David Zakarian, *Women, Too, Were Blessed: The Portrayal of Women in Early Christian Texts*

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*CW: This review discusses rape and sexual violence*

A lot of work is asked of a small word in David Zakarian’s new book: *too.* This “too” is from a line in Agat‘angełos’ fifth-century *History*, an abbreviation of which is used for the book’s title. The full sentence from Agat‘angełos is important: as a remark on the capacity of Early Christian women to spread the gospel, the historian asserts, “women also (sic) were blessed on account of the virgin birth which was from among them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This statement from Agat‘angełos is recruited by Zakarian to symbolize his book’s project, which ultimately is to demonstrate, he argues, the “clear tendency towards empowering women ideologically” on the part of Early Christian (EC) Armenian authors. This small adverb, then, does hard linguistic labor: to include women in the EC community, but also (with its connotations of excess) to hint at superlative blessing on the part of EC Armenian women. Most of all, the work of the “too”is semiotic: women may be blessed, but more critically they are *marked*.

The only entity working harder in *Women, Too, Were Blessed* are of course, these marked women: the virgins, mothers, queens, consorts and overall martyrs of the early medieval conversion period, their bodies scarred by violent narratives of faith- and nation-making.[[2]](#footnote-2) Zakarian concludes by arguing that the male authors of these narratives “explicitly show that women’s agency is essential for the entire process of the country’s evangelisation. No gender-based discrimination features in both narratives and women are depicted as possessing multifaceted agency, which is strongly encouraged.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This review is going to focus ultimately on the tension and difference between agency and labor, and on the paradox of women’s work -- and, in particular, the work of birthing, sustaining, and embodying the nation -- as *allegorical labor* which remains susceptible to “gender-based discrimination” on the part of (even well-meaning) social scientists, with serious implications for both scholars and the broader communities at whom this book is aimed.

In *Women, Too, Were Blessed,* Zakarian sets out to manifest women in the cultural context, events, and subsequent narratives of the Christian conversion in Armenia (and, thus, the coalescence of the Christian Armenian nation); this entails a review of the mentions of women and their actions by EC historians writing in or about the fifth century AD. It is not possible (nor necessary) in this venue to fully account for the significance of the fifth century within Armenian historiography; this period is informed by cultural shifts in the interstices of Byzantine and Sasanian ecumenes, and marked in Armenian historical memory as a time of acute transformation, writ in the landscape and upon the bodies of martyrs: men at Avarayr and women in the “front lines”of conversion. Zakarian focuses on the primary Armenian histories of this period: histories of the Armenians attributed to Agat‘angełos and Movsēs Xorenac‘i, the anonymous *Martyrdom and Discovery of Relics of St Thaddeus the Apostle and of the Virgin Sanduxt,* the *Epic Histories* attributed to P‘awstos Buzand, the histories of Ełiše and Łazar P‘arp‘ec‘i, and the *Martyrdom of St Šušanik.* In the introduction, Zakarian lays out his method, which is to search for an alternative to the narrative of misogynistic EC writing, by seeking out evidence of the appreciation of women and their agency on the part of the EC Armenian historians. Ultimately the “success” of this project for Zakarian rests in a flat reading of literary symbolism, whereby the appearance of medieval women unaccompanied by misogynistic censure is counted as a celebration of their agency.

