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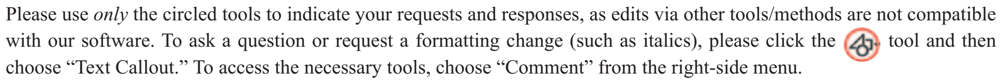

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Religious vs secular nationhood: 'Multiple secularities' in post-Soviet Armenia

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Abstract
This article draws on the notion of 'cultural defense' to examine how nationalism shapes contemporary contestations around religion and secularity in Armenia. While clearly relevant, this framework has rarely been used for the analysis of religious change in the Caucasus region as part of the broader post-Soviet space. This article fills this lacuna. Simultaneously, it moves beyond the relatively narrow interest in the degree of secularization or reinforced religious nationalism as social outcomes of cultural defense situations. Instead, we are interested in how boundaries between religion and secular spheres in society are drawn in particular ways, how the resulting religious–secular configurations have evolved since the end of the Soviet Union – of which Armenia was a part – and how concepts of nationhood and nationalist mobilizations have shaped this process.

Keywords
Armenia, cultural defense, nationalism, religious minorities, secularity

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Résumé
Cet article étudie la notion de 'défense culturelle' afin d'examiner la manière dont le nationalisme intervient dans les contestations contemporaines à propos de la religion et de la laïcité en Arménie. Tout en étant très relevant, ce contexte a rarement été utilisé pour l'analyse du changement religieux dans la région du Caucase en tant que partie de l'espace postsoviétique. Cet article comble cette lacune. En même temps, il va au-delà du simple intérêt pour le degré de sécularisation ou pour le renforcement du nationalisme religieux comme résultats sociaux des situations de défense culturelle. Par contre, nous nous intéressons à la façon dont les frontières entre la religion et les milieux séculiers de la société sont établies, la façon dont les configurations religieuses séculières qui en résultent ont évolué depuis la fin de l'Union soviétique – dont l'Arménie faisait partie – et à la manière dont les concepts de nation et de mobilisations nationalistes ont façonné ce processus.

Mots-clés
Arménie, défense culturelle, laïcité, minorités religieuse, nationalisme

Introduction

In 2015, Armenians commemorated the first centenary of the genocide by the late Ottoman Empire's Young Turks government, committed by its army as well as local civilian helpers in the territories where Armenians lived. While today Turkish officials still refuse to recognize the atrocities as genocide, it became fundamental for the shaping of, and powerfully reinforced, Armenian religious nationalism. Responses to the genocide – both 'at home' and among the Armenian diaspora – buttressed the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) within collective identities and concepts of nationhood, and of religion as a marker of difference in the face of collective extinction. On April 23, 2015, after several years of consultations and preparation, the AAC canonized 1.5 million genocide victims at the Etchmiadzin Church. The ceremony of sanctification, which had been abandoned in Armenian Orthodoxy since the fourteenth century, became the central event of the genocide centennial commemoration and all high officials of Church and state were present.

This article draws on the notion of 'cultural defense' to examine how nationalism shapes contemporary contestations around religion and secularity in Armenia. Initially developed by David Martin (1978) and later taken up by Steve Bruce (2002), the notion of cultural defense suggests that secularization can be blocked or is less likely to occur in contexts of strong historical connections between the dominant religion and the nation. In such situations churches are viewed as the symbols of the nation. While clearly relevant, this framework has rarely been used for the analysis of religious change in post-Soviet space. This article fills this lacuna. Simultaneously, it moves beyond the relatively narrow interest in the degree of secularization or reinforced religious nationalism as social outcomes of cultural defense situations, which scholars have explored in great detail (Agadjanian, 2015; Siekierski, 2014). Instead, we are interested in how boundaries between religion and secular spheres in society are drawn in particular ways, how the

resulting religious-secular configurations have evolved since the end of the Soviet Union, and how concepts of nationhood have shaped this process.

In order to do so, we introduce the theoretical concept of multiple secularities (Burchardt et al., 2013; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012) to the study of cultural defense scenarios. We suggest that while different social groups mobilize notions of secularity as a means for the accommodation of religious diversity and for promoting individual freedoms, these mobilizations have very limited success, chiefly because they are unable to formulate a collective program that resonates with anxieties over national survival that are typical of cultural defense scenarios. Instead, as cultural defense theorists would predict, the public role of the AAC as the carrier of national identity has been fortified and concepts of secular nationhood weakened. However, there is a need to refine the cultural defense argument. Building on a more nuanced conceptualization of secularity, we show how specific forms of secularity emerge historically and evolved in post-Soviet society.

We argue that contestations over religious and secular concepts of nationhood and religious-secular configurations manifested and played out in three key domains, which we explore below: first, popular understandings of the role of religion in armed conflicts, especially the Karabakh War; second, understandings and regulations of religious diversity; and third, the visibility of religion in public space as evidenced in contestations around new church buildings.

