

# “RECONSTITUTING” RELIGION: NEO-PAGANISM IN ARMENIA.

## *Summary*

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Various religious movements and mystical teachings gained widespread currency in Armenia during perestroika and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their rise to prominence may be divided into several distinct periods, each marked by the predominance of one type of motivation among adherents of the new religious groups: (1) the exploration of spiritual alternatives to Soviet atheist and materialist ideology; (2) the quest for a national religious identity; and (3) the search for ways of spiritual liberation and salvation from the purportedly imminent doomsday. Armenian neo-paganism combines all of these motives. However, compared to religions already well-established on a global or regional scale, it lacks institutional organization, sources of funding, well-honed proselytizing methods, literature and periodicals, an acknowledged ideological and spiritual niche and fixed traditions of ritual practice and community organization. The Armenian neo-pagans set out to reconstitute a religious system, or indeed to create it anew, in the absence of a living tradition, or even memory, of historical Armenian paganism.

The organization of Armenian neo-pagans, called *Arordineri Ukht* (Order of the Children of Ari), was created in 1991 by Slak (Edik) Kakosyan (1936–2005), a former dissident exiled from the Soviet Union in 1979 for nationalist propaganda. Kakosyan settled in the United States, where he became acquainted with the ideas and followers of Garegin Nzhdeh (1886–1955). Nzhdeh was the founder and ideologist of the Tseghakron movement, one of the mainstays of Armenian nationalism. He drew on pre-Christian Armenian deities such as Haik and Vahagn as symbols that could lift his compatriots' spirit and inspire post-genocide Armenians to struggle for national rebirth. Neo-pagan ideology came to draw on Nzhdeh not only as a literary source, but also as an object of worship, a divine human being. The neo-pagans created an entire mythology around him, presenting him as a messiah, one who has been visited by the god Vahagn in order to restore the true faith and Aryan values to the Armenian nation. Kakosyan was ordained a supreme priest by followers of Nzhdeh in the United States. When he returned to Armenia in the early 1990s, he founded a neo-pagan community, registering it as a religion. The neo-pagans began to hold annual ceremonies in the Hellenistic temple at Garni, which dates to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, to mark Armenian holidays with pre-Christian roots. The neo-pagan movement currently has several hundred followers and continues to grow. It includes a core of up to 100

active members. The first neo-pagans found that Kakosyan's teachings helped structure their thoughts and feelings on nationhood, homeland, Armenian identity, faith, and religion. Subsequent adherents have joined the movement for a range of motives that includes mysticism, religious feelings, belief in miracles, expectations of intercession by pagan gods, and spiritual experiences triggered by encounters with the god Vahagn. The neo-pagan community remains weakly institutionalized and has yet to develop stable means of proselytizing and attracting new adherents.

The Aryan myth and an Aryan identity are a part of this newly-constructed religion. The main source of mythological, ideological, and ritual knowledge for the Armenian neo-pagans is the *Ukhtagirk*, or Book of Vows, largely written or "compiled" by Kakosyan. Structurally, the Book of Vows resembles the Old and New Testaments. One of its sections, "Tzagumnaran" (Genesis) or the Ararat Mythology, recounts the origins of the world, the creation of Man, and the relationship between the deities of the Armenian neo-pagan pantheon: Ara, Anait, Vahagn, Astkhik, Mikhr, Tir, Yakhvakh, and Vishap. With the exception of the latter two, these deities are mentioned in the writings of medieval Armenian authors. One of the central motifs in neo-pagan mythology is the birth of the god Vahagn. A fragment of ancient epic songs included in Movses Khorenatsi's 5<sup>th</sup> century CE *History of Armenia*, the so-called "Birth of Vahagn," serves as their ritual hymn. A chapter in the Book of Vows entitled "Veharan" (the Book of Greatness) and Patgamaran (the Book of Commandments) recounts the life of Garegin Nzhdeh in a way that parallels the classic structure of heroic myths. Another chapter, entitled "Himnergaran," (Collected Hymns) is a compilation of neo-pagan hymns written by Kakosyan and his followers as well as well-known 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenian poets who drew on pagan motifs. The "pagan" temple of the sun god Mihr-Mithra in Garni, built in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and reconstructed in 1975, has become the main venue for neo-pagan rituals. Several pre-Christian archaeological sites are being used for ritual practice or pilgrimage by neo-pagans. They have rearranged the territory of the Garni temple (e.g. by planting ritual trees) to conform to the traditional structure of any Armenian sanctuary. For the iconography of its pantheon, neo-paganism draws on fragments of sculptures found in archaeological digs in Western Armenia that represent heroes of Armenian mythology as well as sculptures of Armenian pagan gods and heroes authored by the modern Armenian sculptors. The neo-pagans believe that the creative genius of the Armenian people is constantly at work, transcending historical periods as well as social, cultural, religious, and political circumstances.

The neo-pagans are still in the process of establishing a system of rituals, but they already have several stable attributes, symbols, formulas, and sequences of acts. These include primarily rituals that mark an annual cycle of holidays as well as major life events. Most of the rituals of the annual cycle are copied from folk holidays that have an equivalent in the ritual calendar of the Orthodox Church, especially those that are more or less uniformly celebrated across Armenia's various ethnographic regions and are preserved among urban dwellers. Generally, a neo-pagan ritual starts with a formal ceremony inside the temple; next, the priests descend to the base of the temple to distribute consecrated items such as flowers or fruit or offer a ritual

sacrifice; then they perform a ritual dance. This is followed by the folk part of the festivities, such as performances by dance troupes or singers. At the same time, new adherents are being baptized. The celebration concludes with a feast in the form of a picnic. The neo-pagan celebrations are reminiscent of role-playing games that give rise to entire communities leading a life separate from mainstream society. Despite the presence of strong elements of ideology and play, neo-paganism is primarily perceived by its adherents as a *bona fide* religion. This symbiosis appears to be a characteristic feature of contemporary religions, both new and transformed traditional ones.