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The Introduction of Modern Western Philosophy in the Ottoman Empire: Armenian Thinkers

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Abstract

The literature on the introduction of modern Western philosophy in the late Ottoman Empire is predominantly ethnocentric. This is because it reduces the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy to the philosophical discourses of Muslim/Turkish intellectuals at the expense of non-Muslim Ottomans' philosophical activities in languages other than Turkish. This article challenges such ethnocentrism and offers an alternative narrative from the perspective of Ottoman Armenian thinkers in the late nineteenth century. With this aim, it analyzes the philosophical thoughts of Madatia Karakashian, Nahabed Rusinian, Kalusd Gosdantian, and Yeghia Demirjibashian.

Introduction

Modern Western philosophy was introduced in “Turkey” when a former priest of the Armenian Catholic Mkhitarist Congregation in Vienna, Madatia Karakashian, wrote philosophy textbooks for the Armenian schools of the Ottoman Empire in 1868. Regardless of its truth value, this statement sounds outrageous. This is because the literature on the introduction of modern Western philosophy in “Turkey” is predominantly ethnocentric and teleological. That is, it is based on the assumption that the nation-state of Muslim Turks was already intrinsically hidden within the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, in this literature, the terms “Turkish thought,” “Ottoman philosophy,” “philosophy in a Muslim empire,” and “philosophical discourse formulated in Turkish” are often used interchangeably. Thus this literature traces the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy back to the modernization and westernization of “Turkish thought” in the nineteenth century at the expense of non-Muslim Ottomans’ philosophical activities in languages other than Turkish.¹

¹See, e.g., Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London, 1998); Remzi Demir, *Philosophia Ottomanica: Osmanlı Felsefesi* (Antalya, 2018); Şükrü Hanioglu, “Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion, and Art,” in Elisabeth Özdalga, ed., *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (London, 2005), 27–116; Muammer İskenderoğlu, “The Discovery of Western Philosophy by Late Ottoman Intellectuals,” *Journal of Oriental and African*

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According to this literature, Ottoman philosophy/Turkish thought was initially under the influence of Islam and ancient Greek philosophy. The latter was read and interpreted from the perspective of Islam.² However, the nineteenth century, and especially the period of modernization in the Ottoman Empire known as the Tanzimat period (1839–1876), opened a new chapter for Ottoman philosophy as the latter began to be transformed under the influence of modern Western thought.³ A major reason for this transformation was the fact that the Ottoman Empire lost several wars to its Western/non-Muslim neighbors in the eighteenth century. The Muslim/Turkish ruling elite quickly came to the realization that they needed to initiate certain reforms according to Western standards in order to revive the empire. The reform process began in the military but quickly spread to the spheres of administration, law, and education.⁴ Military engineering and medical schools were opened in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth. These schools provided courses in the French language under the guidance and directorship of Western professors. Moreover, Mekteb-i Sultânî (Imperial Galatasaray High School), a secondary school modeled on the French *lycée*, was opened in 1868. Finally, promising young men were sent to France for education.⁵ The aim was to prepare a new generation of local intellectuals and professors. Some of these intellectuals and professors, such as Münif Paşa (1830–1910), Hoca Tahsin (1811–81), Ahmed Midhat (1844–1912), Ali Suavi (1839–78), Beşir Fuad (1852–87), Bahâ Tevfik (1884–1914), and Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932), would begin to think that the superiority of Western civilization was grounded in its new understanding of knowledge and science; thus they would sow the first seeds of the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶

The dominant literature credits Münif Paşa and Ali Suavi with writing the first histories of Western philosophy in the Ottoman Empire in the late 1860s.⁷ However, it is often argued that it was Ahmed Midhat who introduced “philosophical problems of the West” to the Ottomans beginning in the 1870s.⁸ Hoca Tahsin was the writer of the first manuscript on philosophy of the self,

Studies 29 (2020), 275–85; Rahmi Karakuş, *Felsefe Serüvenimiz* (Ankara, 2015); Murtaza Korlaelçi, *Pozitivizmin Türkiye’ye Girişi* (Ankara, 2021); Sait M. Özervarlı, “Positivism in the Late Ottoman Empire: The ‘Young Turks’ as Mediators and Multipliers,” in Johannes Feichtinger, Franz L. Fillafer, and Jan Surman, eds., *The Worlds of Positivism: A Global Intellectual History, 1770–1930* (Cham, 2018), 81–108; Serdar Poyraz, “Beşir Fuad (1852–1887) and the Introduction of Philosophical Materialism into the Ottoman Intellectual Life,” *Review of History and Political Science* 2/3–4 (2014), 1–21; Hilmi Z. Ülken, *Türkiye’de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi* (Istanbul, 2013); Mehmet Vural, *Tanzimat’tan Günümüze Türkiye’de Felsefe* (Ankara, 2019).

²See, e.g., Süleyman Bolay, *Osmanlı Düşünce Dünyası* (Ankara, 2016); Demir, *Philosophia Ottomanica*, 21–195.

³See, e.g., Hanoğlu, “Blueprints for a Future Society”; İskenderoğlu, “The Discovery of Western Philosophy”; Korlaelçi, *Pozitivizmin Türkiye’ye Girişi*.

⁴Berkes, *The Development of Secularism*, 71–85.

⁵Korlaelçi, *Pozitivizmin Türkiye’ye Girişi*, 139–42.

⁶Vural, *Tanzimat’tan Günümüze Türkiye’de Felsefe*, 26–30.

⁷Demir, *Philosophia Ottomanica*, 426–7; Karakuş, *Felsefe Serüvenimiz*, 44.

⁸İskenderoğlu, “The Discovery of Western Philosophy,” 281.

or, basically, psychology.⁹ Beşir Fuad, on the other hand, was “the first Ottoman positivist and naturalist.”¹⁰ He was also “the true founder of Ottoman materialism.”¹¹

According to the dominant literature, such followers of what was often called the “new philosophy” (*hikmet-i cedide*) in the late Ottoman Empire shared certain characteristics.¹² Primarily, they did not confine themselves to questions of God and religion. Second, they were influenced by the ideas of the French Enlightenment and attracted to positivism, materialism, and evolutionism as means of cultural enlightenment and communal progress.¹³ Considering that such schools of thought could contradict the teachings of Islam, they often attempted to reconcile Western positivism and materialism with the principles of Islam.¹⁴ Moreover, their interest in modern Western thought was primarily fueled by the desire to “protect the integrity of the empire” in the face of continuing military defeats.¹⁵ Education of the people (i.e. Muslims) according to Western standards was considered to be the *sine qua non* for this enterprise. Hence followers of the new philosophy largely confined themselves to introducing Western ideas to the Ottoman Empire. That is, they were oriental encyclopedists with low levels of originality. However, their individual efforts were not sufficient for the popularization of the new philosophical thought among the Ottomans. This was mainly because, in an intellectual environment in which the main motivation was to save the empire, epistemological and ontological problems were quickly portrayed as being of secondary importance to the urgency of political discussions.¹⁶ Such popularization would be possible only after the constitutional revolution of 1908. In 1912, for example, a faculty of philosophy would be established at the Dârülfünûn (House of Sciences), the first university in the Ottoman Empire. Ahmed Midhat would compose the first philosophy textbook according to Western standards from the courses he taught at this university.¹⁷ In addition, philosophy courses would be introduced into the curriculum of secondary schools.¹⁸ Finally, in 1913, Bahâ Tevfik would publish the first Ottoman philosophy journal, *Felsefe Mecmûası* (Journal of Philosophy).¹⁹

Nevertheless, due to its ethnocentrism and teleological makeup, the dominant literature covers up more than it discloses. It covers up, for example, the existence of Armenian thinkers and their contributions to the origination of the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, it covers up the existence of Madatia Karakashian (1818–1903) and his 1868 *Համառոտ Պատմություն Փիլիսոփայության* (Brief History of

⁹Ülken, *Türkiye’de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi*, 272–3.

¹⁰Hanioğlu, “Blueprints for a Future Society,” 28.

¹¹Poyraz, “Beşir Fuad,” 4.

¹²Sait M. Özervarlı, “The Position of Philosophy in the Late Ottoman Educational Reforms,” in Bettina Gräf, Birgit Krawietz, Schirin Amir-Moazami, Ulrike Freitag, and Konrad Hirschler, eds., *Ways of Knowing Muslim Cultures and Societies* (Leiden, 2019), 132–43, at 138.

¹³Demir, *Philosophia Ottomanica*, 401–7.

¹⁴Hanioğlu, “Blueprints for a Future Society,” 27.

¹⁵Poyraz, “Beşir Fuad,” 15.

¹⁶Ülken, *Türkiye’de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi*, 147–8.

¹⁷Vural, *Tanzimat’tan Günümüze Türkiye’de Felsefe*, 39–41.

¹⁸Karakuş, *Felsefe Serüvenimiz*, 101–2.

¹⁹İskenderoğlu, “The Discovery of Western Philosophy,” 282.

Philosophy), published a year before the “first” Ottoman history of philosophy by Ali Suavi.²⁰ It covers up the fact that Nahabed Rusinian (1819–76) taught philosophy and medical ethics at the Mekteb-i Tibbiye-i Şâhâne (Imperial School of Medicine) in the 1870s and composed *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության* (Textbook of Philosophy) from his lecture notes decades before Ahmed Midhat’s “first” philosophy textbook.²¹ It covers up the existence of Kalusd Gosdantian (1843–98) and his 1878 *Մէթոտի Կրայ* (Discourse on Method), wherein Gosdantian passionately defends positivism, materialism, and evolutionism years before the “first” Ottoman positivist, materialist, and naturalist Beşir Fuad.²² It also covers up the fact that Yeghia Demirjibashian (1851–1908) began to publish his philosophy journal called *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում* (Literary and Philosophical Movement) in 1883, or thirty years before *Felsefe Mecmûası*.²³ Finally, it covers up the fact that philosophy courses were introduced in Ottoman Armenian secondary schools as early as the 1870s.²⁴

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to challenge the ethnocentrism of the dominant literature by focusing on the first Armenian intellectuals to systematically deliberate the problems of modern Western philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, to avoid falling into the very ethnocentrism that I aim to challenge, and in order to show that Armenians’ philosophical activities helped the Muslim/Turkish intellectual elite familiarize themselves with the problems of modern Western philosophy, I will read Karakashian, Rusinian, Gosdantian, and Demirjibashian not simply as Armenian intellectuals but as Ottoman philosophers. With this aim, I will show that these intellectuals owed their existence to the cultural, economic, and administrative peculiarities of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, they had strong personal and institutional relations with the Muslim/Turkish intellectual elite. Finally, they were motivated in their philosophical activities by concerns and anxieties similar to those of the Muslim/Turkish followers of the new philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In other words, this article employs a global perspective on the introduction of modern philosophical ideas in the Ottoman Empire. By “global perspective” I mean a framework that problematizes “methodological nationalism,” according to which how ideas emerge or are altered may be explained by inquiring into the history of ethno-religiously homogeneous nation-states as “self-contained spaces.”²⁵ Contra methodological nationalism, a global perspective requires a focus on the networks of and interactions between individuals of different ethno-national origins. It also requires a focus on parallel developments in and multiple entanglements of various ethno-national communities, even when these communities are spread over different sides of national-territorial borders. In short, this article not only responds to recent calls for questioning “the powerful Turcocentric view that dominates

²⁰See Madatia Karakashian, *Համառոտ Պատմություն Փիլիսոփայության* (Istanbul, 1868).