Methodology

Methodologically, this article pursues a macro-sociological strategy that is based on two components: on the one hand, the analysis of historical developments; on the other, data gathered through the analysis of policy and legal documents as well as through problem-centered interviews carried out with policy experts, civil right activists and religious representatives between 2013 and 2015. Our analysis is in the first place a theory-driven interpretation of these data. For three reasons, Armenia is an appropriate case for applying the concept of 'multiple secularities': first, post-Soviet political transformations opened up a space of contestation over cultural values in which concerns over religion and secularity were central and shaped by multiple influences. Second, different influences were carried by distinct social groups who also framed secularities in opposing terms. As a consequence, there is not one single, progressively evolving secularity but multiple competing secularities. And third, because the ideological language of *secularism* is not widely spread in Armenia, it seems especially promising to employ the term secularity that simply refers to the non-religious nature of social spaces, institutions or social relations. Before presenting our findings we situate our account within the sociological literature on religion, secularity and nationalism.

Religion, secularity, nationalism

While nationalism can always be linked to religion, these links take on particular configurations in countries or regions which have historically been dominated by other nation-states or empires such as the British Empire, the Tsarist Russian Empire or the Ottoman Empire. Martin (1978) argued that religion is particularly likely to serve as a

source and carrier of national identity in dominated nations if the majority religion of imperial powers differs from that of the colony or dominated nation. This has been explored with regard to Ireland (Bruce, 2002), Poland (Zubrzicky, 2009), and Greece (Halikiopoulou, 2011). If to various degrees, all of these nations showed higher levels of religiosity than other Western societies due to pressures on national survival exerted by imperial domination. In particular, Bruce argued that where 'culture, identity, and sense of worth are challenged by a source promoting either an alien religion or rampant secularism and that source is negatively valued, secularization will be inhibited' (Bruce, 2002: 30–31). The church may fashion itself as the main force of protest against attempts 'to impose alien cultural values and identities upon a reluctant populace' (Bruce, 2002: 16). In other words, 'An indissoluble union of Church and nation arises, in those situations where the Church has been the sole available vehicle of nationality against foreign domination' (Martin, 1978: 107), and religion is 'reinforced by the heightened self-consciousness of a threatened or dominated nation' (Martin, 2005: 61).

While the cultural defense thesis dominates discussions in the sociology of religion, scholars of nationalism have also explored the nexus of religion, secularity and nationalism. Kohn (1944) famously distinguished ethnic and civic nationalism and subsequently scholars often found religion to nurture the former (Fox, 1999). More recently, sociologists critically interrogated ethnic/civic dichotomy and emphasized the religious sources of civic nationalism in ways reminiscent of Bellah's (1967) theory of American civil religion (Brubaker, 1999). Juergensmeyer (1993) argued that after the Cold War, religious nationalisms were on the rise because of the decreasing power of secular modernity and secular nationalism to inspire nationalist mobilizations. Importantly, van der Veer (1994: xii) argued that 'the definition of space and territory are central elements in religious nationalism', a finding whose relevance we later discuss with regard to the Karabakh War. Similarly, Brubaker (2012: 9) suggested that intertwinements of religion and nationalism often involve the coincidence between religious and national boundaries: 'the nation is imagined as composed of *all* and *only* those who belong to a particular religion.' We explore the impact of such imaginations on secular discourses on religious diversity.

While sociologists working in the cultural defense paradigm are broadly interested in secularization as an outcome, we actually start from observing a specific set of synchronicities: declining religious participation but also the increasing importance of religion in nationalist politics; the constitutional commitment to the separation of church and state but also the public recognition of the AAC as the national church and increasing church influence in political affairs. We take these tensions as a starting point to analyze not so much general secularization processes or religious vitality but boundaries between religion and non-religious social domains that have emerged in Armenia during the post-Soviet period. In order to do so, we focus on competing claims to secularity in the context of church/religion-nation articulations.

Multiple secularities: the concept

The dominant concepts in the current international debate are *secularization* and *secularism*. Until now, the concept of *secularity* has rarely featured centrally (Asad,

2003; Berger et al., 2008; Taylor, 2007). Whereas the concept of *secularization* is used primarily in sociological process models addressing processes of functional differentiation, religious decline, and privatization of religious practice, *secularism* refers to the arrangements of the institutional separation of politics/the state and religion as well as to their ideological legitimizations.

For reasons of analytical clarity, in what follows we propose to reserve the concept of *secularism* for the ideological-philosophical program – hence, for the explicit *ideology* of separation – and related political practices, and the concept of *secularity*, by contrast, for the institutionally as well as culturally and symbolically anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres. Following Asad (2003) we assume that both domains are first identified as religious and secular domains in the course of their differentiation. In Armenia, while secularism as an ideology is clearly subordinated to ethno-religious nationalism, we contend that nonetheless secularity exists. *Secularization* signifies both the process of differentiation, including diminishing mutual influences between religion and other social domains, as well as the decline in religious participation and belief (Casanova, 1994).

