

# **The Role of Religion in the Formation of Nationalism**

Turkish Nationalism vs. Armenian Nationalism

Ali TEKKOYUN





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## About the Author

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## About the Book

### **The Role of Religion in the Formation of Nationalism**

#### **Turkish Nationalism vs. Armenian Nationalism**

This study investigates the role of religion in shaping Turkish and Armenian nationalisms, with particular focus on the late Ottoman period and the events surrounding the Armenian question. Employing a comparative historical approach, the work analyzes how Islam and the Armenian Apostolic Church functioned as core identity markers and mobilizing forces in nationalist movements. For the Ottoman state, religion -particularly Islam- served as both a unifying ideology and a political tool in successive projects of Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkish nationalism. Key intellectual figures such as Yusuf Akçura and Ziya Gökalp are examined for their integration of religious elements into nationalist discourse. Conversely, Armenian nationalism drew heavily on the Armenian Church's historical role, theological narratives, and communal structures, which were instrumental in fostering a sense of distinct identity and political aspiration. The book argues that religious institutions, leaders, and doctrines played a dual role: reinforcing communal solidarity and legitimizing political objectives, while also intensifying intercommunal tensions. The politicization of religion in both contexts contributed to the escalation of conflict, transforming theological differences into nationalistic antagonism. By situating these developments within broader theories of nationalism and identity, the study highlights the interplay between sacred and secular forces in nation-building. Ultimately, it contends that understanding the Armenian question and related conflicts requires integrating religious analysis into political and social histories, revealing how spiritual narratives became embedded in modern nationalist ideologies.

**Keywords:** Religion and Nationalism; Ottoman Empire; Turkish Nationalism; Armenian Apostolic Church; Armenian Question



## PREFACE

Nationalism provides a rational framework for the formation of a national identity for societies by associating that identity with territory, religion, and/or language. This study takes the association of nationalism with religion into account in the Turkish and Armenian cases with the aim of providing a new perspective to the Armenian question. Instead of ignoring the economic and political reasons, this study seeks the role of religion in the conflict which witnessed violence and resulted in a service of tragedies.

Nationalism aiming at building an independence nation-state was a threat for the Ottoman Empire, which consisted of various ethnicities and religions. The Ottoman political and social formation was based on religious identities, which enabled its subjects to keep their ethnic identities, and these gained priority with the influence of nationalism. In order to prevent the dissolution of its millets into essentially national entities, the Ottoman administration tried various policies, namely, Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkish nationalism, whose common element was to be Islam, which provided the social base and justified the arguments of the ideologies. It was Islam that motivated people to fight against infidels in order to defend the homeland (watan).

The “self-isolation” process that began with the separation of the Armenian Church from the Greek Church in the fourth

century transformed into an Armenian identity characterized with religious and ethnic attachments under the hegemony of foreign powers. In the context of the Armenian question, the Armenian Gregorian Church contributed to Armenian nationalism by transforming the historical attachments of Armenian identity into nationalist discourses.

Religious motivation of people toward nationalistic goals by the religious leaders, such as Mkrdich Khrimian, a member of the Armenian clergy, can easily embrace violence by mobilizing people to sacrifice themselves. Violence has been unavoidable when the politicization of religions, namely Islam and Armenian Gregorian Orthodoxy, toward nationalistic goals takes a place in the same territory. In the context of the Armenian question, the role of religion needs to be examined within the framework of politicization with nationalist discourses, which will provide an understanding of the origins of the conflict and its tragic results

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