²¹See Nahabed Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության* (Izmir, 1879).

²²See Kalusd Gosdantian, *Մէթոտի Կրայ* (Izmir, 1878).

²³See *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, ed. Yeghia Demirjibashian (1883–8).

²⁴Pamela Young, “Knowledge, Nation, and the Curriculum: Ottoman Armenian Education (1853–1915)” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2001), 171.

²⁵Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016), 3.

Ottoman history,” but also contributes to the paradigm of “global intellectual history.”²⁶

Specifically, I will argue that similar to Muslim/Turkish followers of the new philosophy, Armenian thinkers were concerned with composing introductory and encyclopedist discourses in order to educate their people and ensure the material and intellectual progress of their ethno-religious community. With this concern, they particularly found attractive what they thought was characteristic of modern Western philosophy, namely positivism and its scientific outlook. However, such attraction came with the anxiety that what was good for the progress of the community could destroy collective identity. This was because modern Western philosophy had materialist and anti-theistic implications and because, in the Ottoman Empire, one’s public or collective identity was based on one’s membership in a religious community. Accordingly, Armenian philosophers attempted to reconcile the principles of the new philosophy with religious commitments. It is worth noting that such “reconciliationism” was confined neither to Armenians nor to Muslim/Turkish intellectuals in the late Ottoman Empire. For example, influenced by the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, British empiricism, and the Enlightenment ideal of progress, Ottoman Greek intellectuals in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, such as Iosipos Moisiodox (1725–1800), Dimitrios Katartzis (1730–1807), and Veniamin Lesvios (1759–1824), sought a compromise between modern Western thought and Eastern Orthodoxy.²⁷

As a result, I offer an alternative narrative of the introduction of modern Western philosophy in “Turkey.” I claim that citing the supposed conflict between modern Western thought and the principles of Islam can only give a partial account of late Ottoman philosophy. In the next section, I describe the cultural, economic, and administrative peculiarities of the Ottoman Empire, against the background of which Armenian thinkers came into existence and formed personal and institutional relations with the Muslim/Turkish intellectual elite. Subsequent sections are devoted to the philosophical thoughts of Karakashian, Rusinian, Gosdantian, and Demirjibashian.²⁸

Armenian thinkers as Ottoman philosophers

Ottoman Armenian philosophers were of the generation of “the Young Armenians.” This generation was born in the late 1840s and early 1850s. The Young Armenians were those who received primary education at the newly founded Armenian schools of the Ottoman Empire in the first decades of the

²⁶Edhem Eldem, “Rescuing Ottoman History from the Turks,” *Turkish Historical Review* 13/1–2 (2022), 8–27, at 14; for the paradigm of global intellectual history see Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013); for an application of this paradigm to “Turkey” see Deniz Kuru and Hazal Papuççular, eds., *The Turkish Connection: Global Intellectual Histories of the Late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey* (Berlin, 2022).

²⁷See Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “The Idea of Science in the Modern Greek Enlightenment,” in Pantelis Nicolacopoulos, ed., *Greek Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science* (Dordrecht, 1990), 187–200; Kitromilides, “The Enlightenment and the Greek Cultural Tradition,” *History of European Ideas* 36/1 (2010), 39–46.

²⁸Translations from Armenian are mine.

nineteenth century and who mostly continued their higher education abroad, especially in Paris. They were inspired by contemporary French writers and orators, such as Auguste Comte, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, and François Guizot, as well as by the revolutions of 1848. Thus they were imbued with the ideas of progress, positivism, naturalism, constitutionalism, and anticlerical secularism.²⁹ It was particularly the combination of two factors that rendered the birth of this generation possible, namely the expenditure of capital by wealthy Armenians on education and the presence of Catholic and Protestant missionary activities. These factors were strongly tied to the specific cultural, administrative, and economic setting of the Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth.

Specifically, according to the cultural-administrative system of *millets* (nations, understood as religious communities) in the late Ottoman Empire, one's public identity was primarily defined by one's membership in a religious community. The *millet* system was "an ad hoc procedure for the organization and integration of non-Muslim religious communities into the empire."³⁰ With this system, although they were considered inferior to the *millet-i Islamiye* (nation of Islam), which was the *millet-i hâkime* (ruling nation), the non-Muslim *millets* of Armenians, Jews, and Greeks enjoyed the collective autonomy to organize their lives according to their customs and religious practices.³¹ However, until the second half of the nineteenth century, their religious leaders could act as absolute monarchs within their communities. For example, the Armenian patriarch not only had spiritual authority over the clergy but also exercised civil authority. He was entitled to appoint and depose religious officials at will. He had the right to decide how community schools, charitable organizations, and monasteries would be administered. Moreover, his permission was required to build new schools, churches, and printing houses. He also had jurisdiction over matters of personal status, such as divorce and inheritance. He had his own courts and prison and could send insubordinates into exile or confiscate their property. Finally, it was through him that the Ottoman government collected taxes from the Armenian community.³² Hence supporting the reign of a sympathetic patriarch, and thus holding control over the patriarchate, was an absolute requirement for the Ottoman Armenian economic elite to govern the Armenian world according to their interests.

The Ottoman Armenian economic elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were called *amira*, derived from the Arabic term *emîr* or *âmîr*—commander.³³

²⁹See Arshag Alboyacian, "Ազգային Սահմանադրությունը: Իր ճագուրը և Կիրառությունը," in *Ընդարձակ Օրացոյց Ս. Փրկչեան Հիւանդանոցի Հայոց* (Istanbul, 1910), 76–528, at 228–38; Young, "Knowledge, Nation, and the Curriculum," 76–8.

³⁰Karen Barkey, "Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 19/1–2 (2005), 5–19, at 9.

³¹Roderic H. Davison, "The *Millets* as Agents of Change in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York, 1982), 319–37, at 320.

³²Vartan Artinian, *The Armenian Constitutional System in the Ottoman Empire 1839–1863: A Study of Its Historical Development* (Istanbul, 1988), 14–17.

³³Richard Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2020), 29.

This elite owed their wealth to the economic and administrative peculiarities of the Ottoman Empire. Specifically, there were two groups of *amiras*. The first group consisted of *sarrafs*, or bankers, who lent money to Ottoman officials and, in so doing, played a crucial role in the Ottoman administrative system. In particular,

In the Ottoman administrative system, the provincial governors and high ranking officials derived their income from the taxes levied on the population in their jurisdictions. The Ottoman treasury did not deal directly with the population but rather put up certain districts, especially tax-farms, to auction. However, before the highest bidder could secure the purchase, he was required to appoint a *sarraḡ*, usually Armenian, who furnished him with the capital on interest for securing the appointment and guaranteed the proper transmission of revenues on his behalf to the imperial treasury.³⁴

The second group of *amiras* included technocratic bureaucrats who assumed high government positions in the Ottoman Empire, for example as imperial architects, directors of the imperial mint, directors of imperial powder works, and directors of silver mines.³⁵

In order to strengthen their influence over the patriarchate and ensure popularity within the Armenian community, the *amiras* did not hesitate to use their capital in the sphere of philanthropic work. In addition to financing the expenses of the patriarchate and providing the funds necessary for the renovation of churches and monasteries, they acted as patrons for educational activities. Thus they contributed to the cultural enlightenment of Armenians. For example, in 1790, Miḡirdich Amira Mirijanian founded the first Armenian parish school in the Ottoman Empire. Other *amiras* followed his lead and helped with founding and funding parish schools, mixed schools, schools for girls, vocational schools, and colleges.³⁶ The *amiras* knew that providing funds for cultural, religious, and educational institutions would grant them some voice in the administration of the Armenian community, as they would be appointed “trustees, or *mütevelli*, of most Armenian Church properties.”³⁷ The *amiras* also provided scholarships to Armenian students to continue their higher education in the major capitals of Europe, especially Paris. Many of these students would return to the empire after graduation and assume high positions in the patriarchate or the Ottoman administration.

The role of the *amiras* in the Ottoman Armenian community may be likened to the role played by the Phanariots, the Orthodox Christian elite, in the Ottoman Greek community. The Phanariots acted as imperial dragomans and *voynodas*, or governors, of the Danubian principalities in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth. Thanks to their wealth and political influence, Phanariot households controlled both governorships in the Balkans and high offices in the Greek Patriarchate. Similar to the *amiras*, the Phanariots used their capital in the sphere of philanthropic work and thereby contributed to the Greek cultural revival in the

³⁴Artinian, *The Armenian Constitutional System*, 20.

³⁵Hagop Barsoumian, *Istanbul'un Ermeni Amiralar Sımfı*, trans. Solina Silahlı (Istanbul, 2013), 93–106.

³⁶Alboyacian, “Ազգային Սահմանադրութիւնը,” 152–3.