Therefore, the concept of *secularity* is more inclusive than that of *secularism* and also encompasses the at times latent, taken-for-granted forms of the distinction between the religious and the non-religious. In addition, we expressly do not confine the analysis to the relation between the state and religion but include other functional domains of society (for instance, those of law, education, science, business, architecture etc.), as well as the public sphere. The connection between such religious-secular distinctions and their legitimating guiding ideas differs empirically. One can assume that the corresponding divisions develop a special cultural dynamic where they are not only implicitly practiced but are made explicit and become condensed into *guiding ideas*. Whereas existing typologies between 'active' and 'passive' (Kuru, 2009), or 'moderate' and 'radical' (Modood, 2010) distinguish between degrees of secularism, we focus on cultures of secularity that are based on the *meaning* attached to the institutions, practices or discourses of differentiation and distinction with regard to religion.

By 'multiple secularities', in what follows, we mean the forms of distinction between the religious and other social domains (which are thereby marked as non-religious), that are institutionalized and in part legitimized through guiding ideas. We assume that these secularities reflect histories of conflict, respond to specific social problems and offer solutions to them. Obviously, these problems arise with different degrees of urgency at different points in time.

At a first approximation, we identify four such reference problems: (1) the problem of individual freedom vis-à-vis dominant social units, be they groups or the state; (2) the problem of religious heterogeneity and the resulting potential or actual conflictuality; (3) the problem of social or national integration and development; and (4) the problem of the independent development of institutional domains. It is clear that most of these problems are closely associated to the formation of *modern* societies and states and the ideas on which they are founded, whereas at least the second also arises in pre-modern societies. It is no accident that reflections on pre-modern sources of modern secularity generally begin here. The third type, by contrast, is very closely linked not only with modernist

state policy but also with progressive, anti-*ancien regime* nationalism as in post-revolutionary France, Turkey and Russia but also early twentieth century Armenia.

These four central problems provide motives for institutionalizing distinctions between the religious and other social spheres. As latent motives and social practices, they can certainly coexist, as overt motifs they may compete with each other. Our assumption is, however, that, given certain preconditions, one of them will become dominant at least for a certain period by being aligned with guiding ideas that set the basic terms for distinguishing religious and secular spaces in a given society, and thereby push the other motives, at least at times, to the background. There is no doubt, however, that these motives are often highly contested, especially in 'critical junctures' (Kuru, 2009) such as Armenia's post-Soviet transformation[1]. We use the formula 'secularity for the sake of…' to designate the different stakes and values secularity is called to promote and justify.

At a first approximation, we distinguish between the following forms: (1) secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties; (2) secularity for the sake of balancing/pacifying religious diversity; (3) secularity for the sake of societal or national integration and development; and (4) secularity for the sake of the independent development of functional domains of society. These four basic forms of secularity are associated with different guiding ideas: in the first type (1) it is the idea of freedom and individuality, in the second (2) that of toleration, respect and non-interference, whereas the third type involves (3) the ideas of progress, enlightenment, and modernity. The fourth type, finally, involves (4) the guiding ideas of rationality, efficiency, and autonomy.

We argue that until the end of the Soviet Union, secularity in Armenia was shaped by Soviet-style state-sponsored atheism, which - within the typology of multiple secularities - we interpret as 'secularity for the sake of national unity and development', with the idea that religion was a social force and human mindset to be overcome by means of science and reason[2]. During the post-Soviet period this notion of secularity lost state support and notions of 'secularity for the sake of individual rights' and 'secularity for the sake of accommodating diversity' began to compete. Both are promoted by particular groups in Armenian society (NGOs, human rights groups, political parties,) but the shifting understanding of secularity is also driven by Europeanization processes, adhesion to the European Convention of Human Rights and Armenia's integration into Western-style 'world polity' structures. There are also limits here as the refusal in 2014 to sign an association agreement with the EU under political pressure by Russia showed. Both notions of secularity, however, run up against powerful assertions of religiously-driven nationalism, which thrive on the memory of the Armenian genocide and contemporary threats by Turkey and Azerbaijan. The cultural defense situation implies that religion is in a much stronger position to develop and promote ideologies of national cohesion than secular forces and their abilities to fashion an alternative secular nationalism. We begin by describing the historical emergence of the religion/nationalism nexus in Armenia and emerging understandings of secularity.

