THE RELATIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS AND CONFESSIONAL SEGMENTS OF THE ARMENIANCY AND THE ISSUES OF THEIR CONSOLIDATION

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The Necessity to Consolidate the Armenians Spread all over the World

In the current transitional period of the multi-polar world civilizational conflicts take place, with the globalized world being formed in parallel. These processes imply spiritual and cultural collisions and possible expansions. Only the nations that act in a coordinated manner are capable of scoring victories or at least gaining advantageous positions. Meanwhile, nations unable to determine their course, or follow a wait-and-see policy, eventually fall under the influence of the others.

In this context it is a crucial issue whether in present conditions a given nation has a clearly formed civilizational concept and competitive capacities to implement it.

The Armenian individuals and separate groups, who are the bearers of the Armenian civilization, have had remarkable achievements at different times and in different fields. However, having been deprived of their statehood (including a system of power) for centuries, Armenians actually had no opportunity to practice their civilization at a political level, though the native Armenian homeland has always been a focal point for clashing global inter-

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ests. For extended times this circumstance has significantly hindered the natural development of the Armeniancy in the political arena, and restricted the opportunities to gain necessary experience. In the modern times it is a rather essential gap that should be filled as soon as possible in order to demonstrate our independent profile and strengthen our positions in the processes taking place in the world.

On this path, high importance is attached to the knowledge of own identity and the Armenian civilizational values deriving from it (the characterization of the Armenian civilization), as well as their real-life application under the current conditions, which implies development of a spiritual/ideological concept and modern mechanisms to practice it so as to face the existing challenges.

Another imperative related to putting the Armenian civilizational values into action is the consolidation and systematization of the national resources.

In our opinion, the high priority of the spiritual/ideological concept is obvious here. It will be a necessary condition for bringing together the human resources needed, whereas in its absence, it will be difficult to consolidate these resources, turning the mentioned concept into a subject of only limited discussions.

Consolidation of the National Resources

Consolidation of the Armeniancy and its resources spread all over the world is obviously challenged by considerable linguistic, religious/confessional and cultural obstacles, which in practice sometimes cause confrontations. Therefore, in order to develop any long-term programs of consolidation it is necessary to clarify and seriously scrutinize the existing situation.

The overwhelming majority of Armenians at least nominally identify themselves as members or adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church

(hereinafter referred to as the Armenian Church), but there is also a considerable number of Armenians of other religions and confessions. This issue is evident in the Republic of Armenia (RA) and it becomes even more notable when the Armenian Diaspora is added to the pool. Here a particular attention should be paid to the leftovers of the Armeniancy who were forcibly Islamized (assimilated with Kurds and Arabs) as a result of the Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in the 19-20th centuries in Western Armenia and the Near East. Some representatives of this segment recently came forward and spoke up.

Under the circumstances concerned, those who study this subject propose to take the Armenian descent as a basis for consolidation; however, this cannot serve as a sufficient condition for such consolidation. **Bearing an Armenian self-consciousness** is offered as an additional condition, which in principle seems to be acceptable almost to everyone. If this is the case, the next step should be defining all the characteristics of the "Armenian self-consciousness".

In developing this definition it is also necessary to take into consideration the religious and confessional ideas of a person who regards himself an Armenian. In this sense, it appears important that the Armenians who live outside the RA are to be actually ready to rank the Armenian national interests higher than those of the countries they live in.

The Role of the Religion

As it was mentioned above, the system of values is an important and requisite descriptor of the identity, serving as guidance for all groups and regulating their everyday lifestyles. The system of values inevitably contains religious/confessional notions, as well as principles and norms deriving from those.

In this context special attention should be paid to the fact that the nation cannot exist without a living memory, without its past, and that we in-

herited Armenia from our ancestors, so every generation should contribute to this heritage (material, spiritual and cultural) and pass it on to the next generation. In case if due to various reasons there is no possibility or ability to add to this heritage, it should at least be passed to the following generation unadulterated and undisturbed.