³⁷Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith*, 30.

second half of the eighteenth century. Together with merchants and bankers, they funded modern educational institutions. A new generation of Greek intellectuals, influenced by the Western ideas of secularism, nationalism, and rationalism, would be raised in these institutions.³⁸

The second factor that rendered the birth of the Young Armenians possible was Catholic and Protestant missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire. These activities may be traced back to the foundation of the College of Propaganda by Pope Gregory XV in 1627. The aim of the college was to train individuals of different ethnic origins according to Catholic dogma and employ them as missionaries within their respective communities. However, it was almost impossible for Catholic missionaries in the Ottoman Empire to proselytize to Muslims, as the latter would face the death penalty for conversion. Hence they turned their attention to non-Muslims, and especially Armenians. Catholic missionaries founded schools for Armenians beginning in the seventeenth century. Protestants followed in the footsteps of Catholics in the first decades of the nineteenth century.³⁹

The education of Armenian boys and girls in Catholic and Protestant schools was opposed by the Armenian (Apostolic) Church. The education of Armenians in these schools paved the way for Armenian youth to convert to Catholicism or Protestantism, thus driving them away from being Armenian. After all, the Ottoman method of accommodating cultural diversity was based on religious differences; therefore ethno-cultural groups had so far arranged their communal life as religious organizations. Proselytization thus meant not only defying the patriarch's authority but also endangering the very existence of the Armenian *millet*. That was why Catholic and Protestant Armenians faced several forms of persecution in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, persecution did not stop the cultural effects of missionary activities on the Armenian community. In fact, it indirectly helped the most influential Catholic Armenian organization, the Mkhitarist Congregation, to thrive. This congregation was founded in Istanbul by Mkhitar Sepasdatsi in 1701. Facing persecution, Mkhitar took his order to Venice in 1717. He and his disciples devoted themselves to the enlightenment of Armenians by disseminating the "true" faith among them and familiarizing Armenian youth with Western culture. With this aim, they published dictionaries, periodicals, scientific works, translations from Western languages, religious writings, Armenian classics, and monographs in European languages in their printing houses in Venice, Trieste, and Vienna.⁴¹ Moreover, they founded several educational institutions, the most famous of which were the Murad–Raphaelian colleges

³⁸See Christine Philiou, "Communities on the Verge: Unraveling the Phanariot Ascendancy in Ottoman Governance," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51/1 (2009), 151–81; Victor Roudometof, "From Rum Millet to Greek Nation: Enlightenment, Secularization, and National Identity in Ottoman Balkan Society, 1453–1821," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16/1 (1998), 11–48.

³⁹Alboyacian, "Ազգային Սահմանադրութիւնը," 279–81; James Etmekjian, *The French Influence on the Western Armenian Renaissance 1843–1915* (New York, 1964), 58–9.

⁴⁰Artinian, *The Armenian Constitutional System*, 33, 41–2.

⁴¹See Mkhitarist Congregation, *Յուգսկ Գրոց Մխիթարեան Տպարանի, 1716–1903* (Venice, 1903); Mkhitarist Congregation, *Յուգսկ Գրոց Մխիթարեան Տպարանի ի Թրիեստ և ի Վիեննա 1776–1903* (Vienna, 1903).

in Venice, Padua, and Paris.⁴² Many Armenians from the Ottoman Empire would receive higher education in Europe in the nineteenth century thanks to these colleges.

Consequently, the expenditure of capital on education and the presence of missionary activities against the background of the specific cultural, administrative, and economic setting of the Ottoman Empire gave rise to a generation of well-educated and “westernized” intellectuals, the Young Armenians, in the second half of the nineteenth century. These intellectuals returned to the empire after finishing their education in Europe and acted as the intellectual leaders of the Ottoman Armenian community. Primarily, taking the Académie française as their model, they established an education committee in 1853. The aim of this committee was to reform the Ottoman Armenian education system, prepare textbooks, improve the conditions of teachers, ensure equal educational opportunities for boys and girls, and open new primary and secondary schools.⁴³ Moreover, the Young Armenians pioneered the process that led to the composition and ratification of the Armenian Constitution of 1863. This constitution was a novelty in the Ottoman Empire. It was based on the principles of pluralist democracy, universal education, secularism, and the separation of powers.⁴⁴ Finally, the Young Armenians contributed to the intellectual progress and cultural enlightenment of the Armenian community through literary activities.

For example, approximately twenty-five Armenian periodicals were established between 1800 and 1850. The number of periodicals over the next decade was doubled thanks to the Young Armenians. Published under the auspices of the Armenian Patriarchate between 1852 and 1908, *Masis* was the most prominent periodical in Istanbul. In the words of its editor, Garabed Ūtūjian, a Young Armenian educated at the Sorbonne and Collège de France, the aim of *Masis* was “to improve, to enlighten, and to help the nation” according to Western standards.⁴⁵ With this aim, *Masis* published articles on various subjects, ranging from medicine and astronomy to Armenian folklore and literature. In fact, the education of the masses according to Western standards with the help of periodicals was a concern shared by many intellectuals in the late Ottoman Empire, regardless of whether these intellectuals were of Armenian, Muslim/Turkish, Greek, or Jewish origins. For instance, the first Ottoman Jewish periodicals in Ladino in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as *El tiempo*, *El sol*, *El instructor*, and *El amigo de la familia*, published articles on hygiene, child rearing, and the natural sciences in order to educate the Ottoman Jews according to Western standards.⁴⁶

In their project of cultural enlightenment, the Young Armenians were particularly influenced by French positivists. Inspired by the works of Auguste Comte, Émile Littré, Hippolyte Taine, and Herbert Spencer, what Armenian intellectuals

⁴²Vahé Osgahan, “Modern Armenian Literature and Intellectual History from 1700 to 1915,” in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 2, *Foreign Domination to Statehood* (London, 1997), 139–74, at 158.

⁴³Young, “Knowledge, Nation, and the Curriculum,” 78–9.

⁴⁴See Ազգային Սահմանադրութիւն Հայոց (the Armenian Constitution) (1863).

⁴⁵Cited in Etmekjian, *The French Influence*, 138–9.

⁴⁶See Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington, 2004), 123–49.

found attractive in positivism was its “scientism.” Particularly, the Armenian intellectual elite with positivist inclinations believed that, in championing the natural sciences and their method as the only legitimate source of authority, the new philosophy might facilitate the enlightenment, economic revival, and emancipation of the Ottoman Armenian community.⁴⁷ It was also argued that education in the natural and applied sciences, such as agricultural sciences and political economy, was a matter of survival for Armenians in the multiethnic context of the Ottoman Empire. This was because, without such education, it would be impossible for them to compete with the Greeks and Europeans in the spheres of agriculture and commerce. As a result, Armenians would suffer severe material deprivation and would possibly be forced to leave the empire in order to survive.⁴⁸ It is worth noting that different ethno-religious versions of this fear were present in the late Ottoman Empire. For example, the directors of Ottoman Jewish schools founded by the Alliance israélite universelle in the second half of the nineteenth century frequently stated in their reports to the Central Committee in Paris that only through education in the natural sciences and Western techniques could the Jews compete with the Greeks and Armenians and thereby overcome their moral and material deprivations.⁴⁹

It was against this background that Karakashian, Rusinian, Gosdantian, and Demirjibashian were plunged into philosophical activities. As products of the cultural, administrative, and economic peculiarities of the Ottoman Empire, they had strong personal and institutional relations with the Muslim/Turkish political and intellectual elite. For example, Rusinian studied medicine in Paris thanks to a scholarship provided by *amiras*. There he witnessed the process that led to the revolutions of 1848. After his return to the empire in 1851, he committed himself to the application of the ideology behind those revolutions to the Ottoman Armenian reality and became one of the principal authors of the Armenian Constitution of 1863.⁵⁰ This constitution would function as a model for the *Kânûn-ı Esâsî*, the Ottoman Constitution of 1876.⁵¹ Moreover, Rusinian acted as the private physician to one of the most powerful rulers of the Tanzimat period, namely Fuad Paşa. When the latter was assigned to Lebanon in 1857 to restore intercommunal peace, Rusinian served him as the chair of a commission that was responsible for ensuring that Christians who had been forced to convert to Islam returned to their original faith.⁵² Finally, as a professor of philosophy and medical ethics at the *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şâhâne*, which was a cradle of Ottoman

⁴⁷See D. E. Harutyunyan, “Պոզիտիվիզմի Մուտքը Հայ Իրականություն և Պայքարը Նրա Գնահատական Շուրջ,” *Բանբեր Երևանի Համալսարանի* 3 (1987), 182–9.

⁴⁸See, for example, Harutjun Svacian, *Մեղր: Հանդես Կիսամյայ* (Istanbul, 1857), 214–21; Madteos Mamurian, “Ազգային Հարստություն,” *Արևելեան Մամուլ*, 1879, 425–35.

⁴⁹See Paul Dumont, “Jewish Communities in Turkey during the Last Decades of the Nineteenth Century in the Light of the Archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle,” in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York, 1982), 209–42.

⁵⁰Hrachia Acarian, *Պատմություն Հայոց Նոր Գրականության* (Etchmiadzin, 1906), 197–8.

⁵¹Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876* (Princeton, 1963), 134–5.

⁵²Agop J. Hacikyan, Gabriel Basmajian, Edward S. Franchuk, and Nourhan Ouzounian, *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, vol. 3, *From the Eighteenth Century to Modern Times* (Detroit, 2005), 227.

intellectuals with positivist and materialist inclinations, he was responsible to a considerable degree for the Ottoman intellectual elite familiarizing themselves with the problems of modern Western philosophy.⁵³ It is worth noting that prominent Muslim/Turkish positivists in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, such as Abdullah Cevdet and Rıza Nur, would be educated at the *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-yi Şâhâne*.⁵⁴

Karakashian, on the other hand, began his education at a school of the Mkhitarist Congregation in Istanbul. At the age of fourteen, he was sent to the Mkhitarist monastery in Vienna to become a priest. In 1858, he returned to the empire and worked as a teacher at the congregation's school in Izmir. After a year of teaching, he joined the Haygazian initiative in Istanbul, whose task it was to prepare textbooks for the Armenian schools of the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁵ As one of the most prolific writers of the Mkhitarist Congregation, he wrote two philosophy textbooks in 1868, including a history of philosophy. In addition to his teaching posts at such Armenian colleges as Getronagan and Nersesian, between 1868 and 1872 he taught at the *Mekteb-i Sultânî*, another cradle of Ottoman positivism and materialism.⁵⁶ The *Mekteb-i Sultânî* was founded with the purpose of creating a new generation of Ottomans familiar with Western, particularly French, literature. In 1877, the directorial post of this *lycée* would be assumed by the "first" historian of Western philosophy in the Ottoman Empire, namely Ali Suavi.