Religion, secularity and nation in Armenia

Post-Soviet transitions

We suggest that the 'cultural defense paradigm' offers a very useful conceptualization not only for studying Armenian religious nationalism but also its consequences for

secularity. Armenia's religious-secular configurations are shaped by two fundamental frames: first, the cultural defense situation vis-à-vis Turkey and Azerbaijan, and second, the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet notions of secularity. Both historians and sociologists have highlighted the extremely close relationships between the AAC, the Armenian nation and Armenian ethnic identity (Panossian, 2002; Sarkissian, 2008). Historically, these links date back to the fourth century when Armenians officially accepted Christianity making the Armenian kingdom the first Christian polity in the world. Insecure and vulnerable statehood always had a strong impact on nationalist politics, which at least since the First Republic 1918-1920, shifted between ethnic and civic models of nationalism (Agadjanian, 2015: 25).

In fact, between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century modern nationalist leaders blamed the AAC of contributing to state breakdown (Siekierski, 2014: 11) and fashioned an early secularist and anticlerical critique. At the beginning of twentieth century then, there were four major trends within Armenian political and intellectual discourse: first, conservatives defending the central role of the church within the Armenian nation; second, anticlerical liberalism trying to restrict the church influence on public matters; third, national-revolutionaries (i.e. the Dashnaktsutiun Party) trying to take over the place of the church in public life; and fourth, social democrats (i.e. Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, etc.) demanding the separation of church and state. In other words, three out of these four political currents carried secular ideas. Secularist ideologies were also explicitly expressed at the council held in Etchmiadzin in 1906, though unsuccessful, but later the delegates of this meeting became the leaders of first Republic (Hovhannisyan 2008). The first president, Levon Ter Petrosyan (1991-1998), was widely perceived as Francophile and this French influence was noticed in his politics around religion. Again after independence, Armenia's 1995 Constitution emulated main principles of the French Constitution including the articles referring to the separation of church and state. Yet, despite this and post-Soviet Armenia's official promotion of universal citizenship and diversity, ethno-nationalist conceptions that emphasized the special mission of the AAC became increasingly prominent.

In this context, the resurgence of religion was less a phenomenon of spiritual revival than an element adding to such ethno-nationalist mobilizations. As Agadjanian (2014: 27) emphasized with regard to both Armenia and Georgia, the Orthodox Churches have been 'stereotypically described as the most ancient established Christian churches [...] hence serving, without interruption, as holders of an essentialized ethnic identity, including periods of statelessness when this identity was under threat.' The early periods of Soviet rule, especially the 1930s, were still characterized by anticlerical militancy and the partial destruction of religious heritage. After the withering of this militancy, however, ethno-religious nationalism was actually fostered during the Soviet period in two distinct ways: first, through the existence of ethno-religious subcultures; and second, the Soviet Union buttressed the nationalization of religion and the confessionalization of the Soviet Republics. Each of these was to be defined by, and to cohere around, an ethno-religious core within the broader ideology of the Soviet Union as a multiethnic empire that crystallized during the 1970s and 1980s (Agadjanian, 2015). In addition, the last two decades of Communist rule saw increasing approximation between the state and AAC leader Vazgen I, and four monasteries as well as 15 churches were restored to the AAC.

With regard to secularity, the demise of the Soviet Union and national independence had ambivalent consequences: On the one hand, it initiated the first significant engagement with notions of secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity and promoting individual freedom of religion. This engagement is exemplified in the constitutional separation of state and church, ratified on 5 July 1995. On the other hand, as elsewhere in the post-Soviet world, national independence came along with powerful ethno-nationalist mobilizations bringing the question of the religious identity of the nation back to the public agenda. More importantly still, the collapse of the Soviet Union raised massive concerns over national security, territorial integrity and relationships with Turkey, and thus reinforced the collective plausibility of 'cultural defense' interpretations. For many Armenians, the Karabakh War symbolized and reinforced these fears.

The subsequent political sacralization of the AAC as the national church reached a new stage when in 2005 the special relationships between it and the state were legally sanctioned through a constitutional amendment. As article 8.1 states: 'The church shall be separate from the state in the Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exceptional mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as the national church, in the spiritual life, development of national culture and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia. Freedom of operation for all religious organizations in accordance with the law shall be guaranteed in the Republic of Armenia. The relations of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church may be regulated by the law'[3]. Furthermore, the presidential inauguration involves a rite of making an oath on the Bible and blessings offered by the Catholicos and every session of the parliament starts with a prayer offered by him (Hovhannisyan, 2015: 188). Antonyan (2014a: 83) found that 'almost no public ceremony of enterprises, public constructions or institutions is conducted without a priest's blessing'. As we argue below, this preponderance of religious nationalism over collective notions of secularity was not a natural process but was wrought from specific historical events and the actions of specific groups.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war: religious or secular mobilization?

