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Armenian Liturgical Commentaries in the Twenty-First Century: What the Changes in an Ancient Christian Genre Tell us about the Oriental Orthodox Today[1]

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> *Among the eastern churches, the Armenians possess perhaps the richest tradition of liturgical exegetical literature.*
> (Findikyan 517)

Many ancient Christian traditions utilize the genre of commentary on the liturgical practices of the Church. Germanus of Constantinople's *On the Divine Liturgy,* written in the eighth century, is perhaps the best-known and most cited of the commentaries on the Divine Liturgy, the celebration of the Eucharist.[2] This practice of reflecting on the central liturgical sacrament, the mystery of Christian salvation, and union with God through Jesus Christ already appears in the "mystagogical" sermons of fourth-century hierarchs and the influential discussion of the elements of the church and the liturgy in Pseudo-Dionysius's *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy.*[3] Commentaries on the liturgy, especially on the Eucharist, reveal important assumptions about fundamental theological questions, including ecclesiology. Additionally, the genre of the commentary on the liturgy includes texts that use a variety of exegetical and hermeneutical principles, deploying the full range of devices available to the larger commentary genre.

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2 St. Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1985). Already influential for later Orthodox commentaries, Germanus's text became the most accessible for modern scholarship on liturgical commentaries when it was included as part of the first printing of text of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy.

3 St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments,* trans. F.L. Cross (Crestwood: NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1986). Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works,* trans. Colm Luibheid (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987).

If liturgical commentaries are part of a broader genre of commentary, there are also divisions within this genre of liturgical commentary, with texts that focus on services other than the eucharist: the liturgy of the hours, certain occasional services of blessing, and even in the case of the Armenian tradition, commentaries on liturgical books themselves, such as the Lectionary. In fact, as the epigraph from Bishop Michael Daniel Findikyan suggests, the Armenian Christian tradition is rich in commentaries, with "apparently unique" examples of exegetical genres, including "a genre of literature interpreting the colours and figures that decorate these ornate gospel canon tables."[4]

Armenian authors penned sophisticated exegetical discussions of different aspects of their liturgical experience through the centuries. In these commentaries, some described briefly below, clergy-scholars not only revealed their thoughts on the practice of the Divine Liturgy during their time, but they also revealed their anxieties about these practices and, therefore, the fundamental debates and concerns of their time. These authors, beginning in the eighth century with Step'anos Siwnets'i, had different pastoral and ecumenical concerns shaped by the realities of their time. The genre of the liturgical commentary, especially in its ability to comment on the eucharist, addresses practical ecclesiological concerns.

Contemporary hierarchs and theologians of the past century have also written liturgical commentaries. In these commentaries, like those of their predecessors, we see the concerns and anxieties over contemporary liturgical practice. These are likewise grounded in and refer to fundamental practical ecclesiological questions, though the ecclesiological situation is vastly different. For instance, Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan's short commentary, appended to his translation of the Divine Liturgy into English, works hard to establish an ecclesiology that can answer to modern concerns about history and language in a post-Genocide diasporic context. Thus, like the earlier Armenian commentaries, it can be read for insight into the anxieties and concerns over the contemporary *ecclesia* (in Armenian *ekeghets'i*) and the Church as the Body of Christ. Similarly, Bishop Vahan Hovhanessian's *In Remembrance of the Lord,* in its opening address to the reader and the historical and Biblical focus and structure, addresses common questions of parishioners of his time. Like the earlier Armenian commentaries on the liturgy, these recent and contemporary commentaries offer a lens into the concerns and cares of a Christian hierarch over the Eucharist, the fundamental ecclesial event.

4 Michael Daniel Findikyan, *The Commentary on the Armenian Daily Office by Bishop Step'anos Siwnec'i (d. 735): Critical Edition and Translation with Textual and Liturgical Analysis* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2004), 42; 53–4.

In this chapter, I suggest that the genre of the liturgical commentary reveals concerns and cares over the status of the Church. Practical ecclesiological concerns emerge in reflections on the sacrament of Holy Communion and on the Divine Liturgy. This genre opens space for contemplation of the contemporary liturgical situation and through this situation to the broader context of the liturgy. For Armenians, from Nersoyan's time until today, that broader context is shaped by the experience of living in a modern, pluralistic society in dispersion and Diaspora. This experience is shared with other Oriental Orthodox Churches, Christian churches in communion with the Armenian Church which have their own rich traditions of commentary. Thus, I argue that the contemporary deployment of the genre of the liturgical commentary, read through the long practice of commentary on the liturgy of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, reveals important practical ecclesiological concerns around the shared experience of living in Diaspora.

To make this argument, I trace the emergence of a genre of liturgical commentary in the Armenian Church. After presenting the rich tradition of liturgical exegetical literature of the Armenian Church, I briefly discuss my own exegetical and hermeneutical principles for considering the genre as a source of the practical ecclesiological concerns that play out in the terrain of liturgy, such as marriage and baptism. Establishing the connection between liturgical commentary and the broader context, the chapter turns to two relatively recent authors of the genre: Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan and Bishop Vahan Hovhanessian. Through a close reading of their commentaries, I describe the changes in the genre, especially regarding the need to establish a Biblical basis and a historicity to the liturgy. These changes, and the concerns addressed and expressed in these and other commentaries from the twentieth and twenty-first century, reflect a situation marked by the experience of living in diaspora and are important expressions of the dominant concerns about the Church Body of the time. In this, I suggest, these Armenian commentaries are similar to other Oriental Orthodox commentaries which reflect a similar circumstance. I conclude by reflecting on this shared situation and how the persistent deployment of the genre of liturgical commentary helps us to understand that situation.

The genre of liturgical commentary in the Armenian Christian tradition

Commentary, as a form of reflection and engagement, is a fundamentally hermeneutic or interpretative activity. While "there exist almost an infinite variety of commentaries – and they need not be just texts," in this paper, I leave broader debates about hermeneutics to the side to focus more specifically on textual exege-

sis.[5] If hermeneutics, in its broadest sense of interpretive activity, has become central to philosophical debates and social-scientific methods, I use exegesis to refer more narrowly to the hermeneutical explication of received texts. Historically, exegetical activity and the genre of the commentary are identified most closely with Biblical commentary, though commentaries on the corpus of Aristotle also shape the development of the genre.[6] In Greco-Roman antiquity, commentaries were "self-standing works containing exegetical remarks on another text."[7] Christian biblical commentary, as it develops in the first centuries of Christianity, is shaped by this Greco-Roman tradition, especially the commentaries on Aristotle, as well as earlier Jewish exegesis.[8] Through the centuries of the development of the Christian tradition broadly, biblical exegesis and the genre of the commentary emerged as one of the central textual genres and a key practice in Christian pedagogy and indeed theology.

Biblical commentary and exegesis form the largest and most influential subset of the broader commentary genre as it develops in the Christian tradition. Nearly all Christian denominations have developed practices of Biblical commentary, including written commentaries and oral exegesis through homilies, which were often also later written down. Early Christian commentators include Clement and Origen of Alexandria and Diodore of Tarsus. The commentaries of St. John Chrysostom, often delivered in homiletic form, exerted a profound influence on

5 Aaron Hughes, "Presenting the Past: The Genre of Commentary in Theoretical Perspective," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, no. 2 (2003): 150.

6 There is an enormous literature on the practice of philosophical commentary on Aristotle, which also later influences grammatical education and commentary. For an introduction, see Lloyd A. Newton, ed., *Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Armenians, too, developed a practice of philosophical and grammatical commentary, partially dependent on Aristotelian and neo-Platonic works in Greek and in translation. See, for instance, Benedetta Contin, "Intertwining Aristotelian Ontology and Logic with Theology: The early Armenian Non-Chalcedonian Perspective: the Book of Beings and the Questions Addressed to the Heretical Diophysites," *Jahrbuch Der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 70 (2020): 429–463.