A student of Karakashian at Nersesian College was Demirjibashian. Demirjibashian spent two years in France and studied at the business school in Marseilles. It was during this period of his life that he met Émile Littré and embraced the latter's positivism. After his return to the empire in 1876, he worked for a brief period of time at the Babiâli Tercüme Odası (Translation Office of the Sublime Porte, the Ottoman government).⁵⁷ Founded in 1821, the Babiâli Tercüme Odası functioned as a school of "westernization" for the Muslim/Turkish political and intellectual elite. Fuad Paşa and Âli Paşa as the Jacobin rulers of the Tanzimat period, Namık Kemal and Ziya Paşa as the leading constitutionalists of the late nineteenth century, and the philosopher and educational reformer Münif Paşa all owed their intellectual development to the time they spent in this office. The Babiâli Tercüme Odası was also a meeting place for the intellectual elite of different *millet*s in the Ottoman Empire, with Armenians constituting the largest non-Muslim group.⁵⁸ In addition to his position at the Babiâli Tercüme Odası, Demirjibashian also paid his services to the Ottoman Armenian community

⁵³Nuran Yıldırım, "Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-yi Şâhâne'nin İlk Deontoloji Hocası Rusinyan Efendi," *Yeni Tıp Tarihi Araştırmaları* 1 (1995), 148–61.

⁵⁴In 1889, Abdullah Cevdet and his friends from the *Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-yi Şâhâne* founded İttihad-ı Osmanî Cemiyeti (the Committee of Ottoman Union), which would later be transformed into the radical positivist and revolutionary İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress).

⁵⁵See A. Mubahiagian, "Մատաթիս Գարագաշեան: Կեանքը եւ Գործերը," *Մոյն: Քաղաքական, Հասարակական, Գրական Լեւսագիր* 1 (1940), 57–72, at 57–62.

⁵⁶Oktay Aras, *Mekteb-i Sultani'nin Kuruluşunun 150. Yılında Galatasaray Lisesi: Müdürler ve Öğretmenler (1868–2018)* (Istanbul, 2019), 287.

⁵⁷Kegham Fenercian and Hrachia Bedrosian, *Եղիա Տէլիրնիսպաշեան: Իր Կեանքը եւ Գործը* (Istanbul, 1921), 21.

⁵⁸See Taceddin Kayaoglu, *Osmanlı Hâriciyesinde Gayr-i Müslimler (1852–1925)* (Ankara, 2013).

as he taught philosophy, history of philosophy, and aesthetics at Getronagan and Haygagan Gırtaran in the 1880s. Finally, judging from his deeply personal obituary for Beşir Fuad on the occasion of the latter's suicide in 1887, calling him "the unforgettable Fuad," we have reason to believe that Demirjibashian and the "first" positivist in the Ottoman Empire personally knew one another and were possibly familiar with each other's work.⁵⁹

Gosdantian, on the other hand, was born in Izmir. His parents were wealthy philanthropists, acting as patrons for young Armenians pursuing scientific studies. As an encyclopedist intellectual of the Tanzimat period, he published *Հասարակաց Թանգարան* (General Collection) in 1858. This collection comprised sixteen volumes, each of which was devoted to the introduction of a branch of science.⁶⁰ Moreover, he defended positivism, materialism, and evolutionism in his 1878 *Մեթոդի Վերջ* (Discourse of Method). This book was fiercely criticized for its blunt atheism by both religious and secular intellectuals from the Ottoman Armenian community. We have reason to believe that Muslim/Turkish philosophers with the ability to read French were familiar with the content of this book and the discussions surrounding it. This is because one of the French positivists most read in the Ottoman Empire, Émile Littré, wrote an article in his *La philosophie positive revue* in 1879 to defend Gosdantian against his critics, calling him "the Auguste Comte of Izmir."⁶¹ Gosdantian had already published an article in Littré's journal in 1878, with a preface supplied by the latter, on ways to propagate the scientific worldview in the Orient. In this article, Gosdantian had argued that only through education in the positive sciences was it possible to enlighten the masses and fight against the blind chauvinism responsible for unending conflicts between populations with different ethno-religious origins.⁶²

As a result, although there is no strong evidence indicating that philosophical discourses written in the Armenian language were actually read by Muslim/Turkish intellectuals, Armenian philosophers and the Muslim/Turkish intellectual elite had strong personal and institutional relations. Moreover, some Muslim/Turkish intellectuals, including Ali Suavi, Ahmed Midhat, Namık Kemal, and the first philosophy professor at the Dârülfünûn, Ahmed Vefik Paşa, were familiar with the Armenian script. Thus they were able at least to read periodicals published in Turkish in the Armenian script, such as *Ceride-i Şarkıye* (Eastern Journal) and *Manzume-i Efkâr* (Course of Opinion).⁶³

It is worth noting that intercultural relations between Armenian and Muslim/Turkish intellectuals were not limited to the sphere of philosophy. For example, the Cemiyet-i İlmıyye-i Osmâniyye (Ottoman Academy of Sciences) and its journal, *Mecmûa-i Fünûn* (Journal of Natural Sciences), functioned as media through which intellectuals of different ethno-religious origins communicated with each

⁵⁹Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Իմաստասիրական*, 1887, 20–33.

⁶⁰Mikayel Hagopyan, "Գալուստ Կոստանդյանը և Նրա 'Մեթոդի Վերջ' Էրաբեր Հասարակական Գիտությունների 3 (1979), 47–58, at 47–8.

⁶¹See Émile Littré, "Auguste Comte à Smyrne," *La philosophie positive revue* 5 (1879), 313–17.

⁶²Kalud Gosdantian, "Գիտական Պրոպագանդ Արևելքում," *Բանբեր Հայաստանի Արհիվների 1* (1971), 147–8.

⁶³See Murat Cankara, "Rethinking Ottoman Cross-cultural Encounters: Turks and the Armenian Alphabet," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51/1 (2015), 1–16.

other. Founded in 1861, Cemiyet-i İlmiyye-i Osmâniyye was the first multicultural civil scientific organization in the Ottoman Empire. Committed to the dissemination of scientific knowledge among the Ottomans, Muslim/Turkish, Armenian, and Greek members gave public lectures on topics ranging from physics and astronomy to law and political economy. Similarly, *Mecmûa-i Fünûn* published articles in the Turkish language on history, logic, and the natural sciences.⁶⁴ Hovhannes Sakızlian (1830–1912), an Armenian member of Cemiyet-i İlmiyye-i Osmâniyye, was responsible for the articles and public lectures on political economy. His *Mebad-i İlmi Serveti Milel* (1885), which was based on his lectures at the Mekteb-i Mülkiye (Imperial School of Political Science), was published in *Mecmûa-i Fünûn*. This was the first scholarly work in the Turkish language on political economy.⁶⁵

In the following sections, I will argue that in addition to their personal and institutional relations with Muslim/Turkish intellectuals, Armenian thinkers' philosophical discourses were motivated by concerns and anxieties similar to those of the latter. That is, just like the Muslim/Turkish followers of the new philosophy, Armenian thinkers were attracted to positivism, materialism, and evolutionism as means of cultural enlightenment and communal progress. They were also concerned by the possibility that these schools of thought could destroy the very foundation of their communal identity, namely religion. Hence they felt the need to inquire into the possibility of reconciling modern Western philosophy with religious dogmas, institutions, and practices.

Karakashian and the devilish charm of positivism

As one of the first historians of Western philosophy in the Ottoman Empire, Karakashian begins his *Հասկանալի Պատմությունն Փիլիսոփայությանն* (Brief History of Philosophy) by explaining why studying the history of philosophy is an important enterprise.⁶⁶ He argues that studying the history of philosophy is

⁶⁴See Ali Budak, *Mecmûa-i Fünûn: Osmanlı'nın İlk Bilim Dergisi* (Istanbul, 2011), 15–121.

⁶⁵See Yıldız Devci Bozkuş, *XIX. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğ'unda Ermeni Entelektüeller* (Ankara, 2020), 312–29.

⁶⁶Münif Paşa and Ali Suavi also attempted to write the history of Western philosophy in the 1860s. However, their histories were not of the caliber of Karakashian's. In fact, no history of Western philosophy in the Turkish language of the caliber of *Հասկանալի Պատմությունն Փիլիսոփայությանն* would be written until the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Specifically, Münif Paşa's *Târih-i Hukemâ-yı Yunân* (History of Greek Philosophers), published between 1863 and 1867 in *Mecmûa-i Fünûn*, was just a translation of François Fénelon's *Abrégé de la vie des plus illustres philosophes de l'antiquité*, which had already been translated into Turkish by an Armenian named Krikor Kumarian in 1854. See François Fénelon, *Antik Felsefe Tarihi: Evvel Zamanda A'zamü'ş-şân Olan Filozofların İmrar Etmiş Oldukları Ömürlerinin İcmalidir*, trans. Krikor Kumaryan, ed. Bedri Merutlu (Istanbul, 2020); Münif Paşa, *Târih-i Hukemâ-yı Yunân*, ed. Yunus Kaplan (Konya, 2016). On the other hand, despite his original plan to write the history of contemporary philosophy, Ali Suavi's *Târih-i Efkâr* (History of Thoughts), published a year after *Հասկանալի Պատմությունն Փիլիսոփայությանն* in the newspaper *Ulûm* (Sciences), was limited to the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers. See Ali Suavi, *Târih-i Efkâr*, ed. Yakup Yıldız (Konya, 2019). Even Ahmed Midhat's *Târih-i Hikmet* (History of Philosophy), published as late as 1912–13, was confined to ancient Greek philosophy. See Ahmed Midhat, *Dârü'l-Fünûn Dersleri: Târih-i Hikmet*, ed. Ali Utku and Sabahattin Çevikbaş (Konya, 2016).

the first prerequisite for learning how to exercise philosophical thought. This is because philosophy is nothing but the human mind's endeavor to find the right method for discovering truth, and particularly the truth of external reality and the human soul.⁶⁷ Accordingly, the history of philosophy corresponds to the journey of "the human mind's greatest exercise," namely "free thinking." This journey consists of free thinking to test the most "fantastical" and "daring" systems of thought on the way to discovering the right method.⁶⁸ Thus, by studying the characteristics of this journey, students of philosophy learn how free thinking was born, which stations it has visited, which mistakes it has made, and at which destination it has finally arrived.