The first historical episode, in which religious-secular configurations took shape in relation to ethnic nationalism, was the Karabakh conflict between 1988 and 1994. Towards the end of the 1980s, the AAC with its newly opened diocese started to play an active role in the organization of public life of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians.[4] Initially, the church in Nagorno-Karabakh was less viewed as a religious than a national institution and the process of re-evangelization of local populations was carried out under concepts such as 'homeland', 'fatherland' and the 'restoring of historical justice'. In addition, Karabakh people were historically considered unbelievers but most of them recognized the AAC as an important cultural institution that preserved their national identity (Tchilingirian, 1997). Simultaneously, Archbishop Pargev Martirosyan played an essential role during the escalation of the conflict by binding people to the church.

During the escalation of conflict then in 1988, Azeri nationalist forces attacked the cathedral in Baku. In January 1990, pogroms against Armenians took place in Baku and

two Armenian Churches were closed and the Azerbaijan diocese of Armenian Church factually ceased to exist. Azeri spiritual leader Sheikh-ul-Islam Pasha-Zade criticized the destruction of these churches (Corley, 1998), yet these incidences intensified Armenians' articulation of national and religious belonging. We argue that while the conflict was initially framed as a territorial dispute between secular nation-states, this frame was successively displaced by religious frames. Priests began to offer baptisms for soldiers before going to the battlefield. Some priests and archbishop Pargev Martirosyan were present in the battlefield itself, offered inciting speeches and wore white crosses on their cloths during the attack on the city of Shusha. Initially, white crosses were made to distinguish one another at nighttime but later acquired a religious character.

The Azerbaijani government also represented the conflict as religious, tried to unite the Islamic world against Armenia and declared 'jihad'. This politics partly succeeded as many *mujaheddin* took part in it and the Organization of Islamic Conference adopted several formulas against the Armenia. During the war and even in peaceful times Armenians desecrated Islamic symbols while Azerbaijanis did the same towards Catholicos Vazgen I[5]. We argue that while the Karabakh War was a political conflict, such practices contributed to shifting the balance from secular towards religious nationalism.

One of the moments charged most powerfully with religious symbolism was the entry of Armenians troops into Shusha on 9 May 1993. Reverend Pargev led the march of soldiers entering the Ghazanchetsots Church, which was a warehouse during the war. Before the attack on Shusha, many of soldiers had come to the diocese asking for crosses. Pargev reported that he distributed more than one thousand crosses and suggested that those who could not get one made crosses on their cloths, and he gave them his blessing[6]. Prayer books too were distributed to a large number of soldiers. Twenty five thousand bibles and fifteen thousand children's bibles were distributed to the population. Often, the military detachments would come to the spiritual leader of Artsakh to get his blessing before going to war. Pointing to religious meanings of the conflict, De Waal (2010: 103) called Shushi the 'Jerusalem of Karabakh'. The capture of Shushi and liberation of the Ghazanchetsots Church became the iconic elements in a powerful imagery that was broadcast on television to forward the message that the Karabakh war about maintaining ethno-religious national identities.

Another essential element during the Karabakh war was the enhancement of the anti-Turkish feelings among Armenian on the basis of collective memories of the Genocide. The discursive identification of Turks and Azerbaijanis existed for the whole Soviet period but it became hostile as a result of the war. The Genocide memory was intensified following the overt assistance of Turkey to Azerbaijan and the closing of the Turkish/Armenian border in 1993. Anti-Turkish sentiments were also intentionally intensified by army commanders showing various movies on the Armenian Genocide before the battles so as to increase the nationalist spirit among the soldiers. The traumatic memory connected with Turkey played a role by involving many diaspora Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. One of them, Monte Melkonyan, became a symbol for freedom and his presence fostered the identification of Turks and Azerbaijanis since the Armenian diaspora is chiefly the result of the Genocide. The first victims of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were buried near the Genocide memorial in order to demonstrate that the Karabakh war was the continuation of events that began in Turkey about 70-80 years

earlier. Interestingly though, both presidents of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan stressed that the Karabakh was an issue of self-determination. President of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutalibov too stressed that conflict was the result of Armenian nationalists claiming an Azerbaijani territory (Corley, 1998).

Secularity for the sake of individual freedoms and diversity

Our discussion of the Karabakh war showed how secularity came under pressure as public discourses surrounding the war delegitimized and marginalized secular concepts of nationhood while championing ethno-religious nationalism. A second arena, in which we observe religious-secular configurations are the political and legal debates surrounding religious diversity and freedom of religion that emerged since the late 1980s. In line with the above-mentioned nationalization of religions under the later Soviet regime, the AAC was the only religious organization that operated officially in Armenia during that period.

This situation changed with the Spitak earthquake that hit Armenia's northern regions in 1988. Following the earthquake, international faith-based humanitarian organizations entered Armenia. Next to providing material support, they also began preaching their faiths to local populations. As a consequence, Armenian society religiously diversified and Catholic and Evangelical communities became the first visible signs of these changes. In 1991, Pope John Paul II reconstructed the Catholic hierarchy of Armenia and appointed an ordinary for Armenian Catholics in Eastern Europe (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Russia). The Armenian Evangelical community was more diversified but its social projects too gained considerable power and followers among Armenians. While the legitimacy of these two communities was based on their consideration as traditional religious organizations, the Jehovah's Witnesses and various Pentecostal groups were publicly viewed as heterodox groups who 'invaded' Armenian territory.