Of course, textual exegesis is not limited to "Western" knowledge, whether the Greek philosophical tradition or the Christian one. Not only does "Biblical" exegesis predate Christianity in Jewish exegesis of scripture, but the genre of commentary emerges in other traditions, notably Vedic commentary. However, given the overwhelming influence of Biblical (and to a lesser extent Aristotelean) commentary on the emergence of modern (Western) philosophical hermeneutics, Biblical exegesis and Christian hermeneutical practices often come to be seen as the paradigm of the genre of commentary.

7 Paul Griffiths, Jutta Jokiranta, Alan T. Levenson, David Thomas, Trevor W. Thompson, Barry Dov Walfish and Karin Hedner Zetterholm, "Commentaries (Genre)," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (Volume 5: Charisma – Czazkes) (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012). Accessed online at: https://www.degruyter.com/database/EBR/entry/MainLemma_34537/html?lang=en.

8 Most importantly, Philo of Alexandria. Philo exerted a profound influence on the Armenian Christian tradition. On Philo in the Armenian tradition, see the work of Abraham Terian collected in Volume 13 of the *St. Nersess Theological Review.*

subsequent commentary. As Christian traditions diverged and ecclesial divisions took hold, each denomination continued the practice of Biblical commentary: John of Damascus in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Thomas Aquinas in the Catholic Scholastic one, and Jacob Bar-Salibi of the Syriac Orthodox Church are all noted exegetes. Among the Protestant reformers, Biblical commentary was a favourite genre, and both Luther and Calvin, among others, exerted an incredible influence on later Biblical exegesis. In the case of the Armenian Apostolic Church, "hardly any major scholar emerged from those [monastic] schools who did not establish his competence by producing a biblical commentary or translating one."[9]

While Biblical exegesis was the dominant form of the broader commentary genre, Christian scholars wrote hermeneutical texts interpreting other kinds of texts, as well as the church services and sacraments. Notably, a genre of liturgical commentary emerged, with "its origins in the fourth century, with the famous mystagogical catecheses of such leading figures as Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, and John Chrysostom."[10] Mystagogy, the explanation of the Christian and especially eucharistic "mystery," was part of the education of adult Christian catechumens during era of large-scale conversion to Christianity. Cyril of Jerusalem's famous "Catechetical Lectures," sermons given during the Lenten period in preparation for baptism during the Pascal celebrations, were followed by the "Mystagogical Lectures" that explicitly tackled the Christian sacraments and ecclesial mystery into which the newly baptized had entered. As we will see, the genre of commentary in general and the genre of liturgical commentary, in particular, is highly responsive to the historical and social context of its time: in this early case, that context was marked by the shift of Christianity from a persecuted "underground" sect to privileged and eventually official church of the Byzantine (Roman) Empire. The earliest liturgical commentaries, then, were focused on the preparation of an "initial, massive influx of converts" and their incorporation into the Church as the Body of Christ through the sacramental mysteries.[11]

Mystagogy and the developing genre of liturgical commentary "found a ready method for their commentaries in the long-standing tradition of biblical exegesis."[12] That is, liturgical commentary is explicitly part of a broader genre of com-

9 S. Peter Cowe, "Introduction," in Xosrov Anjewac'i, *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy,* trans. S. Peter Cowe (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1991), 52.

10 Paul Meyendorff, "Introduction," in St. Germanus of Constantinople*, On the Divine Liturgy,* trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 23.

11 Meyendorff, "Introduction," 23–4.

12 Meyendorff, "Introduction," 24.

mentary and takes many of its exegetical tools and hermeneutic principles from the broader genre, especially that of Biblical exegesis. Tracing the full history of Christian hermeneutics, such as the well-known but now more nuanced opposition between the "Alexandrian" and "Antiochian" schools, is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, it is most important to note that the principles of exegesis developed and debated for and within the broader genre of commentary can also be found in the specific genre of liturgical commentary. For later commentators across Christian traditions, in addition to the early mystagogical commentaries, the deeply eschatological and "anagogical" work of Pseudo-Dionysius, especially in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and the historical-tropological writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia were the most influential.[13]

In the Eastern Orthodox Byzantine Christian tradition, there are several important examples of the genre of liturgical commentary. The famous and influential Chalcedonian thinker Maximus the Confessor (580–662) penned a *Mystagogy* around 630 A.D., the "first properly Byzantine commentary."[14] Germanus's later commentary on the Divine Liturgy, part of his *Historia Ecclesastica* is perhaps the best-known example of the entire genre of liturgical commentary. According to its translator Paul Meyendorff, the commentary provides a "new synthesis" of the "Alexandrian" approach to the liturgy of Ps-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor where the "notion of the early liturgy as representing the heavenly liturgy predominated," adding a "more Antiochene perspective, far more historicizing and focusing on the human ministry of Christ."[15] Germanus's commentary "exercised tremendous influence in the Byzantine Christian world from the time of its composition at least to the time of Cabasilas' work in the fourteenth century" and was included in the first printed version of the Byzantine liturgy.[16]

While commentaries on the liturgy are found less often in the Latin Catholic tradition, in other Christian traditions of the Oriental Orthodox churches there is also a strong practice of liturgical commentary. In particular, the Syriac Orthodox Church, in the persons of Jacob of Edessa, Moses Bar Kepha, and John of Dara, among others, provides a rich body of liturgical commentaries.[17] It is among the Armenians, however, that a vast liturgical commentary tradition develops.

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13 This is true despite Theodore's later anathematization at the "Second Council of Constantinople," the "Fifth Ecumenical Council" (not recognized by the Assyrian Church of the East or the Oriental Orthodox Churches) and his association with Nestorius. See Frederick G. McLeod, S.J., "Theodore of Mopsuestia Revisited," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 447–480.

14 Meyendorff, "Introduction," 36.

15 Meyendorff, "Introduction," 42.

16 Meyendorff, "Introduction," 9.

17 See Baby Varghese, *West Syrian Liturgical Theology* (Farham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 16–34.

As Bishop Michael Daniel Findikyan puts it, the "relative wealth" of texts that fall within the genre of liturgy commentary should be considered a "truly distinctive feature" of the entire Armenian Rite. "Besides commentaries on the Divine Liturgy, a genre known to all ancient Christian cultures, the Armenians add more than a dozen commentaries on the daily Office, several on the Lectionary, and two early allegories on the ritual of dedicating a church, all of these unknown or practically unknown in other Eastern rites."[18] These commentaries, in Armenian մեկնութիւն (*meknut'iwn*), include both the style of text that focuses on explanation, what Findikyan terms an "exegetical commentary," in addition to the mystagogy (in Armenian խորհրդածութիւն, *khorhrdatsut'iwn* from խորհուրդ, *khorhurt,* mystery or sacrament). Findikyan suggests that the *meknut'iwn*s of the mystagogical type should be considered "original work[s] in [their] own right, shaped by the commentator's vision and concerns, whose roots nonetheless "lie in the base text." We will see, among the commentaries in the Armenian tradition below, both kinds of *meknut'iwn*s.[19] While some of the authors who wrote commentaries on the Divine Liturgy also wrote other commentaries, especially on the Liturgy of the Hours, we focus our overview here on the commentaries on the Divine Liturgy.

Contemporaneous with Patriarch Germanos, the earliest Armenian liturgical commentaries emerged: initially they were mostly commentaries on the Liturgy of the Hours. In fact, one of the most important representatives of the genre of liturgy commentary in the Armenian tradition, Step'anos of Siwnik' (Step'anos Siwnets'i), perhaps even met the Patriarch.[20] Whatever the historicity of this meeting, there was a general interest in liturgical commentary at the time of the seventh to eleventh centuries. Findikyan states that "for reasons that are not entirely clear, and perhaps by pure coincidence, the period of a century or so surrounding this date [729–735] gives rise to a surprising number of litur-

18 Findikyan, "Christology in Early Armenian Liturgical Commentaries," in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology,* ed. Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Liturgical Press, 2008), 197.

19 I thank Bishop Daniel for his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, as well as for this citation from his forthcoming textbook on the Armenian *Patarag,* the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church.

