

# GUARDIANS OF MEMORY: THE ROLE OF THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH IN POST-GENOCIDE ARMENIAN IDENTITY

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## Abstract

This article examines the Armenian Apostolic Church's role in preserving post-genocidal Armenian identity and memory within Armenia and the diaspora. It argues that the Church acts as a vital link connecting past traumas to present identity and future aspirations through rituals, narratives, and community institutions.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines theoretical analysis with survey data from Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. The theoretical framework draws from theories of collective identity, memory, and religion in post-conflict societies. The survey explores perceptions of the Church's role in preserving identity and genocide memory, noting differences between Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. In the diaspora, higher religiosity correlates with more frequent interaction with the Church, especially its communal activities. The Church is seen as a place to connect with Armenian identity, holding traditions and fostering a sense of Armenian Christian unity. This article also indicates that some believe a clear Armenian culture or identity might not exist today without the Church.

The article emphasises the Church's enduring significance as a pillar of Armenian resilience, particularly against assimilation in the diaspora, where communities are in constant fear of it. The findings contribute to understanding religion's role in post-traumatic identity and memory, suggesting future research areas like engaging younger generations and impacting genocide recognition advocacy.

**Keywords:** Armenian Apostolic Church; Armenian Genocide; collective memory; diaspora; identity; religion

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“Who Remembers the Armenians?”  
 I remember them  
 and I ride the nightmare bus with them  
 each night  
 and my coffee, this morning  
 I’m drinking it with them.  
 You, murderer –  
 Who remembers you?<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

During a research visit to Holy Etchmiadzin in September 2024, my attention was drawn to the central role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in shaping Armenian religious life and collective identity. Armenian Christianity, rooted in antiquity, has historically functioned as a core marker of ethnic continuity and communal cohesion. This religious framework has been profoundly shaped by the legacy of the Armenian Genocide, a collective traumatic experience that continues to structure social memory both within Armenia and throughout the global Armenian diaspora. The interrelationship between religion, genocide, identity formation, and collective memory—both in the Armenian homeland and in diasporic contexts—constitutes the central analytical focus of this research.

In April 2015, during the centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian Apostolic Church canonized Armenians killed by the Young Turk regime during the genocide, recognizing them as martyrs.<sup>2</sup> This decision underscored the enduring significance of collective trauma within the religious life of the Armenian Church and the broader Armenian community. The Armenian Genocide remains inseparable from post-genocidal Armenian ethnoreligious identity. Although specific numbers were not invoked during this act of mass canonization, nor could all victims necessarily be classified as martyrs within the theological framework of the Church, the event nevertheless symbolized a powerful intersection between religion, trauma, and collective remembrance.

Yet how is this relationship understood by ordinary Armenians? What meanings do they attribute to the genocide in their everyday lives? What role does the Church occupy in their perceptions of identity, memory, and belonging?

This article examines the role of genocide and religion in shaping post-genocide Armenian identity in the modern era. Its primary focus is on the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving and transmitting the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide, both within Armenia and across the global Armenian diaspora. Collective

<sup>1</sup> Najwan Darwish, *Nothing More to Lose* (NYRB/POETS, 2014), 104.

<sup>2</sup> Shushan Khachatryan, “A Resumption of Canonization after Centuries-Long Hiatus: The Armenian Genocide through the Lens of Neo-Martyrdom,” *Scrinium* 20 (2024):178, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1163/18177565-BJA10117>.

memory is a fluid and dynamic concept, continuously subject to reinterpretation and reconstruction across generations, particularly within geographically dispersed communities. At the same time, it serves as a crucial anchor of group identity, providing a shared sense of history, values, and collective destiny. Within this context, religion remains one of the principal elements uniting Armenians worldwide, which makes the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church especially significant in the preservation and transmission of collective memory.

The Armenian Genocide and its legacy have become cornerstones of modern Armenian identity, with religion constituting an integral component of this identity formation. The canonization of genocide victims represents just one example of the profound interconnection between religion, identity, and the memory of those targeted and killed on the basis of their ethno-religious belonging. Yet identity is not a fixed category; it is dynamic, negotiated, and subject to transformation over time. This raises a central question for the present research: who serves as the principal guardian of Armenian identity—the Church, the state, or other social and cultural institutions?

This study seeks to explore how Armenians in both Armenia and the diaspora perceive the Armenian Apostolic Church and its role in preserving collective memory and national identity. It asks whether significant differences or similarities exist between homeland and diasporic perspectives; how the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide has shaped Armenian religious identity; whether the Armenian Church remains the most essential institution in the preservation of Armenian identity; and to what extent it may be regarded as a true “guardian of memory.” The study also examines how diasporic Armenians preserve their sense of national belonging and resist assimilation in diverse social contexts. These questions are addressed through data collected from a survey conducted among Armenians in Armenia and across the diaspora.

Armenian identity is among just few ethnoreligious identities in the world. Armenians have a long history of persecution because of their religion and ethnicity. Researching how people perceive religion in modern times is particularly useful when the religion is so closely related to collective trauma. Comparing the views of Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora offers the prospect of generating insights on the role of religion in identity building. This research contributes to our efforts to understand the role of collective trauma, memory and religion in the process of identity building.

The primary research methods employed for this article were surveys and interviews conducted among Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. The central aim was to investigate the opinions and perceptions of the role and significance of the Armenian Apostolic Church. These surveys and interviews were carried out in Armenia, the USA, Australia, and various other countries across the world, providing a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives held by Armenians in both the homeland and the diaspora.

This article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between the Armenian Apostolic Church, the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide, and the ongoing construction of Armenian identity, examining how the Church functions as a repository of cultural heritage, a symbol of national resilience, and unity. A century after

the genocide, the Armenian identity continues to evolve, and the souls of killed martyrs continue to be an indivisible part of that identity.