There was thus a need for legal regulation and on 17 June 1990, one of the first laws adopted by the Supreme Council of Armenia was the 'Law on Conscience and Religious organizations'. The bill, passed after a meeting of Catholicos Vazgen I and the head of supreme council, guaranteed the freedom of religion, declared the separation of church and state but at the same time also recognized the AAC as the historic church for all Armenians. The law thus recognized Armenia's religious pluralization and at once affirmed the privileges of the AAC to restore churches, construct new churches and so on. Despite these new legal guarantees, members of Hare Krishna communities and Jehovah's witnesses were again harassed and prosecuted but the perpetrators never officially identified. Subsequently, the law remained largely identical and only some marginal amendments were adopted in 1997. It thus provided the basic frame of 'secularity for the sake of individual freedoms' since the law's main addressees were individuals, not groups. The notion of 'secularity for the sake of individual freedoms' therefore clearly trumps that of secularity for the sake of accommodating diversity since the latter concept is more directly concerned with balancing the rights of religious groups within the spheres of the state and civil society (Casanova, 1994), as for instance in India (Burchardt et al., 2013), pillarization era Holland (Schuh et al., 2012), and more generally in non-liberal versions of multiculturalism.

However, between 2013 and 2014 three different draft laws on religious organizations were presented to the public for discussion in order to make laws compliant with constitutional changes. Presented by the current minister of education and science, one of them included theological concepts (such as definitions of Christians as people worshiping the Holy Trinity, etc.) and was strongly criticized by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. The draft laws contained sections that aimed at restricting the activities of religious minorities, especially their charitable activities while again mentioning the special role of the AAC as the national church. All draft laws were the initiatives of the ruling Republican Party, a close ally of the AAC, and reflected attempts to rearticulate its ideology of conservative nationalism with AAC discourse, which the AAC took up eagerly.

Already in 2002, government introduced a subject titled 'Armenian Church History' to public school curricula for students between 5-11 years of age. While the subject was introduced as 'history of religions', it then changed into 'Armenian Church history' as an elective course, and in 2002 became obligatory for all public schools. Legally, public education in Armenia is secular and interventions by religious organizations may be deemed violations of these secular principles. However, while the ministry of education formally introduced the course, the Christian Education Center of Mother See Holy Etchmiadzin, which is the official center of Armenian Apostolic Church, supervises the teaching process, elaboration of text-books, publications, and training of teachers. The UN urged Armenia to eliminate the obligation to attend so as to ensure the rights of religious minorities, atheists and agnostics.[7] The ministry of education and the AAC, however, responded by emphasizing church-state relationships as matters of national sovereignty and that the course is not religious education itself but teaching about religions[8]. This view is actually supported by the ECHR doctrine of the 'margins of appreciation', which became prominent in the *Lautsi case* as the banner under which the court upheld Italy's right to keep crucifixes in public classrooms (Joppke, 2013).

However, the privileges of the AAC, affirmative religious nationalism and the resulting pressures on secularity have not gone uncontested. Yet, the organizing principles of these contestations differed with regard to the domains in which they unfolded: Contestations in public discussions and popular discourse often centered on *religious diversity* as the main threat to national unity. As a consequence, ideas of secularity as a means of accommodating religious diversity were deemed illegitimate by the majority. Legal contestations in courts, by contrast, were organized around the notion of 'secularity for the sake of individual rights' as individual rights-based frame seemed most favorable to minority claims. We exemplify both types of contestations below.

A vivid example of public debates unfolded around the court case of the Pentecostal church 'Word of Life' against 'Iravunk', a newspaper, which had published a highly offensive article on the church. Entitled 'Sectarian pornographic photographs now linked to accusations in pedophilia', the article accused the church of spreading pornography and pedophilia. The first instance court rejected the case but 'Word of Life' said they would go to the ECHR[9]. As this church is one of the fastest growing religious communities in Armenia the case became widely known. More generally, however, in our interviews a whole variety of religious minority groups reported cases of hostility towards them. One school student explained to us how a teacher used nationalistic speeches to create an

atmosphere of hatred in class and other students physically attacked him. After his parents' complaints to the schools principle the teacher had to apologize. In another case a teacher forced a student to leave the classroom when he refused to pray at the beginning of the 'Armenian church history class'. Representatives of religious minorities generally fear to talk publicly about discrimination taking place in workplaces and other social environments. Officially, the AAC is not involved in discriminatory action but governmental and church discourses do little to discourage them either.