20 Step'anos's meeting with Germanus is described by medieval Armenian historians such as Step'anos Orbelian and is recounted in Patriarch Malakia Ormanian's magisterial *Azkapatum* (Istanbul 1913), 862–863. The collection of letters on doctrinal issues known as the *Girk' T'ght'ots'* [Book of Letters] includes correspondence involving Siwnets'i and Germanus, (Tiflis, 1901), 360–395. See also Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, "Travels and Studies of Stephen of Siwnik' (c. 685–735): Redefining Armenian Orthodoxy Under Islamic Rule," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 68 no. 3–4 (2016): 255–292.

gical commentaries practically throughout the Christian East."[21] Though it may be coincidence, there were also important historical, social, and theological contexts that made the liturgy itself, as the sacramental enactment of ecclesiology, an important object for debate, controversy, and reflection. Meyendorff, discussing Germanus's commentary, says that it "marks a clear shift in the Byzantine perception of the eucharist," the context for this shift being "the rise of iconoclasm."[22] While the iconoclastic controversy did not erupt with the same fervour or from the same theological grounding in Armenia as it did in the Byzantine Empire, the era was marked in Armenia as well by profound controversy: the continued development of a distinct Christology, including debates related to the work of Severus of Antioch;[23] relations with the Byzantine Empire and the imperial church; questions of Church hierarchy, especially vis-à-vis the sect known as the Paulicians.[24] The earliest Armenian liturgical commentaries emerge in this historical context.

Stepʿanos Siwnetsʿi (d. 735), Grigoris Arsharuni (d. 729), and Catholicos Yovhannēs Ōdznetsiʿ (d. 728), all contemporaries of Patriarch Germanus, author the first extant liturgical commentaries in the Armenian tradition. Siwnetsʿi's *Commentary on the Daily Office* is the "first complete liturgical commentary in Armenian" and "became the origin and model for a prolific lineage of commentaries on the daily Hours of Prayer."[25] Siwnetsʿi's work, with its "coherent and systematic" use of allegory influenced not only the subset of liturgical commentaries on the liturgy of the hours, but on all subsequent Armenian liturgical commentary.[26] Of these, the *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* by Khosrov Andzewatsʿi, also transliterated Xosrov Anjewacʿi, father of the famed mystical poet and now

21 Findikyan, "Christology," 198.

22 Meyendorff, "Introduction," 48.

23 See Nina Garsoïan, *L'Eglise armenienne et le grand schisme d'Orient* (CSCO vol. 574; Louvain: Peeters, 1999) and S. Peter Cowe, "Armenian Christology In the Seventh and Eighth Centuries with Particular Reference to the Contributions of Catholicos Yovhan Ōjencʿi and Xosrovik Tʿargmaničʿ," *The Journal of Theological Studies,* New Series 55, no. 1 (April 2004): 30–54. One the main debates revolved around the question of "incorruptibility" of Christ's body. Siwnetsʿi's important contribution to this debate was recently published. See Julia Hintlian and Roberta Ervine, "Bishop Stepʿanos of Siwnikʿ and his Florilegium *On the Incorruptibility of the Body* in Light of Sixth-Eighth Century Armenian Christological Debates," *St. Nersess Theological Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 137–246.

24 See Nina Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy: A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire* (The Hauge and Paris: Mouton & CO., 1967).

25 Findikyan, "Christology," 200. See his critical edition of the commentary, op cit.

26 Findikyan, "Christology," 201. Findikyan, in personal communication, suggests that this method aligns Siwnetsʿ*i's Commentary on the Hours* squarely within the mystagogical rather than the exegetical strand of the Armenian *meknutʿiwn* genre. Rather than an attempt to "explain" the liturgy of the hours, his "coherent and systematic" use of allegory serves a broader theological, specifically Christological theological point.

Catholic Doctor of the Church Gregory of Narek, is the best known, most studied, and most influential for later commentaries.

Khosrov "is our first detailed source for the contents and disposition of the Armenian anaphora," though heavily influenced by the commentaries on the liturgy of hours described above. He also penned a commentary on the liturgy of the hours, clearly conceived as "one undertaking" along with his commentary on the Divine Liturgy.[27] As with the earlier exegetes on the liturgy of the hours, Khosrov's life and times were shaped by "Byzantine expansion and reconquest" that led to a renewed Christological debate, such that there "was much pro-Byzantine and specifically pro-Chalcedonian sentiment at this period in certain circles of Vaspurakan."[28] Similarly, like the Paulicians before them, the contemporary Tondrakian sectarians required a response from the ecclesial hierarchy.[29] It is in this context that the most famous and influential of the Armenian liturgical commentaries on the Divine Liturgy is written.

After Xosrov's influential text, many subsequent Armenian commentaries followed his method closely, which Cowe describes as:

> Instead of emulating the Dionysiac formula of introducing the subject by a general definition of what constitutes a sacrament, outlining (rather succinctly) the peculiarities of the rite and then expatiating on its mystical dimensions, Xosrov opts for an unabashedly textual orientation, unhurriedly explicating the ramifications of each phrase in turn. This, then, was the Armenian classroom approach to biblical commentary and indeed the tone of the present work maintains an immediacy and liveliness indicating the writer's tangible awareness of his audience's presence and his task of engaging and sustaining their interest in a text inherently dense, whose communicability they were partly inured against by so frequent contact."[30]

Indeed, later commentators on the Divine Liturgy often betray "a familiar trend toward compilation, abbreviation and simplification which had already infiltrated the biblical sphere with Anania Sanahnecʿi's commentary on the Pauline Epistles of 1055."[31] These compilation/commentaries, heavily dependent on Andzewatsʿi,

27 Cowe, "Introduction," 25.
28 Cowe, "Introduction," 6.
29 Cowe, "Introduction," 7. On the Tondrakians, see Vrej Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement: Religious movements in the Armenian church from the fourth to the tenth centuries* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1987).
30 Cowe, "Introduction," 53.
31 Cowe, "Introduction," 88.

include Movsēs Erznkatsʿi (d. 1323), Yovhannēs Arjishetsʿi (d. 1330), anonymous commentaries of the era surviving in manuscript codices, and the summary theological efforts of Grigor Tatʿevatsiʿ.[32]

The *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* by Nersēs of Lambron, the erudite bishop of Tarsus and nephew of beloved Catholicos Nersēs Shnorhali, written in 1177, is "the main exception to the trend" of dependence on Andzewatsʿi, and marks an alternative approach to liturgical commentary within the Armenian tradition.[33] After these medieval examples of the genre, a few commentaries emerge in the early modern and modern periods, notably the work of Kapriel Ayvazean. Thus, the genre of liturgical commentary in the Armenian Apostolic church begins in the eighth century with Stepʿanos Siwnetsʿi, finds an exemplary and influential approach in the work of Khosrov Andzewatsʿi around the turn of the first millennium, and has another important – though less emulated – approach in the work on Nersēs of Lambron. As with much original theological writing, the genre sees a decline after Gregory of Tatʿev, though there are notable modern exceptions that carry the genre into the twentieth century.

Reading liturgical commentary as a historical document

Before turning to two examples of recent and contemporary commentaries on the Divine Liturgy, I want to pause briefly over the hermeneutic approach to these commentaries taken in the paper. Given that the object of analysis in the paper is a genre of text that is intimately concerned with the hermeneutical endeavour of interpretation, a short exposition of the approach taken here is appropriate. As should already be clear, the paper reads liturgical commentaries in their historical situation, already a hermeneutical principle far removed from many of the commentaries themselves.

However, it is not a general historicism that animates this interpretative strategy, but rather a methodological concern related to a larger question: how to make sense of the Armenian – and by extension Oriental Orthodox – experience through its textual production. Of course, for historical eras, this textual production is one of the only modes of access to past experiences. To consider the Christological controversies of the fifth century or the Byzantine-Armenian relations of the tenth and eleventh is largely to enter a world mediated by text. However, in the contemporary moment, other methods are possible. Yet, this paper suggests, the concerns, anxieties, and cares of liturgical commentary are a

32 Cowe, "Introduction," 88–9.
33 Cowe, "Introduction," 87.

privileged site to explore the lived Christian experience, even when other methods, like ethnographic fieldwork, are available. In other words, a contextual and historical approach to the texts themselves is grounded in the desire to access those contexts.