## Historical Context: The Armenian Genocide and the Church's Role

Armenians have inhabited the Armenian Highlands, a historical homeland covering more than 600,000 square kilometers, for millennia.<sup>3</sup> There, they developed a distinct culture, identity, and statehood. In 301 AD, Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion.<sup>4</sup> From that moment onward, Christianity became an integral component of Armenian ethnoreligious identity. Yet the same faith that helped shape and preserve Armenian identity also made Armenians a target of discrimination, persecution, and mass violence throughout history, culminating in the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

In its last decades, the Ottoman Empire struggled to reform and centralize its losing territories. This failed program resulted in mass violence against ethnic and religious minorities, especially in the end of the 19th century, when violence against Armenians became more frequent and systematic. In the quarter century preceding the 1915 genocide more than one hundred thousand Armenians were murdered.<sup>5</sup>

Ottoman authorities saw minorities as a threat to the Empire, which was getting weaker and weaker. World War I and war hysteria related to defeats motivated Ottoman authorities even more to proceed with a radical plan of centralization of the country and removal of its Christian population.<sup>6</sup>

In 1915, the Ottoman government implemented a systematic plan to eliminate its Armenian population. When undertaken, the plan became the Armenian Genocide. Among the decades-old plan of constructing a homogenous nation state by eradicating all non-Muslims, the start of systematic massacres of the Armenian population was also motivated by the participation of some Armenians in the Russian army and the Van uprising in April 1915.<sup>7</sup>

On April 24, 1915 a large number of Armenian intellectuals, among them also priests and other community leaders were arrested in Constantinople and later executed.<sup>8</sup> The idea was to remove the Armenian leading and intellectual elite and to prevent any kind of resistance to a broader campaign of elimination. Over the course of the following months, a systematic campaign of extermination engulfed the Armenian population throughout the Ottoman Empire.

3 Robert H. Hewsen, "The Geography of Armenia," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1: The Dynastic Periods, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 5.

4 Meliné Karakashian, "Armenia: A Country's History of Challenges," *Journal of Social Issues* 54, no. 2 (1998): 385; Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia—A Very Brief History* (Yerevan: Zangak-97, 2021), 8.

5 Marc David Baer, *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars and Caliphs* (London: Basic Books, 2022), 13.

6 David Gaunt, "When Perpetual Persecution Becomes Ottoman Genocide," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 11, no. 1 (2020): 2.

7 Noah Berlatsky, *The Armenian Genocide* (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2015), 40.

8 Zoe Lowery and Jeri Freedman, *Genocide in Armenia* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2017), 22.

In the following months, around 1.5 million Armenian men, women and children were killed.<sup>9</sup> Armenians were deported from their ancestral lands and forced to march to the Syrian Desert, where they were subjected to starvation, disease, and mass murder. Armenian children, especially orphans, were taken away with the intention of being assimilated and converted to Islam.<sup>10</sup> This genocide erased Armenian presence from historic Armenian lands and changed the demographics of the region forever. Yet it also created a new Armenian identity of survivors, and a strong diaspora that tried to keep Armenian identity and culture alive far from the homeland.

The fact that some survived genocide because they converted to Islam<sup>11</sup> argues in favour of the religious interpretation of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Apostolic Church shared the same faith and destiny with its people. Destruction of both the ethnicity and religion of Armenians was a way towards cultural genocide.

The Armenian Apostolic Church in pre-genocide decades was divided into three major centres: the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Great House of Cilicia and the Holy See of Echmiadzin. The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople was not just a religious centre but also a de facto representative of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire in charge of many administrative and legal issues concerning Armenians.<sup>12</sup> The church was an institution of unity, language and cultural preservation. Because of its spiritual and identity role in the life of Armenian people, but also because of its leadership capabilities, the Armenian Apostolic Church was seen as a target of genocide. During the genocide, thousands of priests and higher-ranking clergy were killed.<sup>13</sup> Many monasteries, churches, seminaries and schools were destroyed and looted.<sup>14</sup> The organization and implementation of genocide showed a direct intention of Turkish authorities not just to destroy Armenians as a nation, but also their cultural heritage and religion, and completely erase any evidence of their centuries-long existence.<sup>15</sup>

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9 Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 486.

10 Edita G. Gzoyan, Regina A. Galustyan, Shushan R. Khachatryan, and Narine V. Margaryan, "In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in State Orphanages during the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 243-263. See also Shushan Khachatryan, "Halidé Edip and the Turkification of Armenian Children: Enigmas, Problems and Questions," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 50.

11 Shushan Khachatryan, "Some Aspects of Theology and Religious Studies of Genocides: The Armenian Case," in *Dal Paleolitico al Genocidio Armeno: Ricerche su Causaso e Asia Centrale*, ed. Aldo Ferrari and Erica Ianiro (Ca' Foscari, 2015), 112.

12 Simon Payaslian, "The Destruction of the Armenian Church during the Genocide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 1, no. 2 (2006): 149-150.

13 Nerses Vrej Nersessian, "The Impact of the Genocide of 1915 on the Armenian Orthodox Apostolic Church," *Sion* 82, no. 10 (2015): 66-67.

14 Dickran Kouymjian, "When Does Genocide End? The Armenian Case" (Lecture, Sonoma State University, 2003), 8-10.

15 Peter Balakian, "Raphael Lemkin, Cultural Destruction, and the Armenian Genocide," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 65.

After the genocide, the Church emerged as a source of spiritual and material assistance to the refugees and orphans. For the tens of thousands of survivors scattered around the region, different churches and monasteries served as shelters for them. For example, more than ten thousand survivors were saved and sheltered by the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem in Palestine.<sup>16</sup>

The mass dispersal of Armenian Genocide survivors across the globe led to the establishment of new dioceses and communities in numerous countries. This facilitated the critical preservation of Armenian identity, the unification of Armenians worldwide, advocacy for genocide recognition, and the enrichment of the cultural diversity in their new homelands. This also transformed Armenian identity, as it developed along divergent trajectories between post-Soviet Armenia and the diasporic communities, which faced the influence of assimilation. Nevertheless, the Armenian Apostolic Church has served as a unifying force and a core, indispensable element of Armenian identity across these diverse contexts. Today, the Armenian Genocide is officially denied by Turkey,<sup>17</sup> so the Church also has a role in the fight against genocide denialism.