Given that Armenia's religious history is marked by deep-running mono-confessionalism there are no historical reference points in which to anchor notions of secularity as a means for balancing diversity. No religious community other than the AAC has ever made major claims on the social order which why religious diversity never turned into argument for secularity. On the contrary, the cultural defense situation and the way it fed into religious nationalism continually produced fears of diversity as threats to the nation to which nationalism is simultaneously fashioned as the solution.

In the judicial domain, by contrast, contestations around religious-secular configurations chiefly draw on notions of secularity for the sake of individual freedom, especially freedom of conscience. Most of emblematic for these contestations are three cases of male members of Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to enroll in military service because of their religious beliefs. On 5 September, 2002, Vahan Bayatyan was arrested and on 28 October the Erebuni and Nubarashen District Court of Yerevan found him guilty as charged and sentenced him to 1,5 years in prison. In the proceedings the Criminal and Military Court of Appeal and the Court of Cassation upheld the judgments finding that the rights guaranteed by the constitution were subject to limitations under its article 44, especially as regards state security, public safety and the protection of public order. The applicant then addressed the ECHR arguing that his conviction had violated his right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In this as well as in the two other cases involving Armenian members of Jehovah's Witnesses, which were heard before the ECHR, the applicants made claims on article 9 (freedom of religion) and article 14 (non-discrimination) of the European Convention of Human Rights. With 16 to one votes, the ECHR decided that there has indeed been a violation of article 9 of the Convention and ordered financial compensation to be paid to the victims by the state. In all three cases, the Armenian judge was the only dissenter.

Locally, such issues are brought to public attention by NGOs such as the Center Collaboration for Democracy, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Armenian Helsinki Committee, The Helsinki Association and others. The head of the 'Collaboration for Democracy' Center, for instance, told us: 'For many years, we complained about the decisions of the Armenian court and demanded alternative service for Jehovah's witnesses and now, as the law on alternative service was adopted, we do not get complaints from them on this matter'[10]. These NGOs form an activist subculture, which derives its autonomy from their financial independence from state resource and some level of foreign funding. These NGOs are clearly the carriers of discourses on secularity for the sake of individual freedoms as they frame individual freedoms within the demand to state neutrality and criticism of AAC influences on minority-related policy and jurisprudence.

Claiming secular space for the religion of the nation

Finally, we suggest that contestations around secularity unfold as disputes over material space. Here, we look how boundaries between religious and secular spheres are redrawn in urban space and the symbolic landscapes of rural monasteries that function as national pilgrimage sites. This redrawing of religious-secular boundaries has been made visible to the populace through numerous constructions of new churches. One the one hand, new church constructions are framed as symbols of restoring the power of the church that was lost through Soviet-period assaults on church property. On the other hand, they have acquired new meaning as displays of oligarchic power. By ‘donating’ churches to the country, oligarchs display their wealth and simultaneously seek recognition and legitimacy as patrons of the nation (Antonyan, 2014).

In the first place, this politics of church construction is based on a calculus of mutual benefits forged within the power triangle of AAC, the state and the oligarchs. This is illustrated by the way Catholicos Garegin II initiated church constructions to enhance the political role of the Church and bestow legitimacy to government. In this context, the biggest church of Armenia, St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral, was consecrated in Yerevan on 23 September 2001, as a central point for the celebrations of the 1700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as a state religion. This celebration served as a starting point for a veritable wave of church constructions.

However, church constructions too did not go uncontested. Secular civil society activists confronted the church on two issues: first, the destruction of an old building in the center of Yerevan, which housed the Institute of Linguistics of National Academy of Science and construction of the church St. Anna and the Yerevan residency of the Catholics; second, constructions linked to the recovery of churches destroyed during the Soviet time. One of them was the church St. Paul-Peter in the center of Yerevan where cinema Moscow and its summer hall was constructed. In February 2010, the government allocated the open-air summer hall of the famous cinema *Moscow* to the AAC, which intended to demolish it and reestablish a church building formerly located on the land as an act of ‘historical justice’. The old church had been demolished during the 1930s in the context of intensifying Soviet anticlericalism. In March 2010, in line with church plans the government removed the summer hall from the list of historic sites protected by the state. However, civil activists together with some architects began to mobilize against the plan. Some activists spent several nights sleeping at the summer hall as human shields to prevent its destruction. Much of the discussions against the construction of a new place of worship took place online and during talk-shows[11]. Moreover, the issue was actively discussed in the public chamber of Armenia, a governmentally sponsored discussion platform, where the majority opinion slowly turned against the governmental line of action. In order to prevent further escalation of the debates, the AAC eventually decided to freeze the process and no further steps towards demolishing the cinema have been taken so far.

This episode is significant in two ways: first, the AAC and the secular activist made competing claims on historical justice. While the church favored restoring its demolished building, the activists insisted on the historical legitimacy of this secular site and

denounced the ironies implied by another demolition; second, by mobilizing members of the chamber of architects secular activist introduced new repertoires of argumentations into disputes over religion and secularity. Architects referred to the unique aesthetic value of the cinema hall, which in their view trumped ideas about the former and presumably eternal sacredness of the site. They mobilized aesthetic criteria in order to legitimate secular places in urban space (Burchardt and Becci, 2013).