Without entering into a full debate on historical and social-scientific methodology, it is sufficient to note that many "theological" documents have recently been recognized for their historical value. If the hermeneutic approach to theology has long been one intended to help the reader *do* more theology, today, theology is increasingly recognised as a site from which to make other kinds of arguments and claims. That is, there is a tendency in the social sciences today to read and encounter theology – largely theological texts – in their relationship to what is various called "lived experience" or "everyday life." We can see this in the development of the anthropology of Christianity in the past two decades, marked, for instance, by the work of Joel Robbins.[34]

Given the relative paucity of engagement with the genre of liturgical commentary, I build this hermeneutical principle, that we can read liturgical commentaries for insights into the historical and social context and to discern the animating anxieties and concerns of the author regarding that context, through analogy with other (theological) genres. Much of this work has been oriented toward the writing of history itself, of discerning facts. For instance, in an essay on "The Homily as Historical Document," Wendy Mayer suggests that historians "are becoming increasingly aware that Christian homilies can prove a valuable source of certain types of information" since "reference can on occasion be found to significant events of the time, such as wars, political reversals, and natural phenomena and disasters. Since the preacher's comments are usually contemporary with the event, at times providing an eyewitness account, the transmitted homily can supply the historian with rare and significant detail."[35] In a similar move, laws and law codes have been read as sources for historical data, though this use has also been criticised.[36]

While there are certainly historical facts that can be gleaned from the liturgical commentaries, and indeed, one of the main hermeneutical uses of the commentaries has been for liturgical historians to reconstruct the shape of the liturgy at

34 See, most recently, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

35 Wendy Mayer, "The Homily as Historical Document: Some Problems in Relation to John Chrysostom, *Lutheran Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (May 2001): 17.

36 See, for instance, Per Norseng, "Law Codes as a Source for Nordic History in the Early Middle Ages," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 16 (1991): 137–166.

the time of the writing of the commentary, the aim in this paper is slightly different.[37] Rather, as the forgoing discussion has shown, the author – usually himself a clergyman and hierarch writing from a position of authority – reveals anxieties over the Christian encounter with the liturgy vis-à-vis the context of the time. Findikyan suggests such a possibility with regard to Christology, after noting the "unabashedly christological focus" of many of the Armenian liturgical commentaries. He notes that "a more nuanced appreciation for the overtly Christological allegorical methods of Armenia's many medieval liturgical interpreters might well serve to sharpen our understanding of the Armenian Church's traditional view of Christ and of his redemptive work for mankind."[38] This paper pushes this insight from the theological to the sociological: the Christological emphasis ascertained by Findikyan is itself a partial response to the needs of the time. Christological controversy continued, and distinction from and relation to the Byzantine Empire and other Christian churches was a huge concern during the heyday of the classic Armenian liturgical commentary. Moreover, these relations played out in local social life in ways that required pastoral answers, many of which were related to sacramental life. Who could share from the Eucharistic cup? Who could be married? In other words, practical sacramental and liturgical concerns reflect the sociological situation, and these concerns animate the theological responses undergirding the liturgical commentaries, like the Christological emphasis Findikyan sees in the classic commentaries. Using the conventions of the genre, authors like Andzewatsʿi reveal their anxieties over ecclesial boundaries – especially those with the imperial Byzantine Chalcedonian Church – and the role of the hierarchy, the animating concerns of the era.

As the chapter turns to more contemporary commentaries, it does so with this methodological and hermeneutical principle in place. By looking at the specific topics addressed by contemporary liturgical commentaries, the paper reveals the concerns – surely different than Byzantine imperial encroachment – that animate them. As such, liturgical commentaries can be read for the practical pastoral – and hence, often ecclesiological and sociological – concerns of their day.

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37 Findikyan, for instance, commenting on Andzewatsʿi's commentary on the Daily Office, notes that "it is usually possible to reconstruct the principle liturgical texts of the offices as he knew them." Findikyan, *Commentary,* 35. See also the use of the liturgical commentaries in Robert F. Taft, S.J, "The Armenian Liturgy: Its Origins and Characteristics," in *Treasure in Heaven: Armenian Art, Religion and Society. Papers delivered at a symposium at the Pierpont Morgan Library 21-22 May 1994,* ed. Thomas F. Mathews and Robert S. Wieck (New York, 1998), 13–30, especially the discussion beginning on page 17.

38 Findikyan, "Christology," 198.

Contemporary commentaries

Though the contemporary genre of the liturgical commentary looks, in many ways, quite different from the anagogical comparisons that sometimes sweep to abstract theological heights, these more recent examples nonetheless equally reveal the anxieties, pastoral concerns, and sociological situations of their authors. To demonstrate this reading of liturgical commentaries, and to begin to read them for their insights into contemporary Armenian and Oriental Orthodox life, the chapter turns to two recent texts by influential clergymen of the Armenian Church.

First, we look at Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan's "Brief Commentary" appended to his *Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church with Variables, Complete Rubrics and Commentary.*[39] Archbishop Nersoyan was one of the most influential Armenian clergymen of the twentieth century. Born in Cilicia in 1904, he survived the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and came to Jerusalem with many other Armenian refugees. He entered the seminary at the Monastery of St. James, then one of the few remaining centres of Armenian Church education, and was ordained a priest in 1928. In 1933 he was assigned to the St. Sarkis Armenian Church in London, serving there for most of World War II.[40] Elected in 1943 as the primate of the Armenian Church of America, he was a dynamic leader of the Diocese in New York, leading the project to build a Cathedral and Diocesan Center in Manhattan. Though he was elected as the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1957, he was not allowed to enter the country of Israel and never took up his post. Remaining in America, he founded the St. Nersess Armenian Seminary and continued his pastoral work in the United States until his death in 1989. An erudite scholar and dynamic clergyman, Archbishop Nersoyan is a revered figure of the recent past.

His *Պատարագամատոյց* (*Pataragamaduyts'*), the liturgy book under consideration in this chapter, itself was highly influential. Nersoyan's English translation of the Divine Liturgy continues to be the preferred English version for many Armenian Christians. First published in 1950, the 1984 "Revised Fifth Edition" was the ubiquitous pew book for many decades, especially throughout the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America. It remains the book of choice for many deacons when they need to choose a variable to sing on a feast day.[41] His

39 First published in 1950. Citing from the widely available 5th edition: Tiran Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church with Variables, Complete Rubrics and Commentary* (London: St. Sarkis Church, 1984).

40 Marvine Howe, "Tiran Nersoyan, An Archbishop, Scholar and Author, Is Dead at 85, *New York Times,* September 3, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/03/obituaries/tiran-nersoyan-an-archbishop-scholar-and-author-is-dead-at-85.html.

41 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 141–184.

description of the rubrics in the section on the "Ritual of the Divine Liturgy" is authoritative for some priests.[42] In addition to these practical liturgical elements of the book, the Archbishop included "A Brief Commentary on the Divine Liturgy."

The "Commentary" begins by providing a definition of liturgy as service in Greek, and stating that the Armenian name for the Divine Liturgy, *Surb Patarag,* means "Holy Sacrifice."[43] After the initial definition, he turns to "The Origin of the Divine Liturgy," relating the Christian Eucharist to "an old Jewish religious fraternal meal, called *Chabourah.*"[44] Liturgical historians debate the extent to which Christian liturgical practices derive from earlier Jewish worship, but crucially, Nersoyan begins by grounding the contemporary practice of the Armenian *Patarag* historically.[45] He approaches a philological justification in "The History of the Armenian Rite," tracing the contours of the five extant Armenian texts.[46] In this, his work is shaped by Dom Gregory Dix's seminal historical-critical study of liturgy, *The Shape of the Liturgy,* which at the time was the definitive research on the topic available in English.[47] This historical grounding is the first feature of Nersoyan's Commentary I note. At various points throughout the text, he offers a history of the development of the liturgy and also secures a foundation or justification for practices by showing their antiquity.[48]

From this historical and textual grounding, Nersoyan moves to the parts of the liturgy, "*The Preparation; The Synaxis* or *The Midday Office; The Eucharist; the Con-*

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42 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 195–236.

