

## THE CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS OF ARMENIANCY IN THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

*Hovhannes Hovhannisyan*<sup>\*</sup>

### *The Problems of Armeniancy in the Religious Dimension*

Over the history of the Armenian people, along with the political and state-related issues the religious, ecclesial and theological ones were among the most discussed and analyzed problems. Already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century the “Ecumenical” Council of Chalcedon led to division between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches, setting conditions for further course of not only ecclesial/religious, but also the political life. Later the numerous other ecclesial splits not only deepened the ecclesiastical or religious/confessional differences alone, but also shaped the processes of identity formation and differentiation for various nations and ethnic groups. Naturally the Armenian Church and Armenian people could not stay away from these processes. The Great Schism of 1054, and later also the church division during the Reformation period directly affected the Armenian reality.

In parallel with emergence of various Christian sects the Western ecclesial structures launched active missionary activities particularly in the regions inhabited by Armenians, simultaneously exploiting the socio-psychological conditions caused by the pressure of the Muslim environment, as well as the lack of religious education among the Armenian population and the absence of a national political authority. The Catholic and Protestant preachers sometimes took advantage of this unstable political, public, social, religious and

---

<sup>\*</sup> Ph.D. in History, Docent at YSU Chair of History of Ecclesiology and Armenian Church.

spiritual situation, and over the time their active proselytism enabled them to acquire a large number of adherents among the Armenian population. It is not our intention to analyze the reasons why a considerable mass of Armenians converted to other religions, because this analysis may include drastically different causes: from using the opportunities to adapt to the only means to avoid physical extermination. Nonetheless, it has to be mentioned that the late-medieval history of the church and politics is full of stories about foreign preachers, who were often viewed as a serious factor disturbing the national unity and posing a threat to the national identity.

The stratification of the Armeniacy especially deepened and widened after the Genocide, when the various religious strata of the Armeniacy left their ancestral homes and scattered around the world. It has to be noted that during this period the special attitudes of European states and religious/ecclesial structures towards Armenian Protestants and Catholics often intensified the existing controversies and antagonism between Apostolic Armenians and their Evangelical and Catholic brethren<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, in some cases adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church directly blamed Armenians of other religions and viewed them as accomplices in the massacres. Such attitudes did not facilitate establishing national unity, and further pushed apart the approaches of Armenians with different religious affiliations regarding the issues of concern for the Armeniacy. Needless even to mention the Islamized Armenians, as Apostolic Armenians used to refuse that they are Armenians at all, since adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church traditionally regarded only themselves as ethnic Armenians, and rejected the idea that people of other religions can be Armenians.

In respect to the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches it is useless to talk about ecclesiological/confessional, canonic or

---

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the attitudes of Apostolic Armenians toward Armenian Evangelicals see: *Խառնաշրջան Հ.*, Կրոնի և կրոնական ինստիտուտների հասարակական դերը կամ կրոնականության իրավիճակը Հայաստանում, «Կրոն և հասարակություն» ամսագիր, Ա, Երևան, 2007, p. 99:

ritual issues, because the differences between these churches always existed and the very fact of these differences has prompted diverse approaches towards Armenianness. Despite the religious differences, some religious/confessional similarities of these churches are to be noted as well, in particular their common acceptance of the first three Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea – 325, Constantinople – 381, and Ephesus – 431), which is often neglected or subordinated to the differences and conflicts that increasingly deepened in subsequent centuries. On the other hand, raising the religious issues can only be an artificial problem, which does not reflect the true nature of relationship between these churches and is outside the scope of the critical issues that the Armenian people are concerned about. It bears also mentioning that most of the Armenian Catholics residing in Armenia “are Catholic by hereditary religious identity, rather than by faith”<sup>1</sup>. Many of them have no idea about the etymological origins of their sobriquet “Frank”, no perception of any confessional discord with Armenian Church and they often turn to the priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church for satisfying their spiritual needs. Incidentally, Armenian Evangelicals were called “Ingliz” by the public.

The situation is different with the Armenian Evangelicals, who strengthened their adherents’ sense of religious affiliation with help of the support received from abroad, and thus intensified the displays of religious identity. In this perspective the main emphasis of this article is not placed on the religious differences or similarities, but rather on the national unity of Armenian people living in both Diaspora and the Republic of Armenia, valuing the identity, developing joint actions, acting in unison with regards the national problems, quickly responding and forming a national front to face the global and local challenges. In this regard Dr. Hayk Kotanjyan, a political scientist, has correctly noted: “Difficulties remain in relations between the RA and Diaspora, because so far there has been a lack of understanding of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 95:

necessity to form an effective model of mutual interests between the two system-creating components of the World Armeniacy – the Republic of Armenia as the National State and the Diaspora.”

