

The Patriarch of Constantinople Needs No Defense

In an Armenian-language article published in the 26 February 2005 issue of Yerevan Azg, the "Central Administration of the Democratic Liberal Party, Boston" assails in scathing terms the character of His Beatitude Archbishop Mesrob II (Mutafian), Patriarch of Istanbul and All Turkey, and questions his motives in filing his lawsuit against the Central Board of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in connection with the latter's decision to close the Melkonian Educational Institute (MEI) in Cyprus. The said lawsuit was filed in the Superior Court of California on January 13th, 2005.

Following a long diatribe charging that the Patriarch was elected to his position with "Turkish government crutches" and that he has been "used as a political tool" by Turkish authorities in their bid to win accession to the European Union, the article turns to its real motive, namely the Patriarch's lawsuit against the AGBU. Specifically the article says:

"Archbishop Mutafian has now embarked on his most extreme adventure. He has decided to file a lawsuit against the largest philanthropic organization of the Armenian Diaspora with the excuse that he wishes to nullify the decision of the AGBU's Central Board to close the MEI in Cyprus. The AGBU has fully met its obligations to the Patriarchate. Consequently Archbishop Mutafian's action has no legal basis. What he has done is clearly an act of mischief.

"The course Archbishop Mutafian has taken thus far clearly suggests that he has always served the political directives of the Turkish authorities. In view of that it is impossible even to think that he could have undertaken this adventure without the consent, encouragement, and especially directive of those authorities."

The article goes on to suggest that the Patriarch's lawsuit is part of a longstanding Turkish campaign to "harm the AGBU" and adds that the Turkish authorities have finally "found a partner in the person of the adventure-seeking Archbishop Mutafian" in their campaign against the AGBU.

An English version of this article appeared in the Armenian Mirror Spectator on March 5, 2005. Interestingly the passages quoted above as well as all references to the MEI and the lawsuit was excised from the English version.

It is sad that the Democratic Liberal (Ramgavar) Party has stooped to commit such an act of character assassination against one of the most capable and energetic and best trained religious leaders in the Armenian Diaspora. Clearly, the author(s) of the article is (are) entirely unfamiliar with the circumstances of Archbishop Mutafian's election to his current position and his relationship with the Turkish authorities and thoroughly unqualified to make these baseless charges.

Given the bitter tone of the article and the shallowness of its "facts," the more important question that arises is: Why was this article written and why at this time? If the Ramgavar Party was so concerned about the Patriarch's relationship with the Turkish authorities, why did it choose to publish this article only six weeks after the Archbishop filed his lawsuit against the AGBU?

The motivation for the article is obviously related to the MEI lawsuit. The removal of all references to the MEI in the later, English version of the article clearly suggests that there were some second thoughts and that there was an attempt to dissociate the allegations against the Patriarch from the MEI lawsuit. Was this done, belatedly, to prevent this article from being used in the coming legal battle against the AGBU? Or was it done to prevent charges that the AGBU

and the Ramgavar Party have launched a mudslinging campaign against the Patriarch because they cannot defend their decision on the closure of the MEI and are deeply concerned about what may be revealed in the courtroom about their stewardship of the Melkonian trust over the past 80 years?

The article does not do much harm to Archbishop Mutafian because he needs no defense against such shallow and baseless charges coming from circles that seem to have little knowledge of the affairs of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul. Furthermore, the political allegations raised by the article are obviously just a hysterical sideshow to cover up its real purpose, namely a desperate attempt to stop the MEI lawsuit from going forward.

On the other hand, the article does enormous harm to the reputation of the Ramgavar Party and the AGBU. By sinking to such low levels of unprofessional mudslinging they have brought nothing but shame upon themselves.

In an interview published in Istanbul Lraper on March 13, 2005, the Patriarch said: "Like every charitable institution, the AGBU must be accountable to our people. What happened to the \$3.5 million of the 1920s? How much money remains in the Melkonian fund today? Let them inform the nation."

We agree wholeheartedly.

Therefore, we call upon the AGBU and its affiliated organizations:

- a) To desist from such harmful and shameful campaigns which make an already difficult situation even more difficult;
- b) To prepare a defense of their actions over the MEI;
- c) To provide a full and truthful accounting of their stewardship of the Melkonian trust to the Armenian people who are the true inheritors of the Melkonian brothers' gift.

MELKONIAN ALUMNI AND FRIENDS

GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA, March 18, 2005