

Avedis Hadjian, *Secret Nation. The Hidden Armenians of Turkey*, I.B. Tauris, London – New York – Oxford – New Delhi – Sydney, 2018, 570 pages.

There was a time when the issue of religious and ethnic identity was not so complicated. A Turk was a Muslim; an Armenian was a Christian. Due to the dramatic events in Turkey, however, and above all the Genocide, things are no longer so easy. There are those who are both Muslims and Armenians, those who struggle to reconcile these two identities, and those who are just confused.

After the Genocide and the Kemalist ethnic cleansing, Eastern Anatolia was considered empty of Armenians, but the fact is that small remnants have survived. Some have preserved their Armenian identity, whereas most have been Islamicized and speak Turkish or Kurdish. However, they have continued to be seen as infidels or converts for generations, and they tend to marry other Islamicized Armenians. Today many of them struggle to come to terms with who they really are.

Many young Armenian women survived the Genocide by being abducted by Muslim men who then married them or gave them as wives to their sons. Nobody knows exactly, but there are estimates that up to two million Turks might have an Armenian grandmother. Often they do not know about it themselves.

The Turkish lawyer Fethiye Çetin published a book in 2004 – in English translation its title is *My Grandmother* – in which she told the story of her grandmother, who revealed to her family at the end of her life that she was an Armenian girl abducted during the Genocide. The book created huge interest in their roots among Muslims who felt that there was something hidden and suppressed in their family history. This was during a time when Turkey – only temporarily, it would turn out – had moved towards greater openness and tolerance, and therefore the discussion was intense.

The journalist Avedis Hadjian has thoroughly studied this phenomenon. After having talked over a period of many years to Armenians living incognito in various parts of Turkey, he has published a book about them, *Secret Nation*. It is a fascinating story about people struggling to come to terms with their identity, of Muslims who have considered themselves Turks or Kurds learning about their Armenian origins. Some do not care, considering all that to belong to the past; they are merely happy to be Muslims. However, there are many who want to connect in one way or another to their Armenian roots. Some go the whole way, reconverting and joining the Armenian Apostolic Church, but not all. Many continue as Muslims but want, at the same time, to be Armenians. That is something new, but it has to be possible, or what is the alternative?

To be a Muslim Armenian has traditionally been impossible. If you are Armenian, you are a Christian, not a Muslim; if you are Muslim, you are not Armenian. Yet for centuries there have been Muslims with Armenian origins. They have normally tried to conceal their roots but have not been seen as real Muslims by those in their environment. People have looked down on them from both sides: Christian Armenians have despised them for having betrayed the faith of their fathers, whereas Muslims have despised them for their infidel background.

Sometimes it gets very complicated. Hadjian tells the story of a man in the little town of Gergen whose family members were "Armenian, by ethnicity and self-identification; Assyrian Orthodox Christians or Sunni Muslims, by religious denomination; Zazaki speakers, by their mother tongue; and Turkish, by citizenship." Many are *ges-ges*, half-half, and practice Islam in their home town, but go to an Armenian church when they are in Istanbul. A man in Diyarbakir talks about chameleons: people who are Armenian with Armenians, Assyrian with Assyrians, Turkish with Turks, and Kurdish with Kurds. History has taught them to do everything to blend in with those who surround them.

Religiously, the hidden Armenians show the whole scale of belief and practice. Some are convinced Muslims. "Christianity is true, but Islam is truer", as one man in Bitlis put it. Some are Crypto-Christians. Officially and outwardly they are Muslims, but in their hearts they are Christians. Some are non-religious, even atheists, while still feeling close to religion, as this man from Diyarbakir observes, "I am a leftist, and I don't like religions, but I like the Church. It gives me peace."

It is a fascinating picture of these remnants of the Anatolian Armenians which Hadjian gives us in his well-written book. Some of the hidden Armenians still want to keep their Armenian origins secret in a Turkey where Armenian identity can be the cause of discrimination and harassment. Others defy the prejudices and claim their Armenian identity with pride. Some are just confused. Do I have to become Christian to be a real Armenian? Can I be Armenian and Muslim at the same time? And who am I really if I speak Kurdish, my ID papers tell me that I am a Turk, but I feel Armenian?

A modern, progressive approach to this is to allow every single person to be whatever she or he likes to be. Without demanding a certain religious belonging or any defined level of language skills, those who want to be Armenian should have the right to be such. However, not all "real" Armenians are that generous, and the confusion comes not only from other people's categorization difficulties, but also from a genuine, internal insecurity. A man from Diyarbakir put it like this, "I am of Armenian origin, but what am I now? I am neither a Kurd, nor a Turk, nor an Armenian."

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