### *The Issues of Armenian Identity in the Religious Dimension*

In a publication titled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Fredrik Barth brings up new approaches in defining group identities and outlines the boundaries of these identities<sup>1</sup>. The Armenian Apostolic<sup>2</sup>, Catholic and Evangelical<sup>3</sup> Churches are distinct groups, each having their characteristic identities and by that they differentiate themselves from other groups, including the churches representing other segments of the Armenian people. On the other hand, these religious groups of the Armeniacy have undergone various political, economic, cultural influences over the time, which have often determined their boundaries and identity traits.

As the religious groups of Armeniacy lived in different parts of the world and in various cultural systems, they formed “multi-identities” that allowed them to develop the most adaptive mechanisms and to survive physically. The ethnic origin or ethnic affiliation is one of the important identity elements for the Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians. This element might be concealed due to some political or other reasons, or might not manifest itself for a long time due to the lack of favorable conditions.

<sup>1</sup> *Fredrik Barth*, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. The Social Organization of Culture Difference, Bergen. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969, p. 9-35.

<sup>2</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church consists of four autocephalous centers: Catholicosates of Etchmiadzin and Cilicia, Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople. Despite this departmentalization, the party affiliation rather than religious factor has played a major role in the identity of the Armenian Apostolic Church adherents. For instance, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation has played an essential role in the activities and relations of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, and this has formed the identity traits of the Armenians living under auspices of the Cilicia Catholicosate (see more details about this in: *Հովհաննիսյան Հ., Մայր աթոռ Ա.Էջմիածնի և Մեծի Տանն Կիլիկիո կաթողիկոսության 20-րդ դարի երկրորդ կեսի հարաբերությունների վերլուծության փորձ*, Տարեգիրք Գ, Երևան, 2008թ., pp. 316-338):

<sup>3</sup> The matters are more complicated with the Armenian Evangelical Church, because in this case there is no uniform ecclesial system, and so the Armenian Evangelicals or Armenian Protestants are represented by numerous churches and with various names. In this article Armenian Evangelical Church refers to the church registered in the Republic of Armenia.

The problem of religious affiliation of different strata of Armeniency can be overcome only by subordinating the religious element in the identity to the national or ethnic one, when an objective is set to mobilize various segments of Armeniency through a strategy of “inclusion”. Mobilization can take place only as a result of a direct intervention by the government authorities of Armenia, when attaining a common objective or solving common problems brings the priority of being Armenian to the forefront, leaving behind the religious affiliation of Apostolic, Catholic or Evangelical Armenians.

Pursuing shared objectives and solving common problems may lead to development and adoption of such mechanisms that will not only boost the cooperation between Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians at various levels, but will also create opportunities for them to establish joint bodies and implement effective programs to the benefit of the Armeniency. Implementation of joint programs on a permanent basis will gradually demote their religious identity relative to the national one and make them rise above the confessional differences. Subordinating the religious identity to the ethnic identity is quite difficult, especially for the adherents of the Evangelical church, because many of them deny the connection between religious and ethnic identities and attribute a higher priority to the religious affiliation.

Discussion on the religious identity of the Armeniency requires mentioning the issue of local identities as well, because it is impossible to examine the identities of adherents of the Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical Churches from the viewpoint of universal concepts alone; the nature and components of their identities tend to change depending on the geography. In this sense the residents of Armenia should be viewed as a separate entity, whereas the problems of Diaspora should be considered in a multi-phase diversification perspective. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that the dialogue between the traditional Armenian churches must stem from the public interests, rather than from narrow per-

sonal or even ecclesial interests, because in the modern world priority should be given to the public demands and grassroots motives.

In this respect one should not ignore the circumstance that the modern world has rushed into the stages secularism and post-secularism, which is quite vividly displayed in the interrelation of religious and non-religious aspects in the Republic of Armenia. These stages take different shapes in the Armenian Diaspora communities and Armenia proper, and this is why the religious or inter-church dialogue should take place through secular participation. In other words, the government authorities of Armenia must create favorable conditions for a dialogue between the Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical Churches from a non-religious perspective and for Armenian-centered joint activities to the benefit of Armenians.