According to Karakashian, the history of philosophy begins with humans inquiring into the nature of truth "by themselves" instead of letting "supreme beings" dictate answers for the most fundamental questions of human existence.⁶⁹ He determines five schools of thought as the main attempts to answer these questions. These are sensualism (*զգացականություն*), spiritualism (*ոգնականություն*), skepticism (*սկեպտականություն*), mysticism (*խորհրդականություն*), and eclecticism (*ընտրականություն*).⁷⁰ Karakashian traces the different versions of these schools in the four main periods of the history of philosophy, namely ancient philosophy (*նախնի փիլիսոփայություն*), middle philosophy (*միջին փիլիսոփայություն*), mixed philosophy (*խառն փիլիսոփայություն*), and modern philosophy (*սարդի փիլիսոփայություն*).

The main object of study for ancient philosophy (640–470 BC) was the cosmos and its basic components. Elaborating on this, Karakashian briefly introduces the thoughts of the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers.⁷¹ Middle philosophy (470 BC–AD 200), on the other hand, is divided into two camps with respect to its object of study. Philosophers such as Socrates, Zeno of Cyprus, and Epicurus devoted themselves to the study of human existence and the nature of the good life.⁷² Aristotle and Plato, however, were metaphysicians (*բնագանցազէտք*), inquiring into the nature of what was beyond the physical world, namely general or universal ideas (*ընդհանուր գաղափարներ*), such as being and time.⁷³ Karakashian claims that both ancient and middle philosophies ended with the reign of skepticism that rejects the possibility of knowing truth, mainly because their method for discovering truth was not the right one. That is, these philosophies were hypothetical (*ենթադրական*), not empirical or experimental (*փորձարական*).⁷⁴

Mixed philosophy (AD 200–1600) corresponds to a certain regression in the history of philosophy, as philosophy in this period was mainly subjected to religion with the task of proving religious dogmas by the principles of reason. Thus it was theological and deductive (*ընծայական*), in addition to being hypothetical.⁷⁵

⁶⁷Karakashian, *Համառոտ Պատմություն Փիլիսոփայության*, 5.

⁶⁸Ibid., preface.

⁶⁹Ibid., 5–6.

⁷⁰Ibid., 7.

⁷¹Ibid., 12–13.

⁷²Ibid., 23–30.

⁷³Ibid., 30–41.

⁷⁴Ibid., 23, 41.

⁷⁵Ibid., 11.

Karakashian divides mixed philosophy into the Alexandrian and Christian schools of thought. The former consisted of a certain combination of Greek philosophy and Eastern mysticism, Christianity, and Judaism, whereas the latter was mostly under the spell of scholasticism.⁷⁶ However, despite its regressive nature, mixed philosophy would end with the emancipation of thought, beginning in the fifteenth century. This is because some revolutionary events would lead to the questioning of ancient authorities, even though the philosophers of this period were not yet able to replace these authorities with novel systems of thought. Among these events were the conquest of Constantinople by Muslim Turks, the reintroduction of Greek philosophy into the Western world, the invention of the printing press, and the Lutheran revolution.⁷⁷ Humanity had to wait until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—that is, the age of modern philosophy—to collect the fruits of such events.

Karakashian claims that what defines modern philosophy (AD 1600–1868) is the fact that it “points out the right method or way to search for and demonstrate truth.”⁷⁸ The method in question is observation, combined with induction (*մտկածություն*) and the commitment to doubting anything and everything until it is clearly and distinctly demonstrated. He attributes such commitment to doubt to René Descartes.⁷⁹ The inductive method of observation, on the other hand, is attributed to Francis Bacon. This method made possible those scientific discoveries that contributed immensely to human progress, such as the discoveries of Newton in physics, Harvey in anatomy, and Halley in astronomy.⁸⁰ Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, the inductive and critical method of observation was developed into its contemporary version by the French, English, and Scottish schools of thought. Such philosophers as Voltaire, Baron d’Holbach, David Hume, and Adam Smith defended the most radical versions of free thinking, argued that the source of knowledge was the empirical observation of the material world, and thus advocated empiricism or empiricist materialism (*նկրթականություն*).⁸¹ The method of observation was also developed by Immanuel Kant in his critical philosophy, which struck a deadly blow against idealism (*գաղափարականություն*) and any form of metaphysical thinking. This led to the championing of positivism, even though the anti-positivist followers of Kant, such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, tried in vain to rescue idealism.⁸² Karakashian writes,

Under the impact of these principles [i.e. Kant’s critical philosophy, Bacon’s empiricism, and Descartes’s methodological skepticism], scientific investigations, as well as psychological and moral research, have become empirical and critical for almost one and a half centuries. [For these investigations and researches] what is true and objective is what is positive. Positivism, namely the principle that does not accept anything true other than what is

⁷⁶Ibid., 42–7.

⁷⁷Ibid., 56–7.

⁷⁸Ibid., 58.

⁷⁹Ibid., 61–3.

⁸⁰Ibid., 59–61.

⁸¹Ibid., 71–2.

⁸²Ibid., 72–5.

acquired through observational and critical methods, has formed a powerful camp of empiricism, materialism, and [materialist] pantheism (Mill, Littré, Taine, Renan) against that other conservative camp favoring the eclectic approach based on spiritualist and theological foundations.⁸³

In Karakashian's view, positivism as the final destination of free thinking is devilishly charming. It is charming because the inductive and critical method of observation enables human progress on the way to discovering truth. However, it is also devilish because of its materialist and anti-theistic implications, as well as its encroachment upon what is traditionally regarded as the sphere of religion; that is, the sphere of investigations into morality and the human soul. Karakashian portrays this devilish charm in the most unusual way. He writes, "In the face of [positivist] philosophy, which proceeds with demonstrations and renounces [God], orthodox philosophy, which accepts [God] and is pious, finds itself in a situation that is reminiscent of the dawn of humanity, when God's creatures saw in the human race something both hostile and charming."⁸⁴ We have reason to believe that Karakashian, the Mkhitarist priest, felt this hostile charm of materialist and anti-theistic positivism deeply, as he left the priesthood after encountering the materialist philosophy of Ludwig Büchner in 1856.⁸⁵

The "psychologist" attempt to overcome atheism

Karakashian's *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն կամ Սկզբունք Հոգեբանության, Տրամաբանության, Բարոյականի և Բնական Աստուածաբանության* (Introduction to Philosophy; or, the Principles of Psychology, Logic, Ethics, and Natural Theology), published in the same year as his history of philosophy, and Rusinian's *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության* (Textbook of Philosophy), published in 1879 after his death, may be read as failed attempts to overcome the atheistic implications of positivism without underestimating the value of modern Western philosophy. The value of modern Western philosophy should not be underestimated because, for Karakashian, as we have seen above, this philosophy determines the right method for discovering truth. Thus it functions as the *sine qua non* for human progress. Similarly, Rusinian argues that philosophy is by definition "the love of wisdom," where wisdom refers to the search for "the true, good, and beautiful."⁸⁶ The true, good, and beautiful correspond to the essential faculties of human beings as free, perceiving, and rational entities. Accordingly, philosophy is inevitable for "the mental and moral perfection of humanity."⁸⁷ Moreover, as "the science of sciences," it is philosophy that provides the natural as well as the social sciences

⁸³Ibid. 75–6.

⁸⁴Ibid., 76.

⁸⁵Acarian, *Պատմություն Հայոց Նոր Գրականության*, 100; Mubahiagian, "Մատաթիս Գարսապաշեան," 59. Muslim/Turkish positivists and materialists in the late Ottoman Empire were also strongly influenced by the philosophy of Büchner. His *Kraft und Stoff* was partially translated into Turkish in 1892 by Abdullah Cevdet. The complete translation was published as late as 1911 by Bahâ Tevfik and his friend Ahmed Nebil. Hanioglu, "Blueprints for a Future Society," 39, 66.

⁸⁶Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 27–8.

⁸⁷Ibid., 29.

with basic concepts, principles, and methods.⁸⁸ As a result, philosophy is essential for “each and every progressive movement” in the modern world.⁸⁹ However, religious commitments should not be sacrificed for progress. After all, Karakashian’s and Rusinian’s philosophical discourses were addressed to the Armenian reader in the Ottoman Empire, whose collective identity was primarily defined in terms of membership in a religious community. Hence modern Western philosophy should be reconciled with religious commitments. We have reason to believe that regardless of their personal faith, the desire for such reconciliation was one of the driving forces behind Karakashian’s and Rusinian’s philosophy textbooks, as both end by asking why one should believe in God and what it means to act religiously.

Specifically, Karakashian and Rusinian try to overcome atheism by exercising a sort of “psychologism.” Karakashian divides philosophy into psychology (*հոգեբանություն*), logic (*տրամաբանություն*), ethics (*քարոյսական*), and theology (*աստուածաբանություն*); following a similar line of division, Rusinian replaces theology with aesthetics (*գեղագիտություն*).⁹⁰ However, both take psychology, or philosophy of the self, as the first philosophy. This is because, in Rusinian’s words, “the other parts of philosophy” assume “the necessity of the existence” of the self, understood as the mind or the soul.⁹¹

To study psychology is to inquire into the basic faculties of the human mind. These are sensibility (*զգայնություն*), intelligence (*խնայողություն*), and activity (*գործունեություն*). Sensibility refers to the fact that humans may be affected by external objects, ideas, and other human beings.⁹² Activity, on the other hand, is the soul’s ability to act on itself as well as on the external reality.⁹³ Finally, intelligence is the faculty to understand. It is divided into three parts, namely consciousness (*գիտակցություն*), perception (*աղտսագին ըմբռնում*), and reason (*քան*).⁹⁴ This division allows Karakashian and Rusinian to “overcome” the atheistic implications of positivism. In Rusinian’s words, it prevents them from falling into the kind of “empiricism” that necessarily leads to “skepticism and materialism” by “overthrowing the foundations of morality, religion, and art.”⁹⁵

Primarily, Karakashian and Rusinian argue that although perception functions with the aid of the five senses, consciousness and reason do not require sensory data to discover truth. Moreover, as opposed to perception, the latter may provide humans with certainty. Consciousness, for example, works with introspection (*ներքին զգայնություն*). Since, in the case of introspection, the object and the subject of knowledge are one and the same, the mind acts infallibly when it introspectively knows that it exists and that it is the cause of certain actions

⁸⁸Ibid., 31.

⁸⁹Ibid., 33.

⁹⁰Madatia Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն կամ Սկզբունք Հոգեբանության, Տրամաբանության, Բարոյականի և Բնական Աստուածաբանության* (Istanbul, 1868), 3; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 33–4.