Despite facing the ongoing challenges of combating genocide denial and reclaiming its seized properties and cultural heritage in Turkey, the Church continues to play a central role in safeguarding the Armenian people's cultural and religious heritage.<sup>18</sup>

## Theoretical Framework: Identity, Memory, and Religion

Everyone has a story, and everyone has an identity. Stories are an inseparable part of ourselves and our identities. People construct their identities through narratives that help them understand themselves and their place in the world. Identities can be both individual and collective, and collective memories play a key role in both.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, identities cannot exist without memory.<sup>20</sup>

Memories can be positive or negative. Collective traumas are significant experiences that challenge a group's or society's existence or fundamental values and create lasting psychological consequences. These traumas significantly affect collective memories and identities and create an important foundation for post-traumatic nation-building.<sup>21</sup> With this outcome, the new nation gains a narrative, "past abuses," on which it bases its new

16 Harry Hagopian, *The Armenian Church in the Holy Land* (n.p.: 2017), 15.

17 Ozlem Belcim Galip, "The Armenian Genocide and Armenian Identity in Modern Turkish Novels," *Turkish Studies* 20, no. 1 (2019): 92-119.

18 Aram I, "The Armenian Genocide: From Recognition to Reparations," *International Criminal Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 233-41.

19 Lea David, "Against Standardization of Memory," *Human Rights Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2017): 303.

20 Selma Leydesdorff, "How Shall We Remember Srebrenica? Will the Language of Law Structure Our Memory," in *Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society*, ed. Y. Gutman, A. D. Brown, and A. Sodaro (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 125.

21 Kirk A. Denton, *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021), 17.

national identity.<sup>22</sup> Every nation needs a narrative for the construction of its nationhood,<sup>23</sup> but in the situations of collective traumas, those traumas could be selected as “chosen traumas” and become a central point of formation for new nationhood.<sup>24</sup> Genocide intends to destroy a certain group and its identity, which means also the group’s collective memory and its complete sense of attachment to its past and history.<sup>25</sup> After the genocide, the “shattered nation” needs to be rebuilt.<sup>26</sup> Collective trauma then becomes an integral part of a nation’s DNA and its identity onwards.

The “grand narrative”<sup>27</sup> of genocide, as formulated by Badema Pitic, becomes fundamental to the group’s identity and is used to make sense of the past and present and to guide the future. Also, with the support of the state, that narrative becomes part of institutions and is used in a systematic way.<sup>28</sup> This intersects with religion, which provides frameworks for understanding suffering, death, and injustice, but also serves as a source of resilience, resistance, and identity preservation. This is especially important when it comes to transmitting memories to younger generations. A unique feature of collective identity is its possibility to be transmitted to members of a group who did not witness or participate in events that formed that memory.<sup>29</sup> By sharing identity, we also share memory and the complete past of our community. Hirsch sees this as postmemory - “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”<sup>30</sup>

Ethnoreligious societies are formed around a shared religious faith and a shared ethnicity. The fact that one group shares so much makes the identity and connection between groups even stronger. This is even more the case during and after collective traumas, when religion serves as a “force for reconciliation and healing.”<sup>31</sup> Avigail Eisenberg argues that religion

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22 Joseph P. Feldman, *Memories before the State: Postwar Peru and the Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 164.

23 John David Brewer, “Memory, Truth and Victimhood in Post-Trauma Societies,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, ed. G Delanty and Kumar (London: SAGE, 2006), 216.

24 Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser, “Remembering the Past in Diasporic Spaces: Kurdish Reflections on Genocide Memorialization for Anfal,” *Genocide Studies International* 13, no. 1 (2019): 10.

25 Jeffrey Blustein, “Conceptions of Genocide and the Ethics of Memorialization,” in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Memory*, ed. J. Lindert and A. T. Marsoobian (Cham: Springer, 2018), 36.

26 Suranjan Weeraratne, “Assessing the Many Faces of Transitional Justice in Timor-Leste,” in *Remembrance and Forgiveness: Global and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. A. Karamehić-Muratović and L. Kromjak (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 212.

27 Badema Pitic, “Musical Commemorations and Grand Narratives: The Case of the Oratorio ‘Srebrenički Inferno’ in Post-Genocide Bosnia,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 2 (2021): 466.

28 David Mwambari, “Music and the Politics of the Past: Kizito Mihigo and Music in the Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda,” *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6 (2019): 1321.

29 Steffi De Jong, *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums* (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 12-13.

30 Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103.

31 Doris L. Bergen, “Religion and Genocide: A Historiographical Survey,” in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. D. Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 215.

can be either a choice or an identity.<sup>32</sup> In these situations when it is part of identity, it is inseparable from it and acts as a uniting factor. This bond is sometimes so strong that members of a group hardly differentiate their religious and ethnic identities.

The religious role in preserving collective memory includes several elements, including gathering people, protecting national identity, language, culture, and preventing assimilation among diasporic communities. Religion helps groups maintain a connection with their past, serving as a “chain of memory.”<sup>33</sup> If religion was one of the reasons for groups to suffer, like genocide, the connection between ethnicity and faith is even stronger. This relation can create a form of religious nationalism that “posits a sacred mythical relationship between worshipers, the past, and a territorially demarcated land.”<sup>34</sup> Armenians are an ethnoreligious group, where the Armenian Apostolic Church plays a vital role in their communal identity. Usually with ethnoreligious groups link is so strong that sometimes it looks as if there is no religion, and there would not be ethnicity either.<sup>35</sup> However, the role of the Church is much more than a pure expression of faith. The main role is actually preservation of Armenianness both in Armenia and the diaspora.