The spiritual component is an essential part of this heritage and the Armenian Church has been its carrier for ages. One should not forget that the Armenian Church is the only preserved and uninterrupted Armenian institution which connects us with the past, and its mission is to take our nation to its future destination. Under the influence of different external drivers some segments of the Armeniancy started adopting other spiritual heritages only during the last three centuries.

While considering the religious situation one cannot ignore the circumstance that in the last century secularization swept victories all over the world. One of the manifestations of such secularization has been the "privatization of the religion", as a result of which the social life was divided into public and private areas and religion has been pushed to the "private space" to become a personal matter of an individual. Religion was turned into one of the particular public services and "a market of the religions" emerged. Consequently, consumer attitudes towards religions developed among the people; a person began viewing religious traditions as merchandise and treating them by the principle "what is in it for me?" Thus, generally the religion no longer tells a human being what kind of a person he/she should be, but quite the opposite. Hence, the traditional consolidating role of the religion was abolished and substituted by the civil norms…

Nevertheless, we believe that while studying the issue of the Armeniancy's consolidation one should not bow too much to the current secular concepts and disregard the real, traditional role of the religion, but should rather take it into consideration as necessary.

According to Vincenzo Gioberti, an Italian philosopher, statesman and politician of 19th century: "At all times and everywhere the civil principles were derived from the hieratic ones, cities developed around the temples, laws originated from prophecies, … the education and culture of people from their religion…" Similar ideas were suggested also by A. Berdyayev, M. Müller, L. Feuerbach and many other reputable thinkers.

It should also be taken into account that today, under the post-secularism, the notion of religion based on secular concept is being reconsidered; i.e. Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism (except for its ultra-liberal branches) and Islam are no longer viewed as religions alone. Now they are again treated as ideologies and ways of life, as alternative value systems not only respective to each other but also in regard to secularism. Secularism is losing its status of the one that uses neutral tools to regulate co-existence of different religious and ideological systems. Under such conditions the issue of possible co-existence of these ideologies has surfaced, the unity of which so far has been taken care of only by formal norms that in no way were neutral.

The Situation in the Republic of Armenia

Currently there are 67 registered and many unregistered religious organizations in Armenia. Most of the registered organizations are Protestant, followed by the so-called new religious movements – Jehovah's witnesses, Mormons, Krishnaites, etc. Although there is no official statistics on religious affiliation in Armenia, according to the data presented by different experts and researchers, the Armenian Church is the largest in terms of the number of the adherents, followed by Armenian Catholics, Protestants and followers of the new religious movements.

The number of adherents of the Protestant churches and new religious movements constitute about 4%, but they act very vigorously and sometimes even aggressively in Armenia, and over the last 20 years they have been able

to establish their own infrastructures (kindergarten, school, university, communities, etc.) in the country.

The inter-religious and inter-confessional atmosphere in Armenia is generally peaceful. The Armenians are truly tolerant toward the national religious institutions of the ethnic minorities living in Armenia that comprise about 3% of the country's population, and have never treated them as sects. However, there is an obvious discontent with most of the Protestant organizations and new religious movements, which is caused by their aggressive activity and the threat they pose to the Armenian identity. This is evidenced by the grievances brought by the citizens and comments in the mass media.

Though the Protestants in Armenia often mention that they recognize the Armenian Church as the "mother church", but in the inner circles they continuously criticize it. Over the recent years this controversy spilled over beyond those inner circles and materialized in an open opposition. This comes to prove that for different reasons, the religious and confessional differences cause confrontation in the RA.

It is noteworthy that there is no atmosphere of an inter-confessional and, much less, inter-religious dialogue in Armenia. It is absent even in the relations between different Protestant movements; only recently, prompted by the need to protect own interests, they initiated steps directed toward consolidation. As for the new religious movements, they reject all other religions and confessions.

Today the Armeniancy faces serious global challenges; meanwhile an Armenian has no answers to them based on the traditional religion, no appropriate norms of behavior, no organized application of these norms, no ideological propositions, and the newly forming legislation actually has no relation to the aforementioned norms and the national ideology. This implies a necessity to analyze and assess the existing challenges and problems and urgently develop a social doctrine from the perspective of the Armenian Church's teachings.

