suicide with his family or enduring the torments of deportation with his uncle. Looking back, he believed that, in that moment, the Holy Spirit gave him strength to choose the latter.[47] In a wider picture, however, the totality of events renders the notion of protective providence profoundly problematic, even nonsensical.

Despite everything, many maintained their trust in God amidst all things and continued to uphold their belief in providence and Christian principles, even in the face of overwhelming devastation. Indeed, the overall atmosphere appears to have remained one of faith until the end. Armen Anush recounts that when a woman cursed her life and openly blamed God, those around her responded by murmuring, "May God forgive her," reflecting the prevailing reverence.[48]

In other words, while the external course of events led inexorably towards annihilation, punctuated by rare moments of perceived providence, the survivors' inner reality could be the inverse: an enduring faith in God, occasionally interrupted by moments of doubt and despair. These outbursts could become only more intense and bitter over the decades.

Prayer. Spirituality is a complex concept to define, but without doubt one of its most tangible expressions is prayer: the more one prays, the more spiritual one appears. This provides a practical way to approach the concept, though other aspects–such as ethical conduct, theological reflection, existential progress, or charismatic phenomena–should not be excluded. The genocide memoirs offer a rare opportunity of having some glimpses into the inner prayer life of small children more than a century ago.

Some memoirs suggest that even before the genocide, there was a sense of growing threat, met with spiritual response. Shahen Derderian, eight years at the time, recalls how hostility towards Armenians intensified in the spring of 1915, and, in turn, his family's evening prayers at home became increasingly fervent.[49] They also attended church services "with sizeable crowds almost every day." When Derderian asked his mother why they were going to church so often, she explained the gravity of the situation and the need to seek solace and support in their faith:

> She said we were there to supplicate for the Lord's protection against the coming evils. "God save us from the Turks," she used to whisper. "Who knows what calamities they'll subject us to again."[50]

47 Antranik A. Enkababian, *From Slaughter to Survival: An Autobiography by a Survivor of the Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Armenians* (Catonsville: Aladdin Publishing, 1999), 21.

48 Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 35.

49 Shahen Derderian, *Death March: An Armenian survivor's memoir of the Genocide of 1915* (Studio City, California: H. and K. Manjikian Publication, 2008), 2.

50 Derderian, *Death March*, 3.

Similarly, at the outset of the deportations, prayer became more intense. As Khachadoor Pilibosian notes, "Many were praying, fearing the trap of death."[51] Chitjian describes his father's unwavering faith, recalling his sincere prayers and firm belief that God would protect them: "Without the will of God, the leaves on the trees do not move."[52]

Yet, it was often the mothers who kept the spirituality alive. John Yervant, then eight years old, recalls how, after his father disappeared, his mother kept saying: "Children, pray to God, he will return." Nevertheless, he bluntly remarks: "We prayed day and night, but we still did not see him."[53] Likewise, Elise Hagopian Taft notes that even when men were present, it was the women who upheld morale–for example, by singing Der Voghormya ("Lord, have mercy").[54] In the same vein, Kerop Bedoukian notes: "I longed to see acts of heroism, but these were rare and usually performed by women."[55] Of course, this was largely due to the fact that men were rarely present, as in many places they had been shot at the outset of the events.

Prayer, too, takes on a paradoxical quality in this context. On the one hand, it could serve as a means of coping with the situation. A child who had lost her relatives is utterly helpless, yet through belief in God and trust in prayer, he/she could create a sense of companionship–an Other to walk with, someone to whom one could speak. One may note that this could provide some solace regardless of the actual existence of God.

During the death marches, the deportees encouraged one another to keep praying in order to endure.[56] Serpouhi Tavoukdjian, for instance, repeatedly recited biblical verses taught by her father[57] and kept praying through the nights, keeping God constantly in mind.[58] This carried a twofold potential: first, it represented something that the perpetrators could not strip away; second, it opened existential perspectives that transcended the immediate hopelessness. In this sense, prayer could function as a vital resource for survival.

For most Armenians, belief in the power of prayer, or at least in its reasonableness, was taken for granted. In a world where God was "the only thing they could rely on," many "truly believed that God would come to their aid," as Karnig Panian (born 1910, Gurin village) recounts.[59] "We'll be keep praying for God's aid until there's no one left alive

51 Pilibosian, *They Called Me Mustafa*, 13.

52 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 88–90, 98.

53 Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button*, 18.

54 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 40.

55 Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived*, 45.

56 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 44.

57 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 33. She mentions "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28), and "the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them" (Ps. 34:7).

58 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 27.

59 Karnig Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura. A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 39.

to pray anymore," one woman noted.[60] Apparently, this kind of sentence can be read as a sarcastic note or as an expression of determined conviction; both meanings are applicable to "I the protagonist" and "I the narrator" accordingly.