The book proceeds through a series of thematic essays. Chapter 1 explores the evidence for the social role of women in Armenia on the “eve” of conversion (first through fourth centuries AD), focusing particularly on the evocations of Zoroastrian culture in the EC Armenian texts. In this chapter Zakarian introduces a spatialized argument carried through the book: that the domain concerning the EC historians was the public sphere, a masculine spacetime of war, hunting, politics and history; thus, the histories by default neglect or provide only sketchy glimpses of the “markedly different” domestic sphere, where female agency reigned behind locked doors.[[4]](#footnote-4) Chapters 2 and 3 consider the representation of women, in particular martyrs such as Sanduxt and the Hripsimean virgins, in the EC Armenian texts. In Chapter 2 Zakarian introduces another persistent theme: that if early late antique Armenia was ripe for conversion by men, it was because its soil had been fertilized with “holy women’s blood.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Much of the following chapters endeavor to support his subsequent characterization of this division of symbolic labor in the narrative tradition of the Christianization of Armenia as “an effective collaboration.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The remaining chapters are considerations of women and their agency and experience through thematic lenses: asceticism, spaces and everyday life, marriage, queenship, and, then, a separate focus on violence. The discussion of women’s asceticism in Chapter 4 is a high point: while female donation and piety is well documented (though underappreciated) in the later middle ages, we still need more work on forms of community and female patronage and piety in the earlier centuries, along with considerations of the effects of new forms of religious community on the built landscape of the South Caucasus. This chapter also owes the clearest debt to other scholars’ interventions, most notably that of Zaroui Pogossian.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Overall, the book presents a number of insights across these themes, and draws worthwhile attention to the significance of the Armenian sources within our broader textual record of the “long fifth century.” But there are also some real missed opportunities for engagement with existing scholarship, some of which undermine the work’s historical contributions. Zakarian’s book has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the situation of women in the Late Antique Near East; however, Zakarian’s conclusion regarding the esteemed place women occupy in Armenian historiographical accounts rests on a series of assumptions with insufficient evidence. For example, in Chapter 2 Zakarian argues that there is “no evidence to suggest that Sanduxt’s description was based on the characterisation of Anahit from the ancient Zoroastrian text, but it seems reasonable to assume that in the imagination of the Armenians, Anahit, one of the most influential and beloved deities in pre-Christian Armenia, served as a model for the representation of an ideal woman.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The readers are left in an uncertain place. Given that ultimately the pre-Christian (Zoroastrian) culture of the Armenian highlands is deemed to be the reason the Armenian authors resisted the “imported misogyny” of the Syriac and Greek traditions, more could be drawn from recent work on Zoroastrian religion and legal studies.[[9]](#footnote-9) If there was indeed a matter of Zoroastrian background, a comparative work with Jewish population of Iran could highlight the case Zakarian is making. Recent works on the Jewish population of Sasanian Iran explore the ways that Zoroastrian/Iranian traditions shaped the social and legal world of women across religious boundaries.[[10]](#footnote-10)

If Zakarian’s claim is correct in that the authors of these accounts have tried to create mirror images of martyrs such as Sanduxt by appealing to the Zoroastrian/Iranian mentality of the Armenian nobility, this elevated place for women would necessarily also be found in Iranian contexts. Even if we accept the prominence of a Zoroastrian heritage in the religious mindset of EC Armenians, Zakarian fails to prove, firstly, that early late antique Zoroastrianism was, in fact, a culture where men and women were treated with equity, even in theory. Secondly, one would need a serious anthropological study in order to accept a correlation between the existence of goddesses like Anahit and veneration of actual women in their social setting.[[11]](#footnote-11) Following Marilyn Strathern,[[12]](#footnote-12) we need to be critical of the idea that the project of EC Armenian chroniclers and our projects could even share similar goals of providing a holistic understanding of the world as it functioned. Zakarian frequently allows for a slippage between the narratives of Church Fathers and the society of Arsacid Armenia, allowing allegories of Early Christianity to stand in for ethnographic description. Scholars need to do more work to make visible that which is *outside* the historical world of EC Armenian writers, because that distinction -- the creation of a second “world of women” as exclusion -- is a political project in which scholars, too, can become complicit, when we accept its premise.

The book would have benefited greatly from engaging with the extensive and growing literature on the gendered body as religious and social symbol in the middle ages; it is remarkable, for example, that a book wherein so much medieval blood is spilt neglects to cite Carolyn Walker Bynum. Ultimately, this lack of engagement with recent scholarship serves to flatten the discussion of female martyrs such as Hṙip‘simē and Gayianē, neglecting consideration of the capacity of the suffering and bleeding female body to identify with that of Christ. This brings us to the central challenge of Zakarian’s book: a core confusion between visibility and agency, such that the symbolic deployment of women is read as quantitative evidence of their dignity and importance, even as their allegorical labor is erased.

**Agency vs allegorical labor**

On the first page of the book, Zakarian announces his work as “the first major attempt to deploy the recently developed theoretical frameworks of the gender studies and women’s history in order to explore the issue of the representation of women in early Christian Armenian

sources and to retrieve... information about the lived reality of women.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In his strenuous effort to frame EC accounts of the conversion as (relatively) feminist, Zakarian accepts the status quo of women and their bodies as sacrifice to be the correct order of the universe. The questions we would have liked to have seen him explore are: Why these women? Why their blood? And why is the blood of some women (Hṙip‘simē, Gayanē) considered a blessing while the spilling of the blood of others (P‘aṙanjem) imagined as exposing the body of the nation to shame and danger?