Due to its role in preserving cultural identity, religion often assumes heightened significance among diasporic communities compared to the homeland, transcending its primary function as an institution of faith.<sup>36</sup> Thus by its decision to canonize the victims of the Armenian Genocide and declare them as martyrs, the Church established a permanent link between religion, identity, and memory. The Church linked its past to its present, and with this tradition, it became a shaping narrative of the future.<sup>37</sup> With this action, the Church established a continuous cycle of remembrance, reconciliation, and renewal, reinforcing the Armenian identity and its determination to never forget its history and past and its collective traumas. Genocide became an integral part of the Church’s concerns, providing “individuals and groups a cross-generational sense of belonging in time.”<sup>38</sup> Memorial museums work in the same way—they want visitors to “identify with the victims, in this way instilling them with empathy and the ability to connect the past and its trauma to their own lives.”<sup>39</sup> Church has the same role and intends to connect its members with martyrs and their victim. This is especially the case with the Armenian diaspora,

32 Avigail Eisenberg, “Religion as Identity,” *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* 10, no. 2 (2016): 297.

33 Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 125.

34 Pnina Werbner, “Religious Identity,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Identities*, ed. M. Wetherell and C. Talpade Mohanty (London: SAGE, 2010), 254.

35 Steward Harrison Oppong, “Religion and Identity,” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 3, no. 6 (2013): 14.

36 Lori Peck, “Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity,” *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): 218.

37 Jakub Urbaniak, “Religion as Memory: How Has the Continuity of Tradition Produced Collective Meanings? - Part One,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 2.

38 Jeffrey R. Seul, “‘Ours in the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, and Inter-Group Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (1999): 561.

39 Harutyun Marutyan, *Commemorating the Armenian Genocide* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2026), 17.

which is under the constant risk of assimilation and loss of identity.

Panossian argues that the answer to the question “When a collective becomes a nation?” should be found in that collective’s past. In the Armenian case, that is genocide and post genocidal “diasporan existence.”<sup>40</sup> Of course, this does not mean that the Armenian collective was not a nation before the genocide. However, “historical memory can be either organic or dead: we can celebrate what we never experienced in reality, live and maintain such a past alive, or be alive only in historical records, the so-called cemeteries of knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Collective memory can bring those forgotten narratives and make them part of the collective identity. That is when traumatic events became an inseparable part of the main structure.

## **Methodology: Survey Design and Implementation**

The methodology employed in this research centres on a survey designed to capture the perceptions and attitudes of Armenians, both within Armenia and across the diaspora (mostly Western), regarding the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the preservation of Armenian identity and the memory of the Armenian Genocide. The survey instrument was carefully crafted to elicit detailed responses on the multifaceted influence of the Church, incorporating a blend of quantitative and qualitative questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Also, in-person unstructured interviews were conducted.

Regarding the quantitative questions in the survey, all were designed on a 1 to 10 scale, 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest level of agreement. These questions were related to the perception of the Church’s importance, but also to the religiosity of respondents. For example, those questions were “How would you assess the importance of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide?” “Is the Armenian Apostolic Church the primary and most important institution for preserving Armenian identity?” and “How religious are you?” The final question is not intended to measure religiosity in a narrow or purely experiential sense; rather, it is designed to capture respondents’ broader relationship to religion as a social, cultural, and identity-forming framework.

Qualitative questions were designed to enable respondents to express their thoughts and considerations freely about the topic, providing detailed answers and adding new ideas and discussions about the role of the Church that researchers had not considered during the research design. For example, questions like: “In your opinion, what is the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide?” “Does the Armenian Apostolic Church in your community adequately take care of preserving

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40 Razmik Panossian, “The Past as Nation: Three Dimensions of Armenian Identity,” *Geopolitics* 7, no. 2 (2002): 121-122.

41 Harutyun Marutyan, “Collective and Historical Memory in the Dialogue of Cultures,” *21-st Century* 2 (2007): 24.

the memory of the Armenian Genocide?” “If the Armenian Apostolic Church, both as a religious institution and a place of social gathering for Armenians, did not exist, would the memory of the genocide weaken over time? In other words, is the Church the one ensuring that the memory remains permanent and is passed on to younger generations?” “What is the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving Armenian identity?” and for those in diaspora, “If you live in the diaspora, what is the role of the Church in preserving your national identity and the identity of your descendants?” In-person interviews were unstructured, and respondents were allowed to speak freely on all of the topics mentioned above and their own experiences.

The survey had 132 respondents, including several interviewees. Surveys and interviews were conducted among Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. Armenians in Armenia were selected during my research stay in Yerevan in September 2024, as well as through online research. Armenians in diaspora were selected during my research stays in the USA, Australia, and via the internet in 2024 and 2025. In total, there were 22 respondents from Armenia, and 110 from the rest of the world.

Regarding the limitations, language was one of them, as the survey was conducted in English. This is one of the reasons for more responses received from the USA and English-speaking countries than from Armenia. Because of this, future research should focus more on Armenia and compare results with those presented in this research. Additionally, this survey primarily targeted the younger population, so it would be reasonable to conduct the survey again in the future to assess any potential changes in opinions between generations.

## Survey Findings and Analysis

“The Church is the birthplace of our souls. She is the keeper of our hearts, our pains, our memories. The church no longer remembers those who died as ‘victims’ but as ‘martyrs for the faith.’ In that way, the Church has elevated their memory.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Armenia*

The survey results indicate that the average level of religiosity among respondents from Armenia, on a scale from 1 to 10, was 5.41. Approximately 36% of respondents rated their religiosity between 1 and 3, while 9% rated it between 4 and 6. Furthermore, a majority of 55% of respondents reported a high level of religiosity, with scores ranging from 7 to 10.

Regarding the rating of the Armenian Apostolic Church’s importance in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide, the average score on a scale of 1 to 10 was 6.91. The percentage of those who rated the importance of the Church from 1 to 3 is 23%. The percentage of those who rated the importance of the Church as 4 to 6 is 9%. A considerable proportion of the respondents, specifically 68%, indicated a strong conviction in the Church’s importance by assigning a rating between 7 and 10.

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<sup>42</sup> Armenian (Diaspora), R109.

The question related to whether the Armenian Apostolic Church is the primary and most important institution for preserving Armenian identity had an average of 5,32 on the scale from 1 to 10. 32% of respondents evaluated it as 1 to 3. 32% of respondents evaluated it as 4 to 6. 36% of respondents evaluated it as 7 to 10, meaning that only a third of respondents are in strong agreement that the Church is the most important source of identity.