Then again, after all the praying, the entire spiritual enterprise seemed futile, leading to frustration and anger. Spiritually speaking, the most unsettling aspect was precisely that the Armenians did pray persistently, yet their circumstances only worsened, from disaster to insanity. Thus, the question of God's role is not an abstract intellectual puzzle, but something intricately tied the pressing practical concerns; prayer became like a space where one could navigate this strange tremendum. As Arda Arsenian Ekmekji asks: "Why did the curses and the pleas that erupted like lava from our broken, tormented and torn hearts and rose to the altars of the heaven remain unanswered?"[61] Indeed, survivor memoirs reveal both extremes: on the one hand, a profound trust in and reliance on prayer; on the other, deep despair and frustration at its apparent ineffectiveness. While survival itself could be interpreted as a miraculous providence, survivors rarely view the setting from an individualistic perspective.

However, one should keep in mind that the eastern conception of prayer is meditative rather than simply a presentation of petitions and requests; its function is to foster participation in God rather than engage in a dialogue with him. In that sense, at its deepest, prayer is introspective and contemplative, particularly in spiritual literature and monastic practice.

Moreover, when considering the role of prayer in "coping with tragedy", we must also reflect on the actual meaning of this question. In Western contexts, such an inquiry is typically framed in psychological terms, focusing on individual recovery. Yet, in Armenian survivor memoirs, this is not always the case. Rather, prayer may function as a collective phenomenon, contributing to the preservation and formation of ethnic and national identity. This was particularly crucial for those whose identities were still forming–namely, children.

Perhaps surprisingly, it was precisely the meditative nature of prayer that could serve in the preservation of ethnic identity. During the marches, Karnig Panian silently repeated the Lord's Prayer, realising how a "strange confidence" grew within him each time he uttered the words, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." This confidence did not stem from conscious reasoning or cognitive process but from a meditative one, as he later admitted having repeated the verse "without even understanding the words."[62]

Prayer became a lifeline, allowing children to hold onto something essential from their lost life and threatened identity. Some memoirs describe in detail the systematic efforts to convert children, with some references to prayer as a means of resistance. For example, in Chitjian's village (Perri, in Kharpet area) this process began even before the deportations,

60 Ibid., 49.

61 Arda Arsenian Ekmekji, *Towards Golgotha. The Memoirs of Hagop Arsenian, a Genocide Survivor* (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2011), 116.

62 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 34.

amid the atrocities. The children were first given Islamic names and forbidden to speak Armenian, forced instead to use Turkish; only later were they introduced to some basics of Islam. Soon, however, the Turks realised that older children would retain their Christian identity—and decided to kill them.[63] Why, then, did Armenians not convert to Islam in large numbers, as that would have been an easy means of preserving one's life?[64] The answer does not necessarily lie in individuals' steadfast faith or profound personal experiences, but in the collective and historical depth of Armenian spirituality, cultivated over centuries. In moments of extreme crisis, survivors resorted to this historical perspective. Shahen Derderian records his uncle's explanation: "The Turk has often massacred us, but the Armenian people has always survived and prevailed."[65] Likewise, Hagopian Taft explains this phenomenon through a historical lens, one that had become fundamental to Armenian identity during the centuries.

> Our Christianity had become a way of life for us ever since it had been introduced to Armenia by the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Throughout the centuries our ancestors had sacrificed their lives and resisted conversion by a score of conquerors and remained Christian. They had died that our faith might live. We could not do less. Christianity for us was no Sunday morning affair. In life and death we remained Christian.[66]

Yet the pressure on orphaned children was overwhelming. In Turkish orphanages, Armenian children faced a strict ban on speaking their native language as part of a broader policy of forced assimilation. Some memoirs offer striking insights into how they responded to this suppression. Karnig Panian recalls how he and many other boys would cross themselves under their blankets and silently recite Armenian prayers–Hayr Mer and any others they could remember. It is telling that the words of these prayers evoked images of relatives and neighbours rather than thoughts of God or religious experiences.[67] Yet this does not diminish the authenticity of their spirituality; it just shows the down-to-earth character of religious experience. Reflecting on the meaning of prayer, Panian later wrote: "I barely understood the words, but without any family left, this prayer was basically my only connection to my past and my identity. It was my shield against Turkification."[68]

63 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 102–4.

64 The option was repeatedly offered by the Turks, especially in the first phases of the genocidal process, but the Armenians "preferred death to deportation," as Hagopian Taft (*Rebirth*, 55) reminiscences.

65 Derderian, *Death March*, 9.

66 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 55.

67 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 96, 108–9.

68 Ibid., 108. For a detailed discussion, see Rubina Peroomian, "The Institutions of Turkification and Assimilation in the Eyes of Armenian Orphans Who Fled Them," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024): 1–27; Edita Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, Shushan Khachatryan and Narine Margaryan, "In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in

Moreover, older boys encouraged the younger ones to pray to "our God," preserve their language, and never forget that they were Armenians.[69] When they finally managed to escape from the orphanage, they immediately declared that from now on, they would "pray out loud, proudly, and in Armenian."[70]

Children facing the "Christian moral imperative"

Spirituality is not only about prayer and contemplation–it shapes one's entire worldview and way of life, particularly in social relationships and ethical decisions. For child survivors, the struggle for survival was not only physical but also an ethical challenge. How could one live according to Christian values while navigating life on the streets? Once again, we encounter two opposing responses.