In other words, the book’s emphasis on the *visibility* of women in the sources overlooks the *mode of their visibility*, and especially the heavy labor done by women in the texts as embodied symbols of national destiny. Zakarian deploys the concept of allegory many times, but misses the opportunity to address the elephant in the room: the recurrent enslavement of women and women’s bodies to the labor of allegorically birthing, sustaining, and embodying the nation at its most vulnerable. This is a central issue in feminist studies of nation-making and nationalism, which have long stressed that “all nationalist ideologies are gendered; most commonly, women are the *symbol* of the nation, men its *agents.*”[[14]](#footnote-14) The narrative embodiment of the EC Armenian nation as a vulnerable virgin must be considered in the context of widespread, incessant representations of nation as “a woman under threat of penetration or domination.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In chapter 3, Zakarian argues that Agat‘angełos doesn’t discuss women because he is focused on the public sphere, “the world of wars, conflicts, betrayal, miraculous escapes, expressions of loyalty and so on; it is a men’s world which seems to be inaccessible to women.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This persistent assertion of war as a “man’s world” erases both rape and natalism as tactics of war, and nation-making. The story of Hṙip‘simē is a story of rape, and when women like the Hṙip‘simian virgins *resist* rape, they defend the blood purity of the nation. Zakarian gestures toward this in discussing the battlefield of Hṙip‘simē -- the chamber of her attempted rape -- in recognizing it as “an allegorical representation of the fight between Hṙip‘simē’s Christianity and the paganism of Trdat.”[[17]](#footnote-17) But the mere fact of representation is not enough: why is the narrative of a Christian nation’s survival given the body of a threatened virgin? (It’s notable also that Trdat is, in turn, “raped” by Hṙip‘simē, which is an interesting, and undiscussed, queering, and an intentional reassertion of the viability and virility of Christian destiny).

The fate of the female body as destined to be seen as allegory for the nation is painfully visible in Chapter 7, where Zakarian shares an excerpt from the *Epic Histories* in which the Arsacid Queen P‘aṙanjem is captured and put in a public rape machine. This allegorical incident is juxtaposed without analysis, when Zakarian writes: “The land of Armenia, *bereft of her king* and the commander-in-chief who was also captured and killed by the Persians, becomes a vulnerable target for King Šapuh, who sends a large army to *conquer and ravish it*”[[18]](#footnote-18) (emphasis added). What the author might have untangled is why this Armenian historian coerces this individual woman’s body to allegorically represent the honor and sanctity of the whole Armenian people. Zakarian could have endeavored to better understand why and how women’s bodies, queenly or not, are treated as the site of dishonor, of fears of penetration and shame that can pressure the whole society. To illustrate: an affective disposition aimed to stir the emotions of the audience in the case of the story of P‘aṙanjem was set up in the way the anonymous author of *EH* introduces her as the murderess of her husband’s first wife, and an unfit mother to her son, Pap whom she offered to *dews* (Arm., evil spirits)*,* as a crossdresser with queer sexual preferences (*EH* Book V. xxii). These are relevant points in P‘aṙanjem’s portrayal that Zakarian decided not to mention and it leaves the reader wondering why. P‘aṙanjem’s penetration, her shameful death, her rape were all punishment for her transsgression of boundaries. Zakarian returns to the story of P‘aṙanjem, again, in Chapter 8, framing the vulnerability of “the female body, her chastity and reputation” to being “unscrupulously manipulated” as evidence for the agency of medieval women– and, thus, evokes yet again the allegorical “value” of the female body as an intimate symbol of the sanctity, morality, purity and destiny of the nation.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Ultimately, the inability of the author to analytically distinguish agency from allegory is a failure of the book, and one that prevents this work from being a feminist text. This has ramifications beyond the scholarly world. In the introduction, the author briefly dangles the contemporary relevance of the subject matter; we would underscore the urgent pertinence to the role of women in nation-making everywhere but in particular within the Republic of Armenia and among the complexly-interwoven Armenian diaspora, for whom the imagined landscape of the conversion is both birthplace and realm of longed-for return.[[20]](#footnote-20) Lerna Ekmekcioglu has cogently argued that immediately after the Genocide, the centrality of reclaimed Armenian women’s “sole duty” to birth new Armenians (including those conceived in rape) within the Patriarchate’s efforts to muster citizens for a potential nation-claim “did not translate into women’s agency in determining group belonging.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Ongoing debates in the Republic of Armenia over the “tradition” of the red apple and sex-selective abortion demonstrate that the destiny of the (Christian) Armenian nation is still embedded, violently, in women’s bodies.[[22]](#footnote-22) Policy directives from President Serzh Sargsyan in 2017 and President Nigol Pashinyan in 2019 have foregrounded declining birthrate and demographic crisis as existential threats to the sanctity of the body politic. Whose blood must be spilt now, whose bodies territorialized as the site of nation-making? Public policy proposals on the demographic crisis talk of necessary “aggressive measures”— but, while the 2500 war dead in the recent Artsakh/Karabakh conflict are described as “martyrs,” Armenian women are mentioned only as mothers, presumably still as Hṙip‘simian “Christian cups,” cradling the wine of Armenian destiny.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This brings us back to challenges surrounding the study of gender and gender theory in Armenian Studies, and the relationship between the discipline to its vulnerable publics. To pull from Strathern again, it matters whose bodies we use to think other ideas with.[[24]](#footnote-24) If the destiny of Armenian-ness persists in being territorialized in virginal and fertile bodies, then refusals of this destiny are persistently to be viewed as patria-cidal (if not genocidal) treason. As Sevan Beukian recently argued: “The marginalization of questions of gender and sexuality in Armenian studies in some ways reflects the making of Armenian everyday life in the transnation, where LGBTQ Armenians, mixed-race Armenians, or Armenian women who do not fit the “norm” (single mothers, or mothers who have children out of wedlock) are not accepted and are viewed as external to the discursive possibilities of Armenianness” (2018: 19) In other words, continuing failure to connect the dots with modern feminist challenges further obscures the ways that Armenian Studies partakes in a culture of exclusion and allegorical exploitation.