The General Situation in the Diaspora

Researchers studying the issue of language and confessional differences of Armenians in the Diaspora classify the religiously/confessionally or linguistically assimilated groups according to certain criteria and come to some interesting conclusions, as follows:

1. The Armenians who do not speak Armenian and are not Christians tend to almost totally lose their Armenian self-consciousness, as, for example, great many Armenians in Syria who assimilated with Arabs and converted to Islam (about 500-700 thousand people).

2. Only in case of carrying out special policies it may become possible to reclaim the Armenian identity for the Armenians who do not speak Armenian, but are Christians.

3. The Armenians who do not speak Armenian, but adhere to the Armenian Church have preserved their Armenian self-consciousness and have higher chances for awakening (e.g. Yakoubiye village in Syria).

There is another remarkable observation: among the foreign language speaking Armenians some manifestations of the self-consciousness of the nation the language of which they speak can be observed, but these may disappear as soon as they find themselves in a mainstream Armenian environment. Therefore, **the mainstream Armenian environment or the way of life which corresponds to the Armenian identity** has a key role to play.

The following conclusion is also important: **the confessional estrangement** from the main Armenian masses paves a way to linguistic and national estrangement in general, and **the language estrangement** (Syria, Lebanon) boosts alienation on confessional/national grounds.

Conclusion

A general situational analysis suggests that obstacles may appear on the way of consolidating the individuals and groups who have Armenian self-

consciousness, and it will be necessary to develop differentiated approaches toward the adherents of other Christian confessions, followers of the new religious movements and people of drastically different religions.

Along with developing spiritual and ideological responses to the existing challenges and modern mechanisms of their implementation, the following should be treated as top priorities:

- organizing the process of consolidation for the individuals and groups who maintain vibrant Armenian self-consciousness and tend to undertake nationally-oriented activities; and
- constant implementation of programs that draw closer the individuals and groups who have not rejected yet different religious/confessional ideas or who have weak perception of the Armenian self-consciousness.

To attain this objective it is necessary to develop an appropriate reintegration (transformation) program and implement it fittingly to the existing conditions. It should have components addressing the groups which are at different levels of the Armenian self-consciousness and readiness to act.

At the same time, it is necessary to develop favorable and stimulating conditions which, in turn, could spur their wish and will to transform, i.e. to reclaim their roots, understand the Apostolic faith, learn the Armenian language and use it on a daily basis, politically support the state interests of Armenia.

This is not a new issue and in the early 20th century one of the great Armenian luminaries had proposed an approach to solve it. This approach is especially remarkable by the fact that its author is one of the high-ranking priests of the Armenian Church – Bishop Karekin of Trabzon. He wrote:

"**The Armenian Church as a religious association is also a spiritual family.** And as a family it has its own **Home**. There is only one Church in the moral sense, but there are many temples.

There are children inside and outside this Home and they all are a family.

Those who live in the Home are loyal to its laws and rules that help manage the house and keep the **internal harmony**.

Those outside the Home – **different groups, sects** or **vagabonds** – are deprived of the privileges enjoyed by those who are inside, but they still remain the sons of this family.

In any case it is wrong to stay outside the Home, no matter what are the justifications and reasons. As a result the House loses its magnificence. The responsibility for it falls both on the indifferent people who are inside and the discontented ones who are outside."

In the conclusion Karekin of Trabzon provides the formula for the inner peace of the Armenian Home:

"**There is no and there must never be any inquisition on faith in this Armenian Home. However, it is appropriate that the spirit and moral basis of the Home constitute the spirit and basis for the individual self of its every member**"[1].

I would suggest supplementing this approach by a well-known principle of the Christian Church (by Blessed Augustine of Hippo): "**In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity**".

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[1] «Գարեգին Եպիսկոպոս Տրապիզոնի, «Աշխարհի Լոյսն ի Հայս», pp. 208-209.