43 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 257.

44 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 257.

45 The relationship between "temple worship" and early Christian liturgy continues to be discussed and debated. Alexander Schmemann, an influential Eastern Orthodox theologian and liturgist writes that, "We know today that the cult of the early Church was essentially a Jewish cult, that practically all its forms can be traced back to Jewish antecedents." *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemann,* ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 15. During the era when both Nersoyan and Schmemann wrote, this was the overwhelming consensus. More recent scholarship nuances the influence. See, for example, Marcel Metzger, *History of the Liturgy: The Major Stages,* trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).

46 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 258–9. I say "approaches" because while it is animated by broadly philological concerns regarding textual transmission, including the historiographic justification for the philological endeavor, Nersoyan's commentary does not trace actual manuscript transmission. In other parts of the chapter, I use "philological" to refer to this historical-textual orientation.

47 Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945). Though, as with the specific question of the role of "Jewish antecedents" discussed above, much of this seminal work has been superseded. I thank Bishop Daniel Findikyan for pointing to this key piece of the intellectual background to Nersoyan's "Brief Commentary."

48 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 262.

clusion."[49] He identifies "the third part, the Holy Sacrifice proper, [as] the essential action of the Divine Liturgy or the Holy Eucharist and is sometimes called the *Anaphora*." In his discussion of this central third part, he describes how the "Eucharist proper" "affects the spiritual, or mystical *union* or *unification* of the Christian with his Lord and God, Jesus Christ." He continues, arguing that "this essential union of the Christian with the Lord constitutes the core of the Sacrament or Mystery of the Eucharist and is the ultimate purpose of Christian life as a whole."[50] Nersoyan describes the institution of the Sacrament of the Eucharist by "the Lord Christ himself at his last supper with the Apostles," suggesting that the "three acts, represented by the three parts of the Divine Liturgy, i.e., Purification, Illumination and Unification, are also the three stages of the process of perfection of the spiritual life of a Christian, as he travels on his way to God." This interpretation would not be out of place the Pseudo-Dionysius inspired work of Khosrov Andzewatsʿi. Indeed, Nersoyan cites both Andzewatsʿi and Nersēs of Lambron, demonstrating a clear connection to the long Armenian genre of liturgical commentary.

As Nersoyan unfolds a fine-grained walk through the sections of the Divine Liturgy, he circles around a perplexing and perennial problem in sacramental theology, namely the relationship between the liturgical instantiation of a sacrament and its transformative spiritual goal. Discussing the mystery – which is the same word used to denote a sacrament in Armenian – at the heart of the Divine Liturgy, he says that "the holiness of Christ in heaven, as manifested through the 'mystery' of His Body and Blood, makes the believers holy."[51] How exactly this happens is one of the central questions of sacramental theology. An influential strand of Catholic sacramental theology suggests that the relationship between the act of the sacrament and that of the spiritual goal is that "a sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing."[52]

Nersoyan notes that Nersēs of Lambron asks "how can this (i.e., the Gifts) be changed by the Holy Spirit from being a symbol into being a reality?"[53] demonstrating that the discourse of symbol also has a long history in the Armenian reflection on the sacraments. However, Nersoyan's repeated digressions on elements of the liturgy, especially the eucharist, as a symbol, demonstrates that he is conscious of the long argument in Western theology over the "symbolic" nature of

49 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy*, 259.
50 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 260.
51 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 275.
52 See the discussion of sacrament in Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 154. Asad attributes this classic definition to Hugh of St. Victor. Nersoyan gives this common definition on page 273.
53 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 272.

the eucharist and also that there is a specifically modern sense of symbol, one that obscures the Armenian Christian understanding of the Divine Liturgy. While, for instance, the "ascending sweet-smelling smoke [of incense] *symbolizes* acceptable prayer,"[54] he argues that the Bread and Wine, the elements of communion, "are not merely symbols of the Body and Blood of Christ in the modern sense of the word 'symbol', which usually *is not* that which it signifies."

We note that Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan consciously and clearly writes within the basic parameters of the perduring genre of Armenian liturgical commentary. Not only does he cite his most illustrious predecessors, Khosrov Andzewatsʻi and Nersēs of Lambron, but at times he approaches the mystical or anagogical interpretation typical of many Armenian liturgical commentaries. At the same time, we note two key differences that mark the changes in the genre of liturgical commentary and demonstrate that Nersoyan was responding to new, distinctly and explicitly modern, challenges and demands. First, Nersoyan deploys an initial philological approach that justifies and grounds the present liturgy in its long historical development. While his explanation of Christian liturgy's emergence from Jewish worship remains debatable, the need to ground the liturgy historically is clear. Secondly, we note that while thinking about the sacrament as a "symbol" has its own long history in theological discourse, Nersoyan himself recognises that "modern" thinking about the symbol obscures what this earlier discourse on the symbol might have meant. In an attempt to recover a properly sacramental understanding of the symbol, he develops his own sacramental semiotics. This necessity of confronting the linguistic turn in theology is the second change in the commentary we note.[55]

In part, this confrontation is necessary in order for Nersoyan to develop his ecclesiology. The new elements in Nersoyan's commentary, those differences from his predecessors, mark a recognition that the broader context for the commentary has changed: he needs to ground the authority of liturgy historically, and he needs to explain the relationship of the liturgical act of the sacrament to its efficacy in a way that must confront the problem of the symbol. This way, he is able to

54 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 268.

55 The "linguistic turn" in philosophy often refers to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein but is also used to refer to a whole series of philosophical moves, debates, and directions of the twentieth century that centered on language and semiotics. Heidegger's critique of "ontotheology" has especially pushed theologians to respond. See, for instance, Georges de Schrijver, "Postmodernity and the Withdrawal of the Divine: A Challenge for Theology" in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context,* eds. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 39–64. I am not suggesting that Nersoyan is responding directly to such philosophical arguments. Rather, this broad and influential philosophical development shaped ideas about interpretation, text, and Biblical criticism for much of the twentieth century. This influence would be felt, even without direct engagement with the foundational philosophical texts.

assert that "by partaking a communicant is actually incorporated and integrated in the Body of Christ,"[56] since the Body and Blood is a symbol only if we understand that "a symbol denotes a thing which in some kind of way *is* what it signifies."[57] If partaking of the Body and Blood is more than "merely" a symbolic act, then each parishioner is "actually incorporated and integrated into the Body of Christ," the Church. Nersoyan works through modern anxieties about language, reality, and history in order to secure a sacramental and liturgical foundation for the Armenian Apostolic Church, such that "when a local church, no matter how humble, shares in the Eucharist it experiences the wholeness of the Church and reveals it in its fulness."[58]

This full ecclesial instantiation of every local gathering, no matter where or "how humble" secures the spatial and temporal unity of the Armenian Church across diaspora. While Nersoyan does not tackle this condition head-on, in his commentary, he is clearly building a sacramental theology that secures a liturgical ecclesiology that can withstand the intellectual and practical demands of the modern church in diaspora. However, Nersoyan clearly considered the particularities of the situation of the modern church in diaspora in his other writings, as well as in his practical efforts such as setting up an Armenian Church Youth Organization in America. Here, rather than confronting these particularities head on, he uses the genre of the liturgical commentary to develop a sacramental and liturgical theology that could meet the demands of that overall situation.