On one hand, some held firmly to their Christian identity and moral principles despite hunger and hardship. Kerop Bedoukian recalls how, in 1917, he still had a deep sense of honesty and responsibility and was committed to retain them, while struggling to survive on the streets–especially in contrast to a Turkish boy who stole without hesitation. He even admitted to having felt envy towards the Turk who was not bound by the same moral code as the Armenians.[71]

On the other hand, some accounts reject such moral restraint. In Mushegh Ishkhan's autobiographical novel, street boys appear hardened and ruthless, with no regard for their Christian identity.[72] While it would be unfair to judge begging children for ethical lapses, it is relevant to note that both approaches reinforce a common association between Christianity and virtues such as honesty and nonviolence–qualities that, in the brutal reality of the streets, could seem more like liability and weakness than strength.

For young girls, the primary threat, and often their only option for survival, was sexual slavery as concubines. Caught in this harrowing dilemma, many felt compelled to consider suicide. Serpouhi Tavoukdjian recounts how she attempted to drown herself but, upon realising that taking a life was a sin, could not go through with it. Instead, she prayed for death.[73] However, many others did not hesitate and threw themselves into rivers. Such acts of suicide can be understood not only as extreme ethical statements but also as profound expressions of traditional Christian morality—voluntary death as martyrdom, echoing the accounts of the early Church.

State Orphanages During the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 243–263; Shushan Khachatryan, "Halide Edip and the Turkification of Armenian Children: Enigmas, Problems and Questions," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 48–79.

69 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 119.

70 Ibid., 124.

71 Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived*, 126–127.

72 See the discussion on Ishkhan's novel in Peroomian, *Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 126.

73 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 61.

Conclusion: Memorizing God after Decades

Survivor memoirs contain a wealth of memory fragments concerning God, prayer, and spirituality. However, these references are often scattered throughout the narrative, with little elaboration or further exploration. This reflects the gradual erosion of the religious context, Christian customs, and spiritual attitudes, which lost their Sitz im Leben amid massacres, deportations, concentration camps, and the challenges of building new lives in exile. Yet the questions never disappeared, and the role of God continued to perplex survivors.

For many survivors, however, God ultimately prevails in the end, even if they cannot fully explain why. Despite all they endured, faith somehow remained. Theologically, their views on God and providence are usually quite simple; undoubtedly this is related to the fact the events were experienced in childhood and remembering them often meant returning to a child's perspective. But there is also a theological reason: after the genocide, religious convictions and beliefs do not coalesce into a coherent system; rather, traditional formulations remain detached units that may seem true from one perspective but hollow from another.

Nevertheless, reflections may become crystallised over time, articulated with the confidence of age. Throughout his memoir, John Yervant is notably reluctant to offer spiritual interpretations. Yet in his concise, almost laconic final chapter–written more than six decades after the genocide, and after having distributed much of his wealth to the Armenian cause–he solemnly declares: "I believe that it was God's wish that I live and become successful: I think I did my share."[74] Similarly, Elise Hagopian, after listing how "poets, writers, scholars, artists, doctors, lawyers, skilled artisans, and priests had nearly all been killed," concluded: "those still alive had survived by the grace of God."[75] This is perhaps a way to say that the courses of life and twists of fate are not in human hands, but they are not random occurrences either.

The most thought-provoking perspectives, however, belong to those who refuse to settle on a single answer, instead holding on to both sides of the dilemma, continuing to wrestle with the paradox. Many grappled with this enigma by engaging with it from opposing viewpoints. Chitjian's memoirs exemplify this struggle: on the one hand, he repeatedly affirmed his faith in divine providence, attributing his survival to God; on the other, he voiced bitter accusations, at times even charging God with deception. At the remarkable age of 102, he was still searching for the ultimate reason behind the events.[76] In other words, the same survivor could express gratitude to God for his life and declare Him a deceiver. Despite his advanced age, Chitjian continued to ask why he had survived. He considered various possibilities: perhaps it was God's will, or perhaps he had been spared

74 Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button*, 92.

75 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 71.

76 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 85, 90, 93, 99, 105, 109, 113.

to bear witness to the atrocities.[77] Yet, in what may be the most distinctively Armenian response–in all its impossibility–he believed he had survived in order to return home. Indeed, he clung to the conviction that the ultimate purpose of survival was to resettle their ancestral lands: "Why else did I survive?"[78] Chitjian kept asking in his old age.

Finally, Chitjian captured the survivor's reality in a single, haunting phrase: "You never survive from a genocide." In the mouth of a survivor, this is yet another paradoxical truth. Ultimately, each answer is merely one side of an ever-turning coin.

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77 Ibid., 94.

78 Ibid., 219.

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