However, the episode also matters because of its exceptionality: In many other cases, new church constructions were continued relentlessly despite protests, especially in recent years through the increasing sponsorship of oligarchs. Diaspora Armenians are main actors in this regard as religion and the church have always been central to the maintenance of national identity for Armenians of the Diaspora (Antonyan, 2014b: 46). Every year, a foundation called 'One culture and one nation' organizes a public festival on behalf of the ministry of diaspora aiming to connect the diaspora Armenians with motherland. A relatively marginal political party has later changed the slogan into 'one nation, one church, one culture' with the aim to deepen religious nationalism among the population.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, religious nationalism has a strong impact on political decision-making around religious diversity in contemporary Armenia. These influences are well captured through the paradigm of cultural defense. Moving beyond these findings, however, our main aim was to show how religious nationalism shapes different forms of secularity. In order to identify these influences, we need a more nuanced conceptualization of secularity than often applied. The notion of multiple secularities suggests that there is a limited number of logics of secularity that function as cultural repertoires from which societies draw in order to respond to particular historical situations. These logics are not mutually exclusive but show different degrees of cultural match and cultural resonance (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013).

During the Soviet period, secularity was chiefly employed as a collective ideology of national integration and progress and then widely dismissed during the period of post-independence nation-building because of its Soviet legacy. While the historical legacy played against this model, the opposite is true with regard to 'secularity for the sake of balancing diversity': Since there are no historical reference points in which to anchor notions of secularity as a means for balancing diversity no claims to religious group rights have been made during the post-Soviet period. Instead, we found that claims to secularity are mainly based notions of individual freedoms and pursued politically by secular activist NGOs and legally by religious minorities.

In addition, however, there is a type of secular everyday life ethos illustrated in the fact that, especially in comparison with neighboring countries, non-minority Armenians' religiosity is of low intensity and the word 'believer' actually stigmatized (Antonyan, 2011). In a taken-for-granted way, people endorse this type of secularity, which in their view is consistent with the support of ethno-religious nationalism that they see as largely ceremonial and not involving subjective religious beliefs. Intriguingly, this secularity mediates both people's adherence to ethno-religious nationalism and their suspicion of

religious minorities. Minority members' deep religious convictions render them deviant from both mainstream religion and mainstream cultural secularity whereas only a thinly institutionalized 'secularity for the sake of freedom' provides some level of protection. Thus, the convergence of the hegemony of secularity as 'low-level religiosity' with religious nationalism limits other expressions of secularity.

Acknowledgements

For inspirational comments we kindly thank our colleagues and interlocutors in Yerevan as well as at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany.

Funding

The article is based on the research project 'Comparing Armenian and Western Models of Religious Pluralism' that was funded by the Open Society Foundation (OSF) as a CARTI project (2013-2015). The authors kindly thank the OSF for the generous financial support.

Notes

1. Kuru (2009) defined critical junctures as periods or moments in which both agency and structural conditions are available for systematic change.
2. Agadjanian (2015) rightly pointed to qualitative differences between Soviet-style ideological atheism and modern secularity while agreeing that within a broadly defined analytical notion of secularity Soviet atheism can be seen as one expression of secularity.
3. Full text of the Constitution of Armenia is available under the following link: http://concourt.am/english/constitutions/index.htm#1.
4. Nagorno-Karabakh is a geographical enclave located within a territory that was given to Azerbaijan under Stalin's rule.
5. Interview with Archbishop Pargev, February 3, 2013.
6. Interview with Archbishop Pargev, February 3, 2013.
7. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Armenia, adopted by the Committee at its sixty-third session (May 27 –June 14, 2013), CRC/C/ARM/CO/3-4, July 8, 2013, F 46 (d).
8. The statement by Minister of Education of Armenia Armen Ashotyan on the UN recommendations: http://arka.am/am/news/society/karavarutyuny_chi_qnnarkum_ekexecu_patmutyun_ararakan+_dprocakan_cragric-hanelu_harcy_/.
9. For more details see 'Shall the Word of Life' apply to European Court? Available at: http://www.a1plus.am/62615.html.
10. Interview with the head of the Collaboration for Democracy Center, September 28, 2015.
11. On Facebook the 'SAVE Cinema Moscow Open-Air Hall' group had over 6,500 members while its opposition group, 'St. Boghos-Bedros must be rebuilt where Moscow Cinema's Open-Air Hall is' had just about 525 members. An online petition protesting the destruction of the summer auditorium has a little over 800 signatures. According to the activist-architect Sarhat Petrosyan around 23,000 signatures were collected on the streets to oppose against the destruction of the summer hall.

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