Over fifty years after Nersoyan provided this grounding, Bishop Vahan Hovhanessian wrote an extended commentary on the Divine Liturgy, *In Remembrance of the Lord: A Biblical Introduction, Historical Review and Contemporary Commentary On the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church.* Hovhanessian, who was born in 1963 in Baghdad, is a graduate of St. Nersess Armenian Seminary and was briefly its dean (like Nersoyan). He wrote his commentary after he served as dean and had returned to pastoral work in the Eastern Diocese. The commentary, according to Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, primate of the Diocese at the time, was published by St. Vartan Press, the Diocesan Press, so that "individuals and communities will use this valuable publication to understand the meaning of the *Badarak,* and through this understanding, to participate fully and to become united with Christ and with each other."[59] Later, Hovhanessian was elected as the Primate of

56 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 276.
57 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 272.
58 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 267.
59 Khajag Barsamian, "Preface," in Fr. Vahan Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance of the Lord: A Biblical Introduction, Historical Review and Contemporary Commentary On the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian*

the Armenian Orthodox Church of the United Kingdom and Ireland and most recently served as the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of France until 2022. During that time, he had a French adaptation of his commentary published as *La Célébration de la Divine Liturgie, Badarak, dans l'Église Apostolique Arménienne* as part of the series *Explorons les racines de notre Église Apostolique Arménienne*, one of his initiatives as Primate.

Stylistically, Hovhanessian's 2008 commentary is much different from Nersoyan's shorter text. Conceived as a stand-alone text in the genre of liturgical commentary, it is also explicitly a "contemporary" commentary. Hovhanessian asks, for instance, at the outset of his commentary, a series of questions about "the origin of the *Badarak*", including, in a nod to one of the constant contemporary and diasporic criticisms, "Did it always last as long as it does now?"[60] While Nersoyan had alluded to the particular questions swirling around in the contemporary diasporic church about liturgical practice, even suggesting in a note that since "the Responsory of the Prologue" is of "recent origin and of dubious value" it could "therefore be conveniently omitted,"[61] Hovhanessian presents the specific practicality at the beginning. While Nersoyan offers brief interpretations of each part of the Liturgy, Hovhanessian lingers on what the parishioner is experiencing in each part. For example, in the "Prayers after the Lections," shortly after the recitation of the Armenian Nicene Creed, Nersoyan states that "the prayers after the Lections are the concluding prayers of the Synaxis," and then briefly describes the content of each prayer.[62] Hovhanessian, on the other hand, describes how "traditionally in the Armenian Church, long prayers are written in two parts with the blessing, *Khaghagootyoon amenetsoon*, in between the two parts," and asserts that after the deacons "Cry out the phrase *Asdoodzo yergurbakestoook,"* the "pious and proper tradition in the Armenian Church is to bow down," since "worship must include bodily gestures."[63] In other words, Hovhanessian is writing for an Armenian Christian audience that he feels needs to be instructed in the basics of liturgical elements and comportments.

Of course, this stylistic difference is due in part to the length and scope of the two commentaries. However, it also reflects Bishop Vahan's different concerns over the current status of the Armenian Church in diaspora. Rather than the ana-

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Church, St. Vartan Press, New York, 2008.

60 Fr. Vahan Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance of the Lord: A Biblical Introduction, Historical Review and Contemporary Commentary On the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 2008), 4.

61 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 281, n. 28.

62 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 270.

63 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 93–4.

gogical explication of the classic commentaries or even Nersoyan's (non-modern) symbolic unfolding, Hovhanessian makes sure the reader – the parishioner – first knows what it is they are seeing and experiencing in the liturgy (something, which, at the most basic level it seems even Nersoyan felt he could assume) and then pushes them to understand it. Understanding, *Verstehen,* can refer to diverse hermeneutic bases, but for Hovhanessian it takes the form of making sure the reader knows the basic facts: what is the song, what do the words mean, what is the liturgical movement happening?

To help make sure the reader understands the liturgy they experience, Hovhanessian also refers to previous commentaries, including Nersoyan's.[64] While these references are sometimes laced within his own commentary, Hovhannessian also introduces the "Patristic Comments" on the Divine Liturgy as a separate part of his historical introduction to the Liturgy.[65] In other words, Hovhanessian, while still securely within the genre of the Armenian liturgical commentary, also refers to "the tradition" as its own historical element. While both Hovhanessian and Nersoyan ground the Liturgy historically, Hovhanessian's historical grounding pushes further than Nersoyan's.

Like Nersoyan, Hovhanessian secures the contemporary practice of the Divine Liturgy through the history of the liturgy. He emphasises that "our Lord's Last Supper" was "a ceremonial meal associated with the biblical feast of the Passover."[66] Thus, he similarly links the Armenian Christian Divine Liturgy to Jewish worship. However, Hovhanessian emphasises, in addition to Nersoyan's focus on Jewish antecedents, the Biblical basis of the Divine Liturgy. In fact, he states that "most of the prayers of our Church are either a compilation of direct quotations from the various books of the Bible or are commentaries on words or teachings in the Bible."[67] In a diasporic context where diversity of worship is accessible and parishioners encounter critiques of structured liturgical worship and a broadly Protestant wariness towards worship elements ungrounded in the Bible, Hovha-

64 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 82. Bishop Daniel Findikyan, another contemporary commentator on the Divine Liturgy who is preparing a line-by-line commentary on the text of the Armenian Anaphora, the main Eucharistic prayer, noted in personal communication that Nersoyan's commentary was the only contemporary thinking that both he and Hovhanessian had on the liturgical experience during their time together as students at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary. There is a clear and direct line of development, then, between these contemporary thinkers on the Armenian liturgical experience, and Nersoyan's first effort to comment on the Divine Liturgy in a "modern," diasporic setting.

65 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 37–43.

66 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 5.

67 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 71.

nessian focuses heavily not only on the historical but the biblical basis for the Armenian Divine Liturgy.

Of course, insistence on the biblical basis of liturgy is not a peculiarly contemporary concern. The critique of non-Biblical Christian practice and liturgical elements, like the hermeneutic principle of *Sola Scriptura,* was one of the hallmarks of many of the Protestant Reformers. However, Hovhanessian, placing the "Biblical Origins of the Badarak" as the first section after his Introduction, makes it clear that the context is one where, *for the parishioner* and not just for the theologian, the question of the biblical basis is important.[68] In other words, the context of living in a pluralistic society, especially the American "marketplace" of churches, requires an answer for the parishioner who encounters other Christian traditions and Christian neighbours in their daily life.[69] Hovhanessian sometimes refers directly to these other Christian traditions, noting for instance that one common name for the Armenian Divine Liturgy "which comes from, and is mainly used by, the Roman Catholic Church, is 'Holy Mass' (*Missa*)."[70] Thus, the pluralism of the diasporan (especially American) Christian landscape is a specter behind much of Hovhanessian's efforts to make sure the Armenian Christian understands – and hence could also potentially explain to a neighborly Christian of another tradition – their liturgical practice.

If Hovhanessian's commentary pushes the historical grounding and the biblical basis of the Armenian Divine Liturgy even further than Nersoyan's, he is less anxious about the "symbolic" status of aspects of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist itself. The commentary still addresses the question of the "real presence" of the Eucharist, a long debate about the relationship between the bread and wine of the Eucharist and the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ that has its roots in Scholastic Catholic thought and emerges as a major point of contention during the course of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation.[71] Yet if Nersoyan unfolds the symbolic meaning of nearly every moment of the Divine Liturgy using an anagogical method familiar to the Armenian patristic

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68 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 5.

69 On the idea of "church-shopping" in a "marketplace" of churches that might meet the individual needs of a particular Christian, see Amy Sullivan, "Church-shopping: Why Americans Change Faiths," *TIME Magazine,* April 28, 2009, http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/ 0,8599,1894361,00.html. See also Shay R. Hafner and Audre P. Audette, "The politics of church shopping," *Politics and Religion* 16, no. 1 (March 2023): 73–89, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048322000384.

70 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 4.

