The Epic of Sasun: Armenian Apocalypse

James R. Russell

Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience. There is one more charge to be added to the bill of indictment. With a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks forward to the destruction of the world.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud made the obvious point that religion suffered from one incurable deficiency: it was too clearly derived from our own desire to escape from or survive death.


1 General Considerations

There seems to be a perversity in religion: on the one hand, believers desire to escape from or to survive death; on the other, they look forward to the destruction of the world. Apocalyptic encompasses both, seemingly contradictory, desires; and the illogic of the situation requires awkward repetitions and convolutions in the theoretical outcome of the future achieved by theologians and prophets. Men are to be judged, once at death and again at resurrection; so the wicked will suffer twice in hell, first till the end of time and then forever after that, while the souls of the righteous will go to heaven till Judgment Day and then be reborn in resurrected bodies for bliss on earth. At the end of time, the Second Coming, Judgment Day, the world will be destroyed. But then it will be restored—how, as what, nobody knows. A thinking person cannot help but agree with Christopher Hitchens that the cosmological dogmas of religions are primitive and demeaning systems of wish fulfillment. Life is inevitably tragic: we experience loneliness and loss, pain, sickness, and age, and we die. The world around us, for all its beauty, is also a place of fear and violence, thanks in no small measure to the incurable vices of our own species. We want to live, but not the way we do; we want a world to live in, but one better than this.

With Christianity, the Armenians inherited a developing apocalyptic scheme that was similar in some respects to that of the Zoroastrian religion whose beliefs and practices had exerted such a profound influence on the
culture of the country previously. This was not entirely fortuitous; for although unconnected cultures often achieve analogous visions of apocalypse, in the ancient Near East apocalyptic ideas have a chronological priority, density of articulation, and ideological centrality in the teachings of Zarathuštra. Prof. Jon Levenson has argued brilliantly and convincingly that ancient Israel developed a belief in a collective, one might even say national resurrection that stands apart from the patterns of belief that emphasize the spiritual immortality of an individual.¹ This system was not the result of Iranian influence; but other beliefs accreted in the Second Temple period—the time critical to Christian origins—definitely were. And the Armenian Christians, uniquely among the chrétientés—national Christian cultures—had in any case a Zoroastrian religious substratum from which they drew abundantly in their symbolism—especially of light in opposition to darkness, as one might expect—and in religious terminology. The Avestan word for apocalypse, the renovation of the world at the end of time, frašō.kǝrǝti-, lit. “making wonderful,” Pahlavi frašegird, for instance, is found as Armenian hrašakert, the “masterpiece” of God’s Creation; and the word for the dread crisis of end-time, awrhas, must be from OIr. *avi-frasa- “intensive questioning”¹²

However the Armenians did not entirely abandon their older faith. It endured for nearly two millennia through the medium of orally recited heroic epic, a kind of secular scripture that existed alongside the teachings of Christianity. Though Christian clerics railed bitterly against the vices ostensively preached by the gusank’ “minstrels” and the reciters of epic songs in turn poked fun at the hypocrisies and foibles of the clergy, more often one observes a coexistence, even a symbiosis, of Armenian epic and Armenian Christianity. A small but telling example of this is the episode in the epic of Sasun, Sasna cṙer (cuṙ means, literally, “bent,” and describes here a hero of wild, imprudent valor) where Sanasar, one of the twins who found Sasun, dives to the shrine of the Holy Mother of God beneath the waters of Lake Van to receive his magic weapons. He also, predictably, fights a dragon. Now a legend about the tenth-century mystic St. Grigor Narekac’i, who lived on the south shore of the lake, where the epic begins, was shaped on the model of the episode or its older mythological underpinnings; but then, later variants of the epic episode in turn were colored by the legend about Narekac’i.³ This cross-fertilization can be observed in many aspects of Armenian spiritual and material culture.

¹ See Levenson 2006.
² See Russell 1998a.