These results indicate that Armenians from Armenia differ among themselves about the Church. Those opinions stretch from total disagreement with this institution to complete support.

Those who are not in agreement with the Church mainly state that the Church is a “political institution with no political power”<sup>43</sup> and that has a “minimal role”<sup>44</sup> in preserving Armenian collective memory related to genocide. One responder stated:

I believe the Armenian Apostolic Church is a completely rotten institution which has pimped out the memory of the Armenian Genocide for largely their own material benefit, and through our decrepit conservatism has effectively halted social progress of Armenians. They continue to portray Armenians as “victims” and memorialize them singularly like so, which, in my opinion, has helped create an inferiority complex in Armenians. Why not memorialize us as Victims AND Survivors? What about those who resisted?<sup>45</sup>

This critique highlights dissatisfaction with the Church’s perceived self-serving actions and its role in perpetuating a victim mentality among Armenians.

Those rating Church’s role in preserving genocide memory with mid-range scores, note that “the church’s role is in preserving Armenian heritage and culture as it surrounds our Christian faith, I don’t agree that the church necessarily is preserving the memory of the deportations and exterminations. However, it is keeping that culture in far-off lands where Armenians fled and then settled, becoming a community centre around which, the Armenian people built.”<sup>46</sup> This view suggests that some see the Church as a heritage and culture protector, which is also seen as a part of collective memory.

On the other hand, those who are supportive of the Church note:

The Armenian Apostolic Church plays a significant role in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide in several ways. First, the Church is a place where the Armenian people gather to understand and remember their history. Major events such as Holy Week, Christmas, and various church commemorations and memorial services emphasise

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43 Armenian (Armenia), R2.

44 Armenian (Armenia), R3.

45 Armenian (Armenia), R1.

46 Armenian (Armenia), R4.

the remembrance of the genocide, along with prayers dedicated to the souls of the victims.<sup>47</sup>

Also, this large connection between genocide and religion is seen as:

definitely great, as commemoration is one of the main functions of religion. But we need to remember that the genocide is central *lieu de memoire* in Armenia for the last 100 years, and it developed as a sort of quasi-religion of its own—in this sense, I would say, genocide commemoration is somehow “competitive” with the Armenian Apostolic tradition as a national/civic religion.<sup>48</sup>

Others also saw the role of the Armenian Church as “crucial,”<sup>49</sup> “important,”<sup>50</sup> and that it had a “key”<sup>51</sup> role.

However, most of the respondents, regardless of their opinion about the Church, somehow agree that the Church on the local level does not always adequately take care of preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>52</sup> One respondent gave a detailed explanation of what Church means to him:

As a community member, I believe the Armenian Apostolic Church plays a vital role in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide, although its level of engagement can vary depending on the specific community.

1. Commemorative Services: In many Armenian communities, the Church organizes commemorative services on April 24, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, where members gather to honour the victims and reflect on the genocide. These services often include prayers, hymns, and messages from clergy that reinforce the importance of remembering the genocide.

2. Educational Efforts: In some communities, the Church also provides educational resources and supports initiatives that aim to educate younger generations about the genocide. This may include Sunday school programs, church-sponsored talks, or collaborations with local organisations that focus on genocide awareness.

3. Cultural Activities: The Church often organizes cultural events, such

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47 Armenian (Armenia), R9.

48 Armenian (Armenia), R7.

49 Armenian (Armenia), R10

50 Armenian (Armenia), R14

51 Armenian (Armenia), R20.

52 Armenian (Armenia), R5 and R6.

as art exhibits, lectures, and concerts, that help raise awareness of the Armenian Genocide. These activities help foster a collective sense of identity and history within the community.

However, the effectiveness and scope of these efforts can differ across communities. In some areas, there might be more active engagement and resources dedicated to preserving the memory of the genocide, while in others, it may not be as emphasized, especially if the community is smaller or has fewer resources.

Overall, the Armenian Apostolic Church in many communities does play an essential role, but there is always room for further engagement, especially in reaching younger generations and expanding educational initiatives.<sup>53</sup>

Respondents are also divided regarding the Church's role in preserving Armenian identity and memory about the genocide. They link the Church with religious identity and cultural heritage, but also note that the Church is more essential in diaspora. In Armenia, there are many other organizations that take care about this question, but in the diaspora, the Church is the one that connects Armenians to their roots.<sup>54</sup> However, the majority of Armenia-based Armenians still think that "Armenian identity is linked to being Christian and a follower of the Church."<sup>55</sup>

### *Diaspora*

Among Armenians in the diaspora, the situation is similar, but religiosity in the diaspora is slightly higher. Respondents rated their religiosity with an average score of 6,04 on a scale from 1 to 10. Those who rated their religiosity with marks from 1 to 3 compose 26,6% of respondents. From 4 to 6 marks were given by 21,1% of the respondents, and from 7 to 10 marks were given by 52,3%.

Regarding the importance of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide, the average score was 7,70 on a scale from 1 to 10, which means that Armenians in the diaspora consider the Armenian Church a very important institution in collective memory preservation. Only 7,3% of respondents gave marks from 1 to 3. Marks from 4 to 6 were given by 17,5% of respondents, and 75,2% gave marks from 7 to 10.

Respondents from diaspora averagely agreed that the Armenian Apostolic Church is the primary and most important institution for preserving Armenian identity, with a 6,95 score, which is significantly higher than in Armenia. 12,9% of respondents gave marks from 1 to 3, 27,8% marks from 4 to 6 and 59,3% marks from 7 to 10.

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<sup>53</sup> Armenian (Armenia), R9.

<sup>54</sup> Armenian (Armenia), R11 and R21.

<sup>55</sup> Armenian (Armenia), R13.