⁹¹Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 34.

⁹²Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 13–15; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 42–4.

⁹³Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 28–30; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 82–5.

⁹⁴Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 16.

⁹⁵Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 75.

and ideas.⁹⁶ Reason, on the other hand, has the ability to cognize *that which does not require demonstration, that which has to accompany every idea of the human mind, and that which has to exist exactly the way it does*. These are what Karakashian calls “the first truths” (*առաջին նշմարտություններ*), such as “one and the same thing cannot exist and not exist at the same time” and “everything has a cause,” and what Rusinian calls “absolute ideas” (*բացարձակ գաղափարներ*), such as the ideas of time, space, substance, and causation.⁹⁷ Accordingly, although the empirical observation of the material world is the *sine qua non* for the positive sciences, it is thanks to consciousness and reason that it is possible to undertake “the moral sciences” (*քարոյսական գիտություն*).⁹⁸

To be exact, both Karakashian and Rusinian claim that it is thanks to their reason that humans are able to determine moral duties. For example, reason dictates that as free, rational, and embodied beings, humans should avoid those habits that harm the body, will, or intelligence and that prevent them from exercising freedom or make them incapable of discovering truth. Moreover, “moral consciousness” (*քարոյսական գիտակցություն*) allows humans to discover the idea of the good. The good is what is agreeable with duty and what therefore makes humans feel pleasure when they act according to the latter.⁹⁹ Similarly, thanks to reason and consciousness, it is possible to prove the existence of God. Both Karakashian and Rusinian argue that there are three ways of proving God’s existence. These are called natural (*բնական*), moral (*քարոյսական*), and metaphysical (*բնագանգակյան*) arguments. The natural argument for the existence of God is based on a “first truth,” namely that everything has a cause. It claims that the existence, movement, and harmony of natural entities necessitate the idea of a first cause, which can be nothing but God.¹⁰⁰ According to the moral argument, given that humans are conscious of the fact that the good is different to the evil and that what is morally good is what is mostly contrary to their desires and drives, the ultimate creator of moral laws cannot be human beings. Therefore God must exist as the creator of moral laws.¹⁰¹ The metaphysical argument, on the other hand, states that by introspection humans know that they have the idea of an infinitely powerful, good, and knowing God. Since the human mind is not infinite, and since reason dictates that infinity cannot be caused by anything finite, the cause of the idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God must be nothing but God.¹⁰²

Finally, both Karakashian and Rusinian refer to consciousness and reason to prove the immateriality of the soul and the existence of an afterlife. First, they argue that by introspection the soul knows that although its actions, sensations, and ideas change, it always remains self-identical and indivisible. Similarly, it knows that it is responsible for its decisions. That is, it is conscious of the fact

⁹⁶Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 16–17; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 36–8.

⁹⁷Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 17–19, 38; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 72, 78–81.

⁹⁸Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 144.

⁹⁹Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 78–80; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 156–8.

¹⁰⁰Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 88–9; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 175.

¹⁰¹Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 89; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 176.

¹⁰²Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 90; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 177–8.

that it suffers from pangs of conscience when its decisions are not in conformity with moral duties. Since material entities do not possess such responsibility, indivisibility, and self-identical existence, the soul cannot be material. It also cannot perish, as perishing requires divisibility and therefore materiality.¹⁰³ Moreover, the fact that the soul understands its moral duties necessitates the existence of an afterlife. This is because moral duties are inextricably woven in human consciousness with the ideas of reward and punishment. However, the material world does not always distribute rewards and punishments in perfect harmony with what is deserved. Therefore an afterlife as the place where true justice is found must exist.¹⁰⁴

On the foundation of such moral and metaphysical arguments backed up by “psychologism,” Karakashian and Rusinian discuss *why* and *how* one should believe in God. In other words, as Ottomans whose public identity is primarily defined in terms of their membership in a religious community, they attempt to establish the necessity of *practicing* religion instead of confining themselves to proving the existence of God by rational arguments, which would largely be the case for their Western counterparts. Karakashian argues that the existence of God, together with the notion of an afterlife, necessarily leads to the idea of religion. Religion is “servitude” to God. Such servitude may be internal or external. The former refers to “belief,” “love,” and “respect,” whereas the latter requires “prayer” and “worship.” The external forms of servitude may in turn be practiced individually or collectively.¹⁰⁵ According to Rusinian, on the other hand, one must necessarily satisfy the requirements of religion—that is, “believe, love, obey, and worship” God—because the end of human beings lies in what truly defines them, namely their immaterial and indivisible soul.¹⁰⁶ The end of the human soul is to reach the true, good, and beautiful in their pure and perfect states. However, these cannot be found in the material world. That is why the true end of human beings is to be directed towards God, which is “the first cause, perfect beauty, unerring justice, and supreme good.”¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, Karakashian’s and Rusinian’s “psychologist” attempt to overcome atheism fails. This is because they are unable to solve the mind–body problem, or what Rusinian calls the problem of their “unity” (*միաստրություն*). The problem is how the soul can unite under one roof different parts of its intelligence, namely the faculty of perception, on the one hand, which necessarily functions with the aid of bodily organs, and consciousness and reason on the other hand, which do not need embodiment. Similarly, how can the immaterial soul affect and be affected by the material body and its sense organs? Karakashian raises these questions in his history of philosophy, but without commenting on them.¹⁰⁸ Rusinian, on the other hand, evaluates the viability of several solutions. He discusses, for example, Gottfried Leibniz’s idea of “pre-established harmony” (*նախասկարզևայ ներդաշնակություն*) between the mind and the body, but rejects such ideas by

¹⁰³Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 95–7; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 94–8.

¹⁰⁴Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 98; Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 82–3.

¹⁰⁵Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 98–9.

¹⁰⁶Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայության*, 183.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 180–81

¹⁰⁸Karakashian, *Համառոտ Փիլիսոփայություն*, 67–8.

arguing that they contradict the concept of human freedom.¹⁰⁹ Thus, he desperately concludes, “The unity of the mind with the body is a fact, whose nature escapes philosophy.”¹¹⁰

Gosdantian and the war of worldviews

Philosophical deadlocks such as the mind–body problem are pseudo-problems from the perspective of Gosdantian’s *Մէթոտի Վրայ* (Discourse on Method). This is because what leads to these deadlocks, namely religious and psychologist, or what Gosdantian calls “rationalist” (*տրասնարանսկան*), attempts to overcome the atheistic implications of positivism, corresponds to nothing but a form of “atavism” (*հաստարձնոյթիւն*). He argues that positivism stands at the zenith of the human mind’s evolution, which parallels the progressive history of inquiring into the right method for discovering truth. Hence religious and rationalist methods are nothing but regressions from the linear path of truth.

Specifically, Gosdantian likens the history of the human mind’s evolution and its quest for discovering the right method to the mental development of an infant. Reminiscent of Auguste Comte’s “law of three stages,” he divides this history into four stages. The first stage comprises “the instinctive method” (*քնազոյիւն մէթոտ*). This was the method of primitive people at the bottom rung of the evolutionary ladder. The intellectual capacity of those people was hardly higher than that of monkeys. Although they were able to produce primitive tools to kill their competitors and cook their food, they were only moved by natural needs.¹¹¹ As such, they were similar to infants: “finding themselves on earth, not knowing whence they came and whither they go, the first men were driven to think, work, fight, and reproduce only by the incentive of daily needs.”¹¹² According to Gosdantian, this stage ended with the development of language, because it was language that made the construction of infinitely many ideas possible and granted humans the capability of analyzing, transmitting, and comparing and contrasting different senses and impressions.¹¹³

However, the more the language they speak is undeveloped, the more confusion penetrates humans’ thoughts. That is why the first stage was not immediately followed by the construction of the right method for discovering truth. Instead, “the religious method” (*հաստոսկան մէթոտ*) replaced the instinctive one.¹¹⁴ At this stage, natural forces were explained by referring to gods, conceptualized as supreme versions of human beings. Thus ancient religions such as Brahmanism and Osirism were based on a sort of “anthropomorphism” (*մարդաձեւութիւն*), functioning as models for all contemporary religions.¹¹⁵ Gosdantian argues that humans at this stage were like “little children who had just learned how to read and who tended

¹⁰⁹Rusinian, *Դասագիրք Փիլիսոփայութեան*, 101–2

¹¹⁰Ibid., 103.

¹¹¹Gosdantian, *Մէթոտի Վրայ*, 2–5.

¹¹²Ibid., 107–8.

¹¹³Ibid., 7–11.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 14–15.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 15–21.

to believe whatever they heard.”¹¹⁶ Finding their source of authority in revelation and holy books, religions as childish anthropomorphisms were unable to grant humans the possibility of discovering truth, because they suffered from being neither verifiable nor falsifiable.¹¹⁷

Gosdantian calls the third stage of human evolution the age of “the rationalist method” (*տրամաբանական մէթոտ*). This age began with “the awakening of the Greek mind” in the sixth century BC.¹¹⁸ At this stage, religious explanations were replaced by the human self and reasoning. That is, this was the age of critical thinking. In Gosdantian’s view, Socrates and Aristotle stood at the peak of this age. The former “struck an eternal blow against blind religious and traditional systems” with his “dialectical method” (*հարցական մէթոտ*); that is, “Socratic irony” (*Սոկրատեսան հեզկոտթիւն*).¹¹⁹ He also took his conscience, instead of gods, as the true source of authority in the sphere of morality. The latter, on the other hand, systematized that Socratic irony and developed it into “syllogistic reasoning” (*հաւաքաբանութիւն*).¹²⁰ Gosdantian argues that the third stage of human evolution entered the process of decline with the rise of Neoplatonist (*Նորասոկրատոնէսան*) mysticism.¹²¹ Following this, Christianity and its scholasticism, which was nothing but a crooked and radical version of syllogistic reasoning, came to characterize the second half of this age. As an anthropocentric and therefore “reactionary” (*յետաադիւն*) system, Christianity did not produce any novelty in the process of human evolution.¹²² However, characterized by Christianity or not, the third stage of human evolution was far from granting humanity the possibility of discovering truth, because humans at this stage were locked up in their own selves and reasoning processes instead of going back to the things themselves. This is why the rationalist method led to nothing but endless sophistry. Moreover, it did not accomplish anything other than creating some meaningless concepts, such as the self or substance. The terminology that the rationalist method employed was in fact just a secular version of the religious terminology; for example, the conscience replaced God’s hell.¹²³ In short, human beings at this stage were like “adolescents,” criticizing everything from the perspective of their egos without being able to replace what they were critical of.¹²⁴

Finally, Gosdantian claims that the positivist (*դրական*) or scientific (*գիտական*) method stands at the zenith of the human mind’s evolution. This method studies observable phenomena. It limits itself to what is verifiable by observation or experimentation. As such, it accepts nothing but a posteriori knowledge (*յետապիւստոգութիւններ*).¹²⁵ Going back to the things themselves, it may be likened to “a 35 or 40-year-old man” acting with “a neutral perspective” instead of taking

¹¹⁶Ibid., 109.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 119–20.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 23.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 30–31.