71 See Graham Ward's discussion of "The Birth of Presence" in "The Church as Erotic Community" in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context,* eds. L. Boeve and L. Leussen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 172-190. Hovhanessian uses of the language of "real presence" in his discussion of the bread and wine of the Eucharist on page 23: "The identification of the bread and wine as Christ's body and blood point to the *real presence* of the Lord among his followers" (emphasis mine).

commentaries, Hovhanessian limits his discussion of the symbolism of aspects to the liturgy to highly "ritualised" moments often unfamiliar to his audience.[72] Similarly, while Nersoyan develops a rather sophisticated sacramental semiotics, Hovhanessian limits his comments to the "symbolism" of various ritual elements. For instance, he notes that "the symbolism of the curtain conveys a powerful theological message: Christ's sacrifice atoned us with God."[73] Likewise, discussing the continued use of incense in the practice of the liturgy, he says that "certain items are incensed emphasizing their role in the liturgy as images and symbols of God's presence. This includes the Gospel book, the main and two side altars, the chalice, crosses, icons (sacred paintings) and reserved communion."[74] This list of items that serve as "images and symbols of God's presence" suggests that Hovhanessian is more concerned with helping his readers understand how to approach certain aspects of the liturgy that might be relatively unfamiliar to them, rather than to develop fully the relationship between symbol and reality.[75] As he notes with respect to the priest's prayers, "it is very important for the participants in the *Badarak* to *know and understand* what the celebrant's prayers mean, because they are being offered on their behalf."[76]

This understanding is constitutive of Hovhanessian's main concern in his commentary, namely that the reader is able to be what he calls an "active participant" in the Divine Liturgy. In fact, after the main body of his commentary, he provides an Appendix, "Active Participation in the Badarak."[77] Of course, "receiving the Holy Communion is the culmination of our participation in the *Badarak.* It does not make sense to 'participate' in the *Badarak* without receiving communion."[78] The "participation" in the theological sense (the ability to "become participants of His external sacrifice of the remission of sins"[79], the *theosis* of the patristic commentators, and the "mystery" of all Christian sacramental life) is connected to the "active participation" through knowledgeable understanding, singing, praying,

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72 See Catherine Bell's discussion of "ritualization" in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

73 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 16.

74 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 58.

75 Another example of his explanations of symbolism regards the movement of the priest during the liturgy: "one can easily see the symbolism in the descent of the celebrant from the altar (a symbol of the biblical "holy hill") to walk among the congregation, as a reminder of the historical event of the incarnation (the descent of our Lord to the world and his birth in flesh) in order to preach the 'good news' of our salvation." Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 83.

76 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 75 (emphasis mine).

77 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 131.

78 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 122.

79 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 127.

and receiving communion during the liturgy. Hovhanessian thus develops his central ecclesiological insight in relation to his concern that parishioners know and understand the liturgical experience in front of them. Hovhanessian develops an ecclesiology steeped in the patristic insight that "the great mystery of our salvation through Christ" is that we "become one with Christ our Lord" "through our participation in the Holy Communion."[80] This ecclesiology is attentive to the needs of a diasporic situation. In such a situation, parishioners might not necessarily understand the dynamics of the liturgy they are experiencing. Thus, Hovhanessian maintains that "the main objective of the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is our inspiring union with Christ," focusing all of his explanation, his efforts to help people understand, to the central soteriological and ecclesiological focus on the Divine Liturgy.[81]

In this, Hovhanessian's text shares much with the classic, patristic genre of liturgical commentary. Through the Divine Liturgy, the Church understood as the Body of Christ (ecclesiology) is constituted through the participation in the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, for the salvation of sins (soteriology). The great mystery of salvation is simultaneously the foundation for the Church. As a genre, the liturgical commentary is uniquely situated to meditate on this simultaneous encounter with the Body of Christ. Hence, a practical ecclesiology, as we have seen in the earlier commentaries, Nersoyan's commentary, and now in Hovhanessian's text, is always one of the major themes of the genre.

If both Nersoyan's and Hovhanessian's commentaries share this and other aspects with the earlier Armenian liturgical commentaries described above, they also exhibit new and different concerns and anxieties. As we have seen, both newer commentaries are steeped in historicism and a need to ground the Divine Liturgy in its historical development. Similarly, while the relationship of the bread and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ has long been a concern in theological discussions of the liturgy, for these two authors that concern is filtered through several centuries of Catholic theological development as well as the "linguistic turn" and the "critique of onto-theology" of recent philosophy.

Finally, while these two recent commentaries share much, exposing a general modern and diasporic context that leads to shifts in the genre, there are also important differences between the two of them. In particular, Nersoyan's symbolic or anagogical explanations seem to assume a parishioner who is broadly aware of the shape and language of the liturgy. Hovhanessian, on the other hand,

80 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 73.
81 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 26.

writes for an audience that needs to understand what it is they are seeing and experiencing. In the final sections, I turn to the question of how the concerns of these recent commentaries are also shaped by a diasporic condition.

Commenting on diaspora

Neither of the two recent and contemporary commentaries explored above tackles the question of "diaspora" directly. Even the regular litany of contemporary diasporic concerns about the liturgy – the Classical Armenian, the length, the unfamiliarity with liturgical rubrics – described by Findikyan in "Eastern Liturgy in the West" barely make a clear appearance.[82] Hovhanessian mentions the perennial concern over the length of the liturgy at the beginning of his text, and Nersoyan, in a footnote, suggests that one portion of the service, notably one without a biblical basis, might be cut. Similarly, Hovhanessian notes in passing that "Classical Armenian is the language of the *Badarak* in the Armenian Church throughout the world."[83] However, as Findikyan's article makes clear, there are a plethora of liturgical concerns the "average parishioner" in diaspora has that are not taken up explicitly in either of these commentaries.[84]

Nonetheless, I want to suggest that through the concerns that are directly addressed in the text, the broader diasporic context is an omnipresent "spectre" behind these works, especially Hovhanessian's. Through the anxieties that *are* directly addressed, such as the biblical basis, the historicity of the liturgy, and the symbolic status of certain aspects of the liturgy, we can discern what the animating concerns of the hierarchs are regarding the diasporic situation. Several of these have been addressed throughout the close reading of the two commentaries. Some are more broadly "modern" concerns, while others relate more specifically to the diasporic situation.

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82 Michael Daniel Findikyan, "Eastern Liturgy in the West," in *Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Colloquium: Music, Workshop, Arts* 8 (Autumn 2006), 55–65.

83 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 62.

84 Findikyan's own efforts during his tenure as the Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America were directed towards a liturgical renewal that recognised these concerns. In his programmatic text *Building up the Body of Christ,* he devotes one of his five "guidelines or pillars" (20) to "'Knitting the Body Together in Love' – the Holy Badarak" (25). There, he suggests that "the challenge of drawing our people into a meaningful engagement with the *Badarak* is a complex and emotional problem that involves issues of faith, language, culture, and a general lack of biblical and liturgical knowledge among our people, societal and economic pressures, and other factors, many of which are out of our diocese's control and jurisdiction. Nevertheless, they must be addressed as issues of primary importance" (25). Michael Daniel Findikyan, *Building Up the Body of Christ: The Treasure of the Armenian Church for Our People Today* (New York: Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, 2022).

Of those modern concerns, the most prominent in the two commentaries is the need to ground the liturgy historically.[85] Both Hovhanessian and Nersoyan point to Jewish worship as the historical context out of which Christian liturgy emerges. Likewise, they treat the emergence of the Armenian Divine Liturgy as a historical-philological question, with Hovhanessian explicitly discussing the "Evolution" of the Armenian Divine Liturgy.[86] In this, Hovhanessian's position towards the entire Armenian Christian tradition is perhaps more "historical" than Nersoyan's: both authors discuss their medieval predecessors in the genre of liturgical commentary, but Hovhanessian also deploys them as witnesses to the historicity of the Armenian Divine Liturgy.