A small number of those in diaspora who negatively look at the Church note that there is no role or it is not treating genocide in a unique way, different from any other community gatherings.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, those who have a medium or positive attitude towards the Church's role in genocide memory preservation argue that its role is "preserving its memory through a religious lens in the history of the Armenian nation."<sup>57</sup> One respondent noted that Church had a "huge impact on my growing up in the Church as a child."<sup>58</sup>

Another respondent gave a detailed explanation of what Church means to him: "From a cultural standpoint, the Armenian Church is a central beacon of the Armenian community amongst the diaspora. It reminds us of our faith, our language, and of our culture."<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, another respondent explained what it looks like when there is no Armenian Church in their community:

All religions engender 'community' and a sense of family. The Armenian Apostolic Church does this as well, and plays a critical role in preserving Armenian heritage, culture, the language, etc, particularly in the diaspora. I was not brought up in an area where there was a thriving Armenian community. There is a very small number of people in the area who have Armenian heritage, but without a "center place" for them to gather, to hear people speak the language, share traditional foods, sing traditional songs, dance to traditional music, etc, they don't really have a sense of Armenian "identity" other than knowing that their grandmother or great-grandmother was Armenian. Wherever there is an Armenian Church, there is a central place for the heritage and culture to be shared.<sup>60</sup>

The church is also seen as a place of socialization and an "open space" for discussing topics that may be taboo within families. For example, one respondent noted that "especially in the diaspora, the Church is a place where the Armenian Genocide can't be forgotten and where diaspora Armenians can have a closer contact with their own history. Especially when one of our parents isn't Armenian. In my own family, no one talks about the Armenian Genocide and maybe going to the church would be a way to know better our history."<sup>61</sup> Also, the Church has an educational role, because "the Church provides a place where we come together and remember each year. It is important for Armenians to be together and share stories. Sometimes there is a school attached to the

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56 Armenian (Diaspora), R2, R5 and R7.

57 Armenian (Diaspora), R9.

58 Armenian (Diaspora), R14.

59 Armenian (Diaspora), R36.

60 Armenian (Diaspora), R42.

61 Armenian (Diaspora), R60.

Church. The students there are taught about the genocide alongside Armenian culture and history. A regular school doesn't do that."<sup>62</sup> Diasporan Armenian people see the Church as an independent institution, not affected by politics and something eternal. The Armenian Apostolic Church has been the only institution that has been stably and constantly functioning for thousands of years. It is the only one that preserves all the human values; it unites all the Armenians together. The role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide is now essential.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the question whether the Armenian Apostolic Church adequately take care of preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide in respondents' communities, a majority of those who live in places where there is an Armenian Church responded positively, but often noted that more could be done. As one respondent observed:

The church organizes and participates in key events, such as the annual Armenian Genocide Commemoration. These events often include marches, memorial services, and gatherings at our Armenian Genocide Memorial and placing flowers on it, which helps to honour the memory of the victims. That said, whether it 'adequately' preserves the memory of the genocide might depend on individual perspectives. Though the Church's efforts might be seen as sufficient, I feel that more could be done. I personally believe more can be done particularly in terms of outreach to younger generations and educational programs as the younger generations may get a sense of the yearly events and attend them, but not fully comprehend why these yearly events take place, how the genocide has affected our nation to this day, and the full extent of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>64</sup>

Opinions are mixed regarding the question of whether the memory of the genocide would weaken over time if the Armenian Apostolic Church did not exist. The main argument of those who say that the memory of the genocide would not weaken over time is that family and community are the guardians of that memory.<sup>65</sup> However, others note that "the church brings the community together and funding for school (Armenian education), and this is what makes a greater contribution to keeping the memory alive. This and what is learned at home."<sup>66</sup> From these responses, we may conclude that the Church is present, directly or indirectly, in the memory preservation process. Church is important, but "it is a place for the people to gather, but it will always be the people who

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<sup>62</sup> Armenian (Diaspora), R86.

<sup>63</sup> Armenian (Diaspora), R120.

<sup>64</sup> Armenian (Diaspora), R90.

<sup>65</sup> Armenian (Diaspora), R4, R12 and R15.

<sup>66</sup> Armenian (Diaspora), R32.

gather that keep the memory alive.”<sup>67</sup>

The exact role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in preserving Armenian identity is seen as “community building,”<sup>68</sup> “socializing with other Armenians,”<sup>69</sup> “preservation of Armenian Language and religion,”<sup>70</sup> and creation of a “united feeling of being Armenian Christians.”<sup>71</sup> In essence, they agree that “if it wasn’t for the Armenian church, I don’t believe there would be a very clear Armenian culture or identity by today.”<sup>72</sup> It is interesting that even those who were critical in previous responses now see the Church as a really important institution. As one respondent said, “Our faults were in our faith. Our faith is what kept us going.”<sup>73</sup>

When asked what the Church means to them and their descendants, and how it affects their identity, many argue that the lack of a Church in their locations is a problem and has a negative impact on their identity. On the other hand, those who live close to active religious communities note that the Church “it’s the only place I feel tied to the Armenian community.”<sup>74</sup> One described the Church as “the primary institution with which I connect with my Armenian identity. It holds the tradition that I follow, which connects me with Armenianness.”<sup>75</sup>

What Church means is best described in the response from one person who said:

my family and the Church are all I have that keeps me connected to my roots. It helps pass on national identity by nurturing our traditions, history, culture, and providing spiritual and communal support. It is also the only other place, aside from my home, where I can speak the Armenian language with others. I believe the church ensures that the Armenian identity remains alive for future generations. When I was younger, Sunday school helped shape my ethics, values, and customs, and as an adult, attending church helps me preserve them.<sup>76</sup>

At the end, it could be concluded that “there is no Armenia without the Church” as noted by one respondent.<sup>77</sup>

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67 Armenian (Diaspora), R130.