¹²⁰Ibid., 32.

¹²¹Ibid., 41.

¹²²Ibid., 43.

¹²³Ibid., 132–6.

¹²⁴Ibid., 111.

¹²⁵Ibid., 142–3.

his self as the point of departure in searching for truth.¹²⁶ Gosdantian traces the birth of this method back to the conquest of Constantinople by Muslim Turks, which led Europeans to explore new trade routes, especially in order to reach India. This exploration started a war of worldviews between proto-positivists like Columbus and those who, based on their religious convictions and scholastic reasoning, believed that there was no such route.¹²⁷ The victory of Columbus over religious and rationalist thinking was sustained by the prophets of the scientific method in the sixteenth century, such as Copernicus and Galileo.¹²⁸ In the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon systematized this method in his *Novum Organum*.¹²⁹ Thanks to this method, the eighteenth century witnessed countless scientific discoveries, such as the discoveries of Herschel and Laplace in astronomy, Richter and Lavoisier in chemistry, Cuvier and Lamarck in biology, and Goethe and Linnaeus in botany.¹³⁰ Consequently, as “the product of a five-thousand-year-old civilization,” the nineteenth century would become the age when “the tremendous torrent of sciences, discoveries, inventions, and truth,” like “a fountain of light,” would begin to penetrate into Europe “with the help of critical and experiential methods.”¹³¹

Gosdantian argues that the positivist or scientific method is the only appropriate method for discovering truth. Accordingly, he rejects any form of eclecticism that is based on an attempt to reconcile the experiential method with religious commitments. Instead, taking religion as “an enemy of science,” he states that “the scholarly war continues and will continue until other methods fall and science reigns over them as their ruler.”¹³² This war is called *Kulturkampf*, “that great battle in the name of enlightenment.”¹³³ For Gosdantian, this battle should determine the goal of philosophers. Waging war against enemies of science, philosophers should not limit themselves to theoretical debates; they should work for the “improving” and “spreading” of sciences. That is, they should publish scientific books and articles as well as founding schools and kindergartens.¹³⁴

Gosdantian’s “presumptuous” attack against religious commitments in the name of positivism and scientific progress was a novelty in the Ottoman Empire. As such, he drew a fierce counterstrike from religious authorities. He was excommunicated by the church. Copies of his book were burnt and he could not publish anything else until his death, including the planned sequel to *Մէջոսնի Վրայ*.¹³⁵ In addition, he was harshly criticized by both religious and secular scholars. These criticisms are particularly important because they reveal what was at stake in the discussions of modern Western philosophy, namely the very existence of Armenians

¹²⁶Ibid., 112.

¹²⁷Ibid., 65–6.

¹²⁸Ibid., 71–4.

¹²⁹Ibid., 76.

¹³⁰Ibid., 83–9.

¹³¹Ibid., 90–91.

¹³²Ibid., 159, 161.

¹³³Ibid., 160.

¹³⁴Ibid., 156–7.

¹³⁵Hagopyan, “Գալուստ Կոստանդյանը,” 52, 57.

as a Christian *millet*. For example, in his review of *Մէջոտի Վրայ*, the head of American missionaries addresses “Armenians who are in love with their nation.”¹³⁶ The review warns them that “nations may die” by “committing suicide” and argues that what Armenians like Gosdantian, who have based their intellectual development on reading “atheistic and worthless books and periodicals in French,” do not understand is that “the Church must be respected as the tie of national unity.”¹³⁷ They also do not understand that just like “other peoples in Turkey,” Armenians, too, “need [foreign] help to spread education” in the name of national progress and that, as history shows us, such help may only come from religious charity organizations for their Christian brothers and sisters.¹³⁸

Similarly, Madteos Mamurian, one of the most prominent Young Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, states in his journal *Արեւելեան Մամուլ* (Oriental Express) that he did not like *Մէջոտի Վրայ* “as an Armenian.”¹³⁹ This is because “the main elements of nations are their institutions. These elements may be grounded in moral, religious, political, or historical circumstances.”¹⁴⁰ In any case, as the very preconditions of national existence, they cannot be abandoned suddenly; they require gradual transformation. Given that religion and the church have historically provided these preconditions for Armenians, removing the religious element from their hearts is to lead them into annihilation as a nation. After all, “under the current circumstances,” Armenians are devoid of “a fatherland, political tradition, or a shiny literature and science”; it is only their religion and history that make them who they are.¹⁴¹ Therefore asking what Gosdantian asks of them, namely embracing atheism in the name of scientific progress, means not knowing the first thing about “poor Armenians” and “the laws of their historical evolution.”¹⁴²

Demirjibashian and the struggle for reconciliation

In the pages of his journal *Գրական և Իմաստասիրական Ճարժում* (Literary and Philosophical Movement), Demirjibashian defends what he takes to be the primary requirements for the enlightenment and national progress of the Armenian people, namely positivism, materialism, and evolutionism. However, he does this without underestimating what Mamurian calls “the laws of Armenians’ historical evolution.” Thus he tries to reconcile positivism, materialism, and evolutionism with Christianity, particularly with the Christianity of Armenians.¹⁴³

¹³⁶George W. Wood, *Քննութիւն Մէջոտի Վրայ Անուն Գրքակին Ուղղեալ առ Ոստանաւոր և Ողջալիտ Հայ Երիտասարդս* (Istanbul, 1882), preface.

¹³⁷Ibid., 118, 120.

¹³⁸Ibid., 119.

¹³⁹Madteos Mamurian, “Մէջոտի Վրայ,” *Արեւելեան Մամուլ*, 1878, 76–7, 125–33, 200–4, 323–7, at 76.

¹⁴⁰Madteos Mamurian, “Մէջոտի Վրայ”. *Արեւելեան Մամուլ*, 1879, 342–7, at 345.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 346.

¹⁴²Ibid., 345.

¹⁴³Similar attempts to reconcile positivism, materialism, and evolutionism with the principles of their religion can be found in the discourses of Muslim/Turkish philosophers. For example, in his *Târih-i Tekvin yâhûd Hilkat* (History of Origination or Creation), Hoca Tahsin explains the evolution of *cevher-i hâlis* (the pure substance) first into atoms and then into celestial bodies. For him, it is this evolutionary history that led to the origination of life on Earth, which first evolved into plants and animals and then gave rise to anthropoids as the ancestors of human beings. See Hoca Tahsin, *Târih-i Tekvin yâhûd*

Specifically, Demirjibashian sets the goal of *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում* as the dissemination of positivist philosophy and evolutionism in the Armenian community.¹⁴⁴ By positivist philosophy he means the search for truth, which takes “observation and experimentation” (*դիտարկումն ու փորձարկումն*) as its starting point and operates with induction in discovering those laws that regulate the relationship between natural phenomena.¹⁴⁵ Demirjibashian believes that it is such positivism that characterizes modern Western philosophy. He writes that “great writers and philosophers” today do not perform armchair philosophy, but “work in the bosom of nature.”¹⁴⁶ Accordingly, he grounds his philosophical contemplations in the findings of the natural sciences.

Primarily, he claims that “for the new philosophy [*նոր ինաստասիրություն*], there is nothing but matter.”¹⁴⁷ Finding its origin in the thought of Democritus and supported by the discoveries of the natural sciences, the new philosophy rightly argues that matter is eternal. That is, it is not created, nor will it ever disappear. It may only be transformed. The current form and secondary qualities of material entities, as well as the way they are transformed, depend on the specific mixture of their “basic elements” (*ուսրերը*) or “atoms” (*հիլլէ*). The mixture in question is determined by “the laws of gravitation” (*ձգողականության օրոնքներ*).¹⁴⁸

As a loyal student of positivism, Demirjibashian does not limit himself to the defense of a materialist ontology. He argues that the new philosophy should also guide our contemplations in the sphere of investigations into human life. That is, they should be directed by the positive sciences, and especially by biology, geology, and archaeology. According to the findings of these sciences, the human is neither a “soul” nor a “creature outside nature.”¹⁴⁹ Human beings are in fact nothing more than evolved and, thus, perfected animals. They are evolved out of “creatures very

Hilkat, ed. Remzi Demir, Bilal Yurtoğlu, and Ali Utku (Konya, 2011). However, Hoca Tahsin pays great attention to embellishing this history with Quranic verses and hadiths in order to show that evolutionism is not in contradiction with Islam. *Ibid.*, e.g. 35, 47, 54, 58. Similarly, in his early writings in the 1870s, Ahmed Midhat defends a sort of Lamarckian evolutionism and materialism, but without failing to justify these schools of thought by citing the Quran. Ali Utku, “Ahmed Midhat,” in Süleyman H. Bolay, ed., *Tanzimat'tan Günümüze Türk Düşünürleri*, vol. 3, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Bilimsel ve Felsefi Düşünce Temsilcileri* (Ankara, 2015), 1618–30, at 1624–5. Although in his later writings in the 1880s he rejects materialism as detrimental to Muslim youth, leading them to moral degeneration, pessimism, and suicide, he does not shirk from arguing that embracing the findings of the positive sciences does not contradict the Holy Book. See e.g. Ahmed Midhat, *Ben Neyim? Hikmet-i Mâdiyyeye Müdâfa'a*, ed. Erdoğan Erbay and Ali Utku (Konya, 2012); Ahmed Midhat, *Schopenhauer'ın Hikmet-i Cedidesi*, ed. Erdoğan Erbay and Ali Utku (Konya, 2013). Finally, Abdullah Cevdet, “the most prominent proponent of the fusion of materialism with Islam,” devotes a considerable number of his writings in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth to the reconciliation of materialism with the principles of Islam. See e.g. Abdullah Cevdet, *Fünûn ve Felsefe ve Felsefe Sânihâları*, ed. Nevzat H. Yanık and Ali Utku (Konya, 2017); see also Hanioglu, “Blueprints for a Future Society,” 28, 47–59.