We, *too*, are accountable.

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1. David Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed: The Portrayal of Women in Early Christian Texts* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021) 102, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We define nation here, following Benedict Anderson, as a community imagined in cultural practice (including writing), which in the course of such imaginings is endowed with a shared history and a common destiny, and oriented in the contemplation of a likewise-imagined landscape (i.e. created in practice as well as occupying ‘real’ physical space) evoked as a point of origin and a destination of potential return. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* (London/ New York: Verso, 1991). For example, this is the nation that is ‘born’ in Movsēs Xorenac‘i’s writing; see Zakarian *Women too were Blessed*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed*, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed*, 45, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zaroui Pogossian, “Female Asceticism in Early Medieval Armenia,” *Le Muséon* 125, no 1-2, (2012):

   169-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The field-advancing work of Maria Macuch especially in regards to marriage and inheritance law should have been consulted see M. Macuch, *Das sasanidische Rechtsbuch Mātakdān i hazār Dātistān -Teil II,* (Wiesbaden: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft: Kommissionsverlag, F. Steiner, 1981), and her article “Zoroastrian Principles and the Structure of Kinship in Sasanian Iran," in *Religious Themes and Texts of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia: Studies in honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli on the occasion of his 65th birthday on 6 December 2002,* edited by C.G. Cereti/M. Maggi/E. Provasi, (Wiesbaden: Beiträge zur Iranistik 24, 2003) also "The Function of Temporary Marriage in the Context of Sasanian Family Law,”in *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea held in Ravenna, October 6–11, 2003. Vol. I: Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies,* edited by A. Panaino/A. Piras, (Milano, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See most recent work by Yishai Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian Talmud*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and Yifat Monnickendam,*Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity: Betrothal, Marriage, and Infidelity in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some studies on the revelation of goddesses and the authority of women in ancient Greece might improve the points Zakarian has tried to make. The point made by Peter Walcot, "Greek Attitudes towards Women: The Mythological Evidence," in *Greece & Rome* 31, no. 1 (1984): 37-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: CA, University of California Press, 1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed*, 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Annie Whitehead, et al., “Editorial,” *Feminist Review* 44 (Summer 1993):1-2. See also Jan J. Pettman, “Boundary Politics: Women Nationalism and Danger,” in *New Frontiers in Women’s Studies: Knowledge, Identity and Nationalism*, edited by Mary Maynard and Jane Purvis. (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996), 187-202, and Irene Gedalof, “Identity in transit: Nomads, Cyborgs and Women.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 7 (2000): 337-354. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pettman, “Boundary Politics,” 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed, 84* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 190 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Zakarian, *Women too were Blessed,* 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Arlene Voski Avakian, “A different future? Armenian Identity through the Prism of Trauma, Nationalism, and Gender,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no42 (2010): 203-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Lerna Ekmekcioglu, “A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 3 (2013): 525. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Marianna Grigoryan. “Armenia Considers Ban on Gender-Specific Abortions: The bill drafted by the Ministry of Health explicitly bans all sex-selective abortions.” Eurasianet, July, 15, 2015. https://eurasianet.org/armenia-considers-ban-on-gender-specific-abortions [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Serouj Mamoulian. “On Armenia’s Demographic Situation.” Armenian Weekly, December 29. 2020. https://armenianweekly.com/2020/12/29/on-armenias-demographic-situation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Strathern, Marilyn, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology, Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992: 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)