68 Armenian (Diaspora), R5.

69 Armenian (Diaspora), R17.

70 Armenian (Diaspora), R8.

71 Armenian (Diaspora), R10.

72 Armenian (Diaspora), R13.

73 Armenian (Diaspora), R62.

74 Armenian (Diaspora), R71.

75 Armenian (Diaspora), R73.

76 Armenian (Diaspora), R90.

77 Armenian (Diaspora), R80.

## **Discussion: The Church's Role in Post-Genocide Identity and Memory**

People have “right to know”<sup>78</sup> about their sufferings. State and non-state actors are the main guarantors of this right. Non-states actors are NGO-s, societies and other interest groups, and also Church. We can say that non-state actors are in some cases even more important, for example, in the Armenian case, and especially in the case of the Armenian diaspora. Also, the uniqueness of the Armenian diaspora in the West is also the fact that its majority is formed by descendants of genocide survivors from Western Armenia, who also formed a unique form of Armenian identity and point of view that does not always align with the point of view that comes from the Armenian state.<sup>79</sup> The Armenian state is a newcomer in the discussions on identity, as the Armenian identity existed centuries without a state at all. However, “the best monument to the (genocide victims) memory is the resurrection of the Republic of Armenia.”<sup>80</sup>

However, both places of martyrdom,<sup>81</sup> and places of new communities in distant countries have become the basis for Armenian identity, where the Church plays a very essential role. Armenian identity and its relation to genocide, especially in the diaspora, are very complex with various layers and forms, and affect people in various ways.<sup>82</sup>

During the decades after the genocide, many survivors refused to talk about their traumatic experiences.<sup>83</sup> This created the gap, and many memories were forgotten. However, with socialization and the communal role of the Church, many were able to trace their roots and regain knowledge that had been forgotten. That was an almost century-long “struggle to preserve Armenianness after the forceful eviction from a historical homeland to a strange host country.”<sup>84</sup> This research aimed to track this struggle and its potential benefits and weaknesses.

Religiosity is slightly higher in the diaspora than in Armenia, with an average religiosity of 6.04 in the diaspora compared to 5.41 in Armenia (Figure 1). Therefore, we can conclude that the religious factor remains almost the same. The reason why Armenians in diaspora are more religious can be found in other responses and can be concluded that higher religiosity comes from more frequent interaction with the Church because of its side communal activities.

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78 Richard J. Wilson, “Restoration of Historical Memory and Dignity for Victims of the Armenian Genocide,” *International Criminal Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 336.

79 Sossie Kasbarian, “The Politics of Memory and Commemoration: Armenian Diasporic Reflections on 2015,” *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 1 (2018): 137.

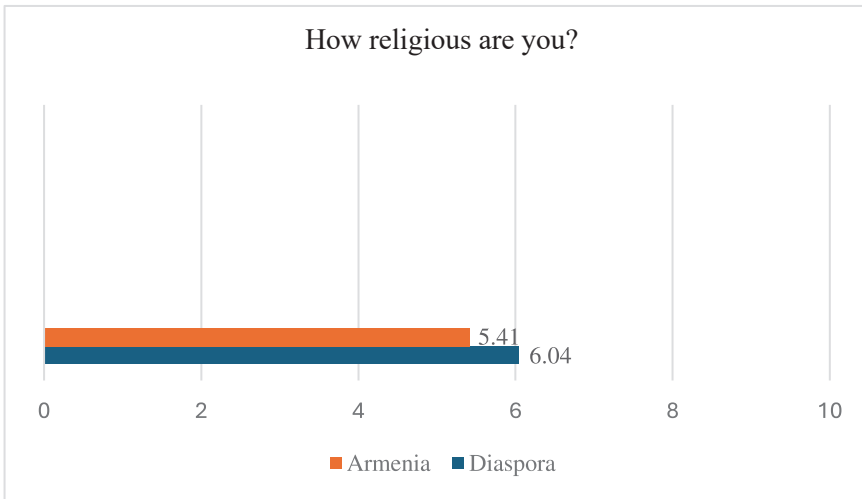
80 Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (University of California Press, 1993), 189.

81 Shushan Khachatryan, Hayk Hakobyan, and Garnik Harutyunyan, “Identification and Identity: Quest for the Armenian Martyrdom Sites in the Modern Times,” *Scrinium* 19 (2023): 276.

82 Dmitry Chernobrov and Leila Wilmers, “Diaspora Identity and a New Generation: Armenian Diaspora Youth on the Genocide and the Karabakh War,” *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 5(2020): 921.

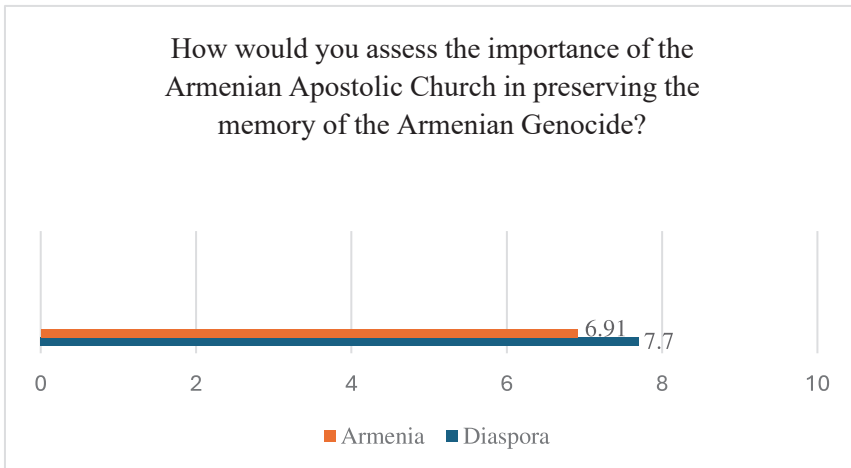
83 Harutyun Marutyan, “Museums and Monuments: Comparative Analysis of Armenian and Jewish Experiences in Memory Policies,” *Etudes Armeniennes Contemporaines* 3 (2014): 60-61.

84 Sevan Beukian, “Motherhood as Armenianness: Expressions of Femininity in the Making of Armenian National Identity,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2014): 262-263.



*Figure 1: Religiosity*

Armenians in the diaspora also see the Armenian Apostolic Church as a more important institution in preserving the memory of the Armenian Genocide (Figure 2). The average response for this question in the diaspora is 7.70, compared to 6.91 in Armenia. This is mainly due to the fact that in Armenia, many other institutions deal with the Armenian Genocide, while in the diaspora, this is almost entirely limited to the Church and its events and commemorations. Also, spending time with other Armenians and talking about stories related to the genocide is a way of preserving and transmitting memories.