Another modern – and indeed, "postmodern" – concern is that of the "real" or "symbolic" nature of aspects of the Divine Liturgy.[87] After the "linguistic turn" of the early twentieth century and the "critique of ontotheology" and metaphysics initiated by Heidegger, the older debate about the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, took on a different form. If already during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation the debate about the "real presence" of the Eucharist was raging, this debate shifts under the weight of the linguistic turn. We see this in Nersoyan's admission that there is a "modern" understanding of symbol which does not do justice to the "symbolic" explanation of the patristic commentaries nor to his own. Hovhanessian, on the other hand, avoids the anagogical explanations of both Nersoyan and the earlier exegetes, except for instances where understanding what the parishioner is seeing or experiencing would require a kind of symbolic explanation, such as "the descent of the celebrant from the altar" as "a symbol of the biblical 'holy hill.'"[88] Otherwise, he prefers to unfold the basics of what the congregation is seeing or experiencing, translating prayers they do not hear or describing the raising of the chalice as a "dramatic moment."[89] In its own way, this sidesteps the debate over the symbol that Nersoyan takes head-on.

While these aspects of the two recent commentaries demonstrate the broader context of "modernity," the hierarchs' concerns also reflect the specific situation in the diaspora. This is true in three ways. First, the eucharistic ecclesiology, while

85 I do not intend here to give a full treatment of the debate over the "modern." Briefly, I follow Talal Asad in seeing modernity as a project, whereby that project includes the inculcation of certain sensibilities and arrangements that are deemed modern – for instance, an attitude toward history. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 14–16.

86 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 28.

87 See L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, eds., *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001).

88 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 83.

89 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 116.

completely in line with age-old concerns and reflective of the genre of liturgical commentary, also arises from the need to secure a basis for a transnational church of which each diasporan diocese is just one instantiation. Second, the condition of a plurality of Christian (not to mention religious) experience available as a "religious marketplace" undergirds the two commentaries. Finally, there are specific anxieties around language, length, and a general "understanding" of the ancient liturgical practice of the Armenian Church that emerge from a diasporic condition.

Of these three, Hovhanessian's texts is more directly concerned with the last, the question of understanding. As the paper has demonstrated, even though he only notes the language question explicitly in passing, his overall project of making sure that parishioners understand the liturgy so that they can actively participate in it assumes, in fact, that they do not understand what they are experiencing. This basic presupposition reveals something crucial about the diasporic context, at least as viewed from the ecclesial hierarchy. For the church leadership, Armenian Christians today do not engage with the liturgy enough and do not know how to do it. Findikyan's discussion throughout "Eastern Liturgy in the West" makes this concern explicit. Similarly, Hovhanessian's focus on "understanding" throughout his commentary belies not only a modern hermeneutic mode of engagement with liturgy that makes understanding the most important way of encountering liturgy but a more specific diasporic context where newer generations and those born in diaspora are assumed not to understand or have a solid grounding in the ancient liturgy of the churches.[90]

Second, we can discern in both commentaries an underlying anxiety about religious plurality in diaspora. Again, religious pluralism by itself is unique neither to diaspora nor to the modern condition. However, what is new is the ease through which conversion or the crossing of denominational and religious lines occurs. Merely through an individual choice, one can leave the Armenian Church. With the even more recent phenomenon of "church shopping," especially in America, this anxiety over religious pluralism and the possibility of leaving the

90 This emphasis on understanding is tied to the primacy of "belief" in Protestant forms of Christianity and is similarly tied to the Protestant hermeneutics of Scripture. See, for instance, Asad's reading of the work of the prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz, suggesting that Geertz's treatment of belief "is a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world." Asad, *Genealogies,* 47. Note that Asad's rejection is not to the importance of belief to Christianity at all, but rather to a particular kind of belief as a "state of mind." When belief is first and foremost a "state of mind," then a specific form of understanding follows suit. There are unresolved questions for future research regarding the changes for (Oriental) Orthodox Christians that come when a hermeneutics of understanding tied to the primacy of belief as a "state of mind" are adopted wholesale into a tradition that has long operated with other forms of exegetical principles.

Armenian Church is heightened. Neither author discusses this diasporic situation directly, but the need both authors feel to justify the Armenian liturgical rite and its unique and ancient practices points to the underlying anxiety. Nersoyan gives the historical "origin of different rites,"[91] while Hovhanessian emphasises the fact that "Armenians developed their own unique celebration of the *Badarak*."[92] Both exegetes offer the unique aspects of the Armenian Rite over and against other forms of worship Armenian Christians might encounter in diaspora. Hovhanessian makes this explicit when he says that "unlike the theological lectures or expositions in some Protestant churches – where the focus of the liturgy is the preacher's sermon and where there is no *Badarak* celebrated – in the Armenian Church the sermon is limited to a brief reflection on the assigned daily readings from the Scriptures."[93] That is, the focus on the particularity of the Armenian liturgy, whether in practice or through its historical grounding, emerges in part from the need to justify participation in the Armenian liturgical experience. Such a need arises because of the contemporary conditions of a diasporic church.

Finally, the ecclesiology the paper has traced in both commentaries can be read as in part a response to the need to secure the unity of a transnational church in diaspora. As we have seen, the genre of liturgical commentary is particularly attuned to the longstanding theological insistence that the liturgy is the moment that connects salvation through the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, to the constitution of the Church, the Body of Christ. Securing the unity of a large Church through the eucharistic has its own long history. For instance, in early Christian Rome, since the Bishop was understood to oversee a singular church in the city, all of the *tituli* churches were sent the *fermentum,* portions of the Eucharist, instantiating the unity of the Church as Body of Christ through the sharing of a single eucharistic sacrifice of the Body of Christ.[94] Yet, in transnational and diasporic conditions, the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ comes up against the dispersion of the members of that body across continents. Thus, as we have seen, Nersoyan beautifully insists that the "local church" always "experiences the wholeness of the Church" every time the Eucharist is offered.[95] Similarly, Hovhanessian insists that his readers understand that "in the fellowship of the *Badarak,* we become one with each other and with the Lord. This unity is experienced in

91 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy*, 258.
92 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 127.
93 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance*, 91.
94 See the discussion in John F. Baldovin, S.J., *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development, and Meaning of Stational Liturgy* (Roma: Pontifical Institutum Studiorun Orientalium, 1987), 145–146.
95 Nersoyan, *Divine Liturgy,* 267.

its fullness through the receiving of His body and blood."[96] Thus, the ecclesiology of the two commentaries emerges in part as an answer to the diasporic condition of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The Oriental Orthodox in diaspora through the lens of the liturgical commentary

Such a diasporic condition is shared by all the Oriental Orthodox Churches as well. Though not all the Oriental Orthodox self-consciously consider themselves as "in diaspora," a transnational and global experience of dispersion characterises the contemporary situation of all these churches. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that the genre of the liturgical commentary, found among all the Oriental Orthodox churches, can reveal common and contrasting responses to the diasporic condition. While the ERC Rewriting Global Orthodoxy database has very few entries specifically of "commentaries," many sermons and teaching texts in the "Religious Teaching" or "Religious Practice" genres approach the same concerns as the two texts under consideration in this paper.[97]

In this chapter, I have shown the connections between the genre of liturgical commentary and the central contemporary issues of the Church as expressed by clergy. Such a connection was true for Armenian patristic commentators a thousand years ago, and it remains true for current exegetes. Through the genre of liturgical commentary, the authors express practical ecclesiological concerns of the time. For the two recent commentaries under consideration, the modern and diasporic conditions of the Armenian Church crucially shaped their commentaries. Since the other Oriental Orthodox churches shared both the long practice of commentary on the liturgy and the current diasporic condition, a closer consideration of the genre across the churches should yield important details regarding the shared anxieties and the common experiences facing all of these ancient churches.

96 Hovhanessian, *In Remembrance,* 128.

97 When searching "commentary" in the Global Orthodoxy database, in addition to Armenian texts, the Dutch language text, *Aan de tafel van het leven,* a translation and commentary of the Syriac Orthodox liturgy is found. Matija Miličić recently brought an English-language "reference book" to the Liturgy of St. Basil, used by the Coptic Church and printed in New Jersey, to my attention.

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