In the context of dialogue between various Armenian ecclesial structures and different segments of Armenianness and implementation of Armenian-centered activities, it seems appropriate to refer to the principles of interreligious dialogue formulated by Paul Tillich, a renowned theologian. According to these principles the dialogue participants are to accept the value of the opponent's religious ideas, which by itself underscores the importance of the dialogue. Secondly, the dialogue participant may insist on his/her religious views, which implies opposing opinions, but at the same time there should be a common ground for both dialogue and dispute. Finally, the parties have to be open to the criticism of their religious standpoints<sup>1</sup>.

It has to be noted that for the Armenian churches it is quite hard to meet the last requirement of Tillich, because each of them is sure and convinced about the rightness of own principles. The other principles of the "Tillich platform" seem applicable for establishing an arena for dialogue and a standing body with participation of Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches. The content dimension of the "Armenian" component present in

---

<sup>1</sup> For details see: *П.Тиллих, Христианство и встреча мировых религий // Теология культуры*, М., 1995, p. 425.

their names could unify all three ecclesial entities, because they all are bound to serve the shared interests of Armeniacy, whether these are universal, local, public or state interests. On the other hand, in addition to supra-religious equivalences and commonalities, the churches also have no less important ritual, canonic and confessional similarities (e.g. the dogma of Trinity), which could be underscored if there is a desire and will for dialogue, and in case of implementing Armenian-centered activities. If a will for dialogue and desire to emerge out of the “latent conflict” exist, then those need to be institutionalized and brought from the level of periodical meetings of church leaders down to the wide circles of the faithful, along with boosting the personal communications and relations, publishing circular letters when necessary, etc.

The Armenian Apostolic Church traditionally dominated in the territory of Armenia, and considered other religions and religious dissent a threat to ethnic preservation and national unity. Interestingly, to counter the representatives of other religions the Armenian Apostolic Church uses only national arguments, rather than confessional or religious ones. On the other hand, after emergence of the Armenian Diaspora the Armenian Catholic and Evangelical Churches have played quite a significant role in preserving Armeniacy and thus contributed to shaping the new realities in Diaspora. It is enough to mention that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Mekhitarist Order has played an invaluable role in developing the Armenian studies and preserving Armeniacy. As for the Evangelical Church, one may recall the activities and tragic death of Hrant Dink, an Armenian Evangelical, who played a great part in bringing up the problems of Armeniacy in the modern Turkish society and launching an Armenian-centered discourse.

***The Memory of Genocide and Restoration of Historical Justice:  
the Image of Hrant Dink as a Vow for Religious Unity***

The 1915 Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire resulted in emergence of Armenian Diaspora, which continues a joint struggle to date for re-

storing the historical truth. Every year on April 24 the Armenians of Diaspora and Armenia regardless of religious and political affiliations stand united to voice protests about the great tragedy that occurred in Turkey. The fair resolution of the Armenian Cause is among the very few issues for which the Armenian people set aside any religious differences and try to make a stand in a united front against a common adversary. In all fairness it has to be added that the religious differences and controversies were shaken off also in 1988 after the Spitak earthquake, when the entire Armeniacy stood united to cope with the effects of the disaster. Unfortunately, this unity and accord can be observed only on occasions related to the Genocide or some other adverse realities, but not in relation to Armenia's Independence Day or Constitution Day or any other celebrations.

It has to be mentioned that in the modern-day Armenian environment the previously widespread religion-based restrictions, when Apostolic Armenians did not marry the Catholics or Evangelicals and vice versa, have been eliminated<sup>1</sup>. The rules of the information society have abolished the limitations existing in the past and made the modern human discard the archaic methods and follow the new rules. Unfortunately, these realities have eliminated not only the religious boundaries, but also the ethnic ones, as a result of which the Armenians in foreign environment often marry foreigners, assimilate into the local culture and lose their ethnic identity under the influence of this environment, especially if it is a Christian one. Despite this circumstance, we still can see internal marriages among crypto-Armenians of modern Turkey whose hidden ethnic self-consciousness causes them pursue the goal of maintaining their ethnic Armenian essence, at the same time outwardly pre-

---

<sup>1</sup> For the analysis of a similar situation in Javakhk see: *Միմալորյան Արեստակես, Հովյան Վահրամ, Ջավախահայության որոշ հիմնական դիրքեր, Եր., «Նորավանք» ԳԿՀ, 2009, p. 41. Also there is an interesting case of negative attitude of Apostolic Armenians toward a family that married their daughter off to a Russian Orthodox policeman in the years of the Russian Empire: Հովհաննիսյան Հ., Հայ Առաքելական Եկեղեցու բարենորոգության հիմնահարցը 1901-1906թթ., Երևան, 2008, p. 46:*



tending to be Muslims<sup>1</sup>. Although the Information Age dictates its rules, there are attempts to maintain in whatever ways the Armenian identity in the modern world, thus creating wide opportunities to consolidate around new ideas and approaches, the first and foremost of which is the imperative to consolidate around the idea of “the Republic of Armenia”.