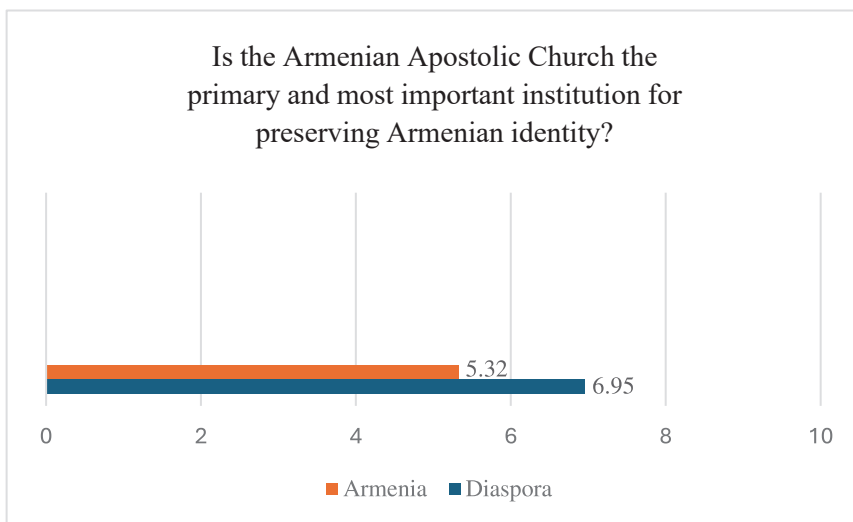


*Figure 2: Perception of the importance of the Church regarding the memory preservation*

However, the most significant difference in perception is the Armenians in different countries' position on the Armenian Church regarding its importance for preserving Armenian identity (Figure 3). Armenians in Armenia are not as reliant on the Church, giving it a score of only 5,32, while Armenians in the diaspora, with a score of 6,95, consider the Church their most important institution in this process. This is also due to

the majority of institutions and the Armenian Government in Armenia, as a nucleus of Armenian identity. In the diaspora, where communities are on their own and constantly fear assimilation, the Church is the centre and the safest place to express and learn about Armenian identity.

This is also encouraged by the very unique behaviour of Armenians in the diaspora. Their phenomenon of “dual loyalties” has been noted for a long time. In essence, Armenians in diaspora tend to be highly incorporated into the cultures of the countries where they live, while also continuing to express their strong Armenian national identity and pride in their closed family or communal gatherings, including religious ones.<sup>85</sup>



*Figure 3: Perception of the importance of the Church regarding the identity preservation*

The generation of genocide survivors is gone, so the question is how future generations are going to be influenced by memories about genocide and survival? What the research reveals is that most people in the diaspora rely heavily on the Church. Previous research<sup>86</sup> has shown that family and family members are the main source of narratives, but in the future, the Church tends to be the only place of communal memory.

Now, the main source of memory is the process of “remembering together,”<sup>87</sup> gathering, talking, and preserving identity. During the genocide, Ottomans were forcing Armenian children to forget their Armenian names.<sup>88</sup> Commuting and sharing stories

<sup>85</sup> Duygu Gul Kaya, “Memory and Citizenship in Diaspora: Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Canada,” *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 4 (2018): 401.

<sup>86</sup> Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, “Memory and Identity Across the Generations: A Case Study of Armenian Survivors and Their Progeny,” *Qualitative Sociology* 14, no. 1 (1991): 19.

<sup>87</sup> A. T. Marsoobian, “Collective Memory, Memorialization and Bearing Witness in the Aftermath of the Armenian Genocide,” in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Memory*, ed. A. T. Marsoobian and J. Lindert (Springer, 2018): 307.

<sup>88</sup> Gzoyan et al., “In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage,” 254. See also Edita Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, and Shushan Khachatryan. “Reclaiming Children after the Armenian Genocide: Neutral House in Istanbul,”

within Church gatherings ensure that Armenians will never again forget their names. As people increasingly engage and participate in these groups and places where collective memory is shared, they become more aware of themselves and who they are.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

The Armenian Apostolic Church has historically served as a crucial institution in preserving Armenian identity, particularly in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide. Its unique position in the creation of Armenian ethnoreligious identity made the Church inseparable from the fate of Armenia and the Armenian people both in the country and its large diaspora all around the world. The Church became the source of identity and collective memory, while also serving as the protector and preserver of these two elements. This is especially the case in the Armenian diaspora, where other institutions that exist in Armenia but not in diaspora, have small influence? In the diaspora, the Church is typically the only institution responsible for preserving Armenian identity and keeping Armenians connected to their roots.

This research reveals nuanced perceptions within the Armenian community regarding the Church's role in post-genocidal identity formation and memory preservation. The main findings emphasise that the Church is not only a religious institution but also an important social and cultural centre, especially in diaspora communities. Armenians in the diaspora view the Church as significantly more important than their compatriots in Armenia, as other institutions are also present in Armenia. However, even in Armenia, sentiment towards the Church and its role is generally favourable. The survey responses indicate a strong consensus that the Church plays a significant role in maintaining Armenian identity and genocide memory preservation through language, religion, education and cultural traditions.

The Church and its link with genocide and identity have not been a subject of much research in the past. Further research might explore its connection to younger generations and analyze concrete actions taken among diasporic communities. Additionally, the Church's role in advocacy and political activism related to genocide recognition should be explored in more detail. More fieldwork, both in Armenia and the diaspora, should be conducted, utilizing qualitative interviews and ethnographic studies. Additional scholarship might examine more closely the role of priests in memory, identity, and genocide.

This research aimed to contribute to empirical foundations for understanding the complex dynamics between religion, identity, and collective memory in the context of post-genocidal societies. The findings underscore the significance of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a pivotal institution for Armenians in both Armenia and the diaspora,

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*Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 33, no. 3 (2019): 395-411.

89 Harutyun Marutyan, "The Memory Management Issue," *21-st Century* 1 (2007): 93.

providing valuable insights into how religious institutions can shape identity and preserve cultural heritage. The Armenian Apostolic Church continues to be the most important national institution among the Armenian people, especially those in diaspora, which ensures that the Armenian identity remains alive for future generations.

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## About the Author

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