¹⁴⁴Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1884, 5–6.

¹⁴⁵Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 78.

¹⁴⁶Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1886, 29.

¹⁴⁷Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1887, 61.

¹⁴⁸Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1886, 119–22.

¹⁴⁹Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1883, 35.

inferior to monkeys.”¹⁵⁰ Hence their ancestors are not similar to the inhabitants of the Garden of Eden as described by holy books. Instead, they are “anthropoids” (*մարդասկերպ*), representing transitional forms between inferior animals and *Homo sapiens*.¹⁵¹

Moreover, the laws of evolution should be taken into account in studying societies and their historical developments. This is because, just like individuals, a society also has its own “physiology” (*քնսախօսություն*), subject to the laws of evolution.¹⁵² Hence societies may be likened to human bodies, composed of several organs with specific functions. These organs evolve according to certain laws. For example, out of “simple, homogeneous, indeterminate, and incoherent” states of existence, social organizations evolve into bodies with “complex, heterogeneous, determinate, and harmonious” organs.¹⁵³ Demirjibashian believes that observing undeveloped communities, such as “African races,” can help us picture the most primitive stages of social evolution. With the aid of analogy (*հսկնգիտություն*) and induction, this can help us determine which conditions are favorable to social progress and which circumstances cause social organs to become mired in the earlier stages of the evolutionary process.¹⁵⁴ This means that with the help of a positivist perspective, it is possible to study pathologies of social bodies, as well as generate prescriptions for them.¹⁵⁵

However, in Demirjibashian’s view, neither positivism nor its materialist and evolutionist modifications necessitate that Armenians abandon their national church or give up religious practices. On the contrary, “it is the duty of Armenians to attend church, the national church.”¹⁵⁶ Moreover, Armenians must ensure that their church remains intact: “removing not only an icon but also the frame of an icon or an ornament from our churches is a national crime.”¹⁵⁷ What is interesting in Demirjibashian’s attempt to settle the apparent conflict between positivism and religion is that his struggle for reconciliation is based on the idea of evolution.

To be exact, Demirjibashian conceptualizes religion as a product of the human mind’s evolutionary transformation. He argues that the origin of religion may be traced back to the belief in the soul of the dead. This belief was transformed over time to a belief in a higher soul or a supreme being.¹⁵⁸ Primitive people who were at the first stages of human evolution portrayed the supreme being as a concrete entity like an animal or a human being. It was mostly their “tribe leader” who functioned as a model for their depiction of an omnipotent God protecting his people. However, the more the human mind evolved, the more abstract and universalist their depictions of God became.¹⁵⁹ Demirjibashian claims that no nation has

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 36.

¹⁵¹Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 40–41.

¹⁵²Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1883, 178.

¹⁵³Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1884, 46.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 124.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 18.

¹⁵⁶Yeghia Demirjibashian, “Եկեղեցական Բարեկարգութիւն,” *Երկրագուն: Անտրեայ Հանդէս Ազգային*, *Գրական և Գիտական* 5 (1887), 226–30, at 230.

¹⁵⁷Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 65.

¹⁵⁸Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1884, 172.

¹⁵⁹Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 64–5.

yet reached the highest point of evolution, from the perspective of which God is nothing but pure abstraction, “profound and eternal,” devoid of any pictorial “shell.”¹⁶⁰ It seems that by this he refers to a sort of materialist pantheism because he argues, for example, that his materialism and Brahmanist pantheism have something in common, namely the monistic conceptualization of the substance of the universe.¹⁶¹ Hylozoism (*հիլոզակենդանություն*) may be a better term, though, as he sympathetically defines it in the following words: “Not only animals and humans but also plants and stones are alive. With one word, matter is endowed with life. Active and alive, the atom is the dawn and origin of everything. After all, what is the thing we call nature other than the unity of atoms? Moreover, is it not true that we find nature always in some sort of activity?”¹⁶² In any case, according to Demirjibashian, “even religions change, evolve, and become perfected”; this is especially proven by Christianity, which is nothing but an evolved and developed version of Judaism.¹⁶³

That religions are historical products of evolutionary transformations means that they should continue evolving according to the current progress of humanity. Otherwise, they function as stumbling blocks to the development of societies. Focusing on the development of Ottoman Armenian society, Demirjibashian states that the new age, characterized by positivism, materialism, and evolutionism, has immensely influenced the intellectual elite of the Armenian community since the 1850s, when the latter began to familiarize themselves with scientific and philosophical developments in the West. Moreover, the effects of the new age have started to be felt in every walk of Armenian life thanks to the fact that the number of schools and scientific periodicals was increased in the Ottoman Armenian community in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁴ Against this background, if the Armenian (Apostolic) Church does not want to malfunction as a pathological organ in the social body of Armenians, it needs to transform itself in line with positivism, materialism, and evolutionism. First, it must ensure that its priests are educated in the positive sciences.¹⁶⁵ Second, the Armenian religious elite must work for the reconciliation of religious dogmas with evolutionary ideas. In Demirjibashian’s words, they should “reconcile Darwin with the Holy Scriptures”; they should, of course, “wonder at sacred writings,” but “at the same time read modern philosophers.”¹⁶⁶ As the shepherd of Armenians, the church must not forget that “however small and poor, a nation can survive if it has faith in positivism.”¹⁶⁷ It is only by committing itself to the positive sciences and the idea of evolutionary progress that the Armenian Church may contribute to the moral and material development of its flock, thus remaining attractive to its members. This is especially important in an age when

¹⁶⁰Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1884, 172.

¹⁶¹Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1886, 30–31.

¹⁶²Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1887, 32–3.

¹⁶³Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1884, 7.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 11–12; Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 18–24.

¹⁶⁵Yeghia Demirjibashian, “Դրական Հասարկ,” *Երկրագունդ: Ամսօրեայ Հանդէս Ազգային, Գրական և Գիտական* 5 (1887), 377–83, at 381.

¹⁶⁶Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Բնաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 183.

¹⁶⁷Demirjibashian, “Դրական Հասարկ,” 383.

Catholic and Protestant missionary activities pose lethal threats to the Armenian nation, considering that within the boundaries of the Ottoman *millet* system, members “leave their nation” when they abandon the national church.¹⁶⁸ Hence what is at stake in the Armenian Church’s willingness or unwillingness to evolve in line with modern Western philosophy is the very existence of the Armenian *millet*.

Assuming that the church satisfies the requirements of the new age, its individual members, on their part, must “stick to and protect whatever there is in the Armenian Church.”¹⁶⁹ They must not forget that “loving one’s nation” and “loving one’s religion” are “synonymous for Armenians.”¹⁷⁰ This is because the same laws of evolution that apply to the Armenian Church also apply to the Armenian nation as a social organization. That is, the Armenian nation in its current state of existence is a product of social evolution. It is the Church that has so far functioned as the main driving force in this evolution. Demirjibashian writes that “religion has played, and still does play, such a great role in our nation that we are called ‘a religious nation’”; it was “the officers of this sublime Church” who acted as “the greatest operatives of our national civilization” and “gave direction to our language and literature.”¹⁷¹ Hence embracing the idea of evolution should not prevent Armenians from remaining religious. On the contrary, it should motivate them.

Conclusion

I have argued that the literature on the introduction of modern Western philosophy in the Ottoman Empire is predominantly ethnocentric. This literature reduces the Ottoman version of modern Western thought to the philosophical discourses of Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. Thus it characterizes late Ottoman philosophy by referring to the so-called tension between Western positivism and materialism on the one hand and the principles of Islam on the other. Challenging this ethnocentrism, I have inquired into the first attempts to consider the problems of modern Western philosophy in the Ottoman Armenian community. I have shown that as products of the cultural, administrative, and economic peculiarities of the Ottoman Empire, Armenian philosophers in the late nineteenth century had strong personal and institutional relations with Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. Accordingly, as teachers, professors, and state employees, they were responsible to a considerable degree for the familiarization of the Ottoman intellectual elite with the new philosophy.

Moreover, I have claimed that Armenian philosophers were driven by concerns and anxieties similar to those of Muslim/Turkish intellectuals. That is, they regarded what they took to be the characteristic of modern Western philosophy, namely positivism and its scientific outlook, as critical prerequisite for the progress and well-being of their community. Hence, relegating originality to secondary importance, they composed introductory and mostly encyclopedist discourses

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 380.

¹⁶⁹Demirjibashian, *Գրական և Իմաստասիրական Շարժում*, 1885, 66.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 182.

¹⁷¹Yeghia Demirjibashian, “Կրօնական Թերթերն և Կղերանոց,” *Երկրագունտ: Ամսօրեայ Հանդես Ազգային, Գրական և Գիտական* 6 (1888), 170–74, at 170; Yeghia Demirjibashian, “Վերահաստատութիւն Քահանային,” *Երկրագունտ: Ամսօրեայ Հանդես Ազգային, Գրական և Գիտական* 6 (1888), 385–94, at 388, 390.

with the aim of enlightening their people. However, this meant that they also had to deal with the materialist and anti-theistic implications of the new philosophy. Specifically, they had to reconcile positivism, materialism, and evolutionism with the religious institutions and practices of their *millet*. After all, it was through such institutions and practices that ethno-religious communities in the Ottoman Empire acquired their collective identity. In the case of Armenians, it was the Apostolic Church that functioned as the foundation of the communal identity. For centuries, this church had administered “national” institutions and governed interpersonal relations among “the nationals.” Furthermore, it was through attending the ceremonies of the church and performing religious practices under its guidance that “the nationals” had been able to distinguish themselves from the members of other *millets* in the Ottoman Empire. In short, Ottoman intellectuals’ struggle for reconciliation was an attempt to make sure that what was the *sine qua non* for the material and intellectual progress of their communities did not damage the communal identity of their *millets*.

In other words, what defined late Ottoman philosophy was not the tension between modern Western thought and the principles of Islam. This tension can only give a partial account of the new philosophy in the Ottoman Empire. For the full account, it is necessary to inquire into the similarities and differences between philosophical activities within different *millets*. Judging from the philosophical activities of Ottoman Armenians and Muslim/Turkish intellectuals, we can tentatively conclude that the Ottoman version of modern Western philosophy in the late nineteenth century was primarily characterized by the anxiety that what was the *sine qua non* for “national” progress had the tendency to eliminate “national” identity, regardless of whether this identity was based on Islam or Christianity.