In this context it seems appropriate to analyze some of the opinions about Armenia and memories of genocide expressed in Catholic and Evangelical media of Diaspora. Recently, various centers of Diaspora have been actively discussing the idea proposed by Hranush Hakobyan, RA Minister of Diaspora, regarding a bicameral legislature and more active involvement of diasporan Armenians in the life inside Armenia. This idea had an ambivalent reception among the Armenians of Diaspora<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, in these discussions about realities inside Armenia all sorts of religious differences were brushed off, and the issue was examined exclusively from the viewpoint of finding political and Armenia-centered solutions, which we believe is a good precedent for making it a continuous process.

Generally, the ecclesial structures of Armenian Diaspora conduct a single-vector policy toward recognition of the Armenian Genocide, because the credo of being an Armenian is directly linked to the demand for a fair resolution of the Armenian Cause, regardless of any religious or political affiliations. The Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical Churches all had scores of martyrs and victims among the faithful and the clergy. For instance, although the headquarters of Mekhitarist Order were in Europe, at the time of the Genocide there were Mekhitarist centers in Mush, Trabzon, Izmit and Bardizag, where many Mekhitarists fell victim to the Turkish yataghan. The Armenian Catholic Church in Zmmar also had numerous victims, but none of them gave up their Armenianness and the Christian faith<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For more details see: *Մեղքոյան Ռ.*, Իսլամացված հայերի խնդիրների շուրջ, Երևան, 2009, pp. 36-43:

<sup>2</sup> See «Մասիս», մարտ 2011, 6-8:

<sup>3</sup> For more details see: «Մասիս», ապրիլ 2011, 22-30:

Many leaders of the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Evangelical Churches perished because of their ethnic and religious identity, as they refused to repudiate this identity. It has to be mentioned that Armenian Protestants have done and continue doing a lot in various countries of the world to bring up the issues of Armenianness and preserve the nation.

The memory of Genocide and its victims is an endless topic to discuss, but we shall turn to expanding the Armenia-centered comprehension of this memory in current conditions and by modern methods, as well as introducing the Armenia-centered identity. Instilling such identity is directly linked with the ideas that the Diaspora has about Armenia, which are not always positive due to some adverse experiences many diasporan Armenians have gone through. Having suffered from the Genocide, the traditional Armenian churches should not concentrate on grave memories of the past, but with the lessons of history in mind they should rather engage in an active dialogue with each other and develop joint action plans to retain the Armenian identity, preserve Armenianness and have a more serious participation in programs directed towards strengthening and developing Armenia. The traditional Armenian churches must be able to jointly form a distinctive public platform, recommendations and criticisms of which could be useful for solving the common problems.

In this regard it is worth noting situation in the Constantinople's Armenian community consequent to Hrant Dink's vigorous activities, when the Armenian ecclesial structures often set aside their differences and contributed to implementation of joint programs. After Hrant Dink was murdered there was much talking about his Evangelical background, ensued by opinions and comments voiced both in public circles and media. Even more debates followed when Very Rev. Rene Levonian, Head of the Armenian Evangelical Church made a statement in the media that Hrant Dink was a member of the Evangelical Church<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Azg daily, 22/02/2007; <http://azg.am/AM/2007022202>

Although Hrant Dink has studied in an Armenian protestant school, the religious or identity-related issues did not have an essential or decisive significance for him; instead, he was very much concerned about national problems and supra-religious issues that were vital to the community. Interestingly, the compensation paid by the Turkish government was divided in three parts and allocated to the Hrant Dink Scholarship Fund, Getronagan Armenian High School in Istanbul and Gedikpaşa Armenian Evangelical Church, respectively, with the purpose of providing education to the children of migrants from Armenia. This is remarkable in the sense that even after his death Hrant Dink continues to remain above any religious affiliation, with a higher priority placed on being an Armenian and benefitting Armeniacy and Armenia.

The *Agos* weekly never prioritized the religious affiliation or viewed people from that perspective, which clearly shows Hrant Dink's vision and stance concerning religious identity. The emphasis on Hrant Dink's person is important in this context, showing that a true Armenian who is concerned about the problems of Armeniacy should not care what church or confession an individual is a member to, but instead should set aside the issues of religious identity, and get involved primarily and mostly with advancing and solving nation-related and ethnic preservation problems, as Dink did.

### ***The Republic of Armenia as a Supra-Religious Reality***

The statement by Serzh Sargsyan, President of RA, made in the USA with regard to the boundaries of ethnic and religious affiliation, or to be more precise, about breaking such boundaries, infused a new quality and content to the Armenian civic, national and political discourse. After this statement, active discussions started about the entirety of Armenian identity's elements, whereby being an Armenian traditionally used to be equivalent to being an adherent of Armenian Apostolic Church, while anybody else was classified as "renegade Armenian" or "traitor of nation". In the modern world such approach is fraught

with dangers of stern intolerance, which is a barrier to starting a dialogue between ecclesial structures of ethnic Armenians. Despite this, many leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church continue to insist on putting the equal sign between the religious and national identities, which both contradicts the guidelines set by the RA President and endangers the unity of Armenian structures in Diaspora, as well as the ethnic preservation process. Recently, the church's "patriot/traitor" approach and equalization of religious and national identities that hinders the state unity are often criticized in the scientific discourse as the main barrier to pluralism of opinions and religious dialogue<sup>1</sup>.

In this sense all churches that act in Armenia and for the unity of Armenian people, should focus not on the confessional differences, but on the imperative of having the same national self-consciousness, same history and same destiny, within the framework of which all intolerance and faulty practice of blaming each other must be eliminated among the traditional Armenian churches and in their interrelations. The ideas and accounts of great Armenian novelist Raffi on national self-consciousness are quite remarkable. He testified that Armenian Protestants had played a great role in preaching Christianity among the Armenians of Dersim and returning them back to their ethnic origins. He also mentions that the national self-consciousness is an important component of the national identity: "... the multitude of confessions does not destroy the national unity. Unity should be sought in the harmony of the parts, with the main motive being the nation in its highest meaning"<sup>2</sup>. It is impossible to imagine national unity without sponsorship of the highest authorities of Armenia, as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church's policy of tolerance toward people of other religions, which would lead to religious dialogue and implementation of joint national programs.

<sup>1</sup> See *Մարգարյան Մ.*, Անհանդուրժողականությունը և ներքին համերաշխության ձեռքբերման խնդիրը հայաստանյան հասարակության մեջ, «Կրոն և հասարակություն» ամսագիր, N. 3, ապրիլ, 2008, pp. 5-19:

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from: *Հովյան Վ.*, Բողոքական հայերը՝ տարադավան հայության շերտ, *Ընթացիկ*, Ի՞նչ կապ կա մեր և Տաճկաստանի հայերի մեջ, [http://www.eanc.net/EANC/library/Fiction/Original/Raffi/Essays\\_9.htm?page=31&interface\\_language=en](http://www.eanc.net/EANC/library/Fiction/Original/Raffi/Essays_9.htm?page=31&interface_language=en)

Given all of the above, we believe implementation of the following concepts will be a basis for achieving the mentioned objectives:

- The vision of development and prosperity of the Republic of Armenia should become the cornerstone for cooperation and establishment of a common platform between Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches.
- Defending the Artsakh people's right to self-determination, fair resolution of the Artsakh question, strengthening the political, military, economic security of Artsakh are the objectives for which the Armenian ecclesial structures must set aside their differences and tie into work for the benefit of the homeland.
- Though recognizing each other's religious, confessional and ecclesial differences, the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches should always be in a dialogue to pursue the interests of the Republic of Armenia and jointly solve the problems of Armeniáncy, because the traditional Armenian Churches have a common ethnic background and the same cultural and historical legacy.
- The Armenian Apostolic, Evangelical and Catholic Churches should establish common platforms in various centers of Diaspora that should report to an ecumenical council comprised of the respective church leaders, acting under auspices of the Republic of Armenia President. They will implement joint activities during the public holidays in Armenia and organize events that appeal the Armeniáncy.
- The traditional Armenian churches that are active in Diaspora should develop joint strategic and action plans for preserving Armeniáncy, whereas frictions and discord between ecclesial communities are harmful and add new threats to the existing ones. A good example to follow is the genuine cooperation between Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic Churches in Javakhk.

- The joint actions and plans of the traditional Armenian churches should be free from any partisan influences and be mostly directed to implementation of the state and national programs.
- The joint actions should include youth, benevolent, educational programs aimed at consolidating the Diaspora around the Republic of Armenia and enrooting the idea of Mother Homeland.
- Representatives of the Armenian Apostolic, Evangelical and Catholic Churches should have the opportunity to organize academic conferences on Armenian Studies, whereas the youth should be given the chance to attend annual summer schools in Armenia.

*December, 2011.*