

PEOPLE, LAND AND FAITH – AN ARMENIAN-ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

by *SHAHE AJAMIAN**

Even from the pure Orthodox point of view, the Armenian Church is schismatic, since it has not accepted the seven ecumenical councils, considering the first three quite sufficient in the formulation of the dogma of the Christian faith. Our Church belongs to the family of the Orthodox Churches commonly known as the pre-Chalcedonian group of Churches. Since we are not concerned now about the natures of Christ, I want to add that with regard to the subject under discussion: "People, Land, Faith" as a fundamental issue in the Jewish-Christian Encounter, The Armenian approach is quite orthodox.

To start, I wish to quote a passage from the historian Faustus of Byzantium, a Greek, who wrote the history of the Armenians of the IVth century, after their Christianization. The 12th chapter tells us about Arshag II, the king of Armenia, who, after fighting for thirty years against both Byzantium and Persia, is invited by the Persian king, Shabouh, for peace talks. He accepts the invitation, but at the banquet preceding the talks, he is arrested and jailed, because he rejects the conditions of his hosts, namely the reconversion of Armenia to the worship of fire. Nevertheless, the negotiations continue and the Persian king comes to believe that he can safely release Arshag and rely on his sincerity as an ally against Byzantium

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The Persian priests interfere, telling their king not to trust an Armenian king who does not stand on his native soil. But let the historian continue:

“And then King Shabouh commanded that half of the ground in front of the altar be strewn with soil and water brought from Armenia, and half of the space of the floor be kept native soil. And he called Arshag, the King of the Armenians, to his presence and after sending off all the others, he took the arm of Arshag and they began to walk around. And while walking in front of the altar and on Persian soil he said to him: ‘O Arshag, King of the Armenians, why did you become my enemy, since I loved you as my son, and I wanted to give my daughter to you in marriage, and make you my son, and you promised me. But you, by your own will and not mine, became my enemy; and it is now thirty years that you have waged war against me.’

And Arshag answered: ‘I have sinned against you, because I came and massacred and vanquished your enemies and I was expecting to be rewarded by you; but your enemies seduced me, made me fear for you and flee from you. And behold, as a servant I am in your hands; do whatever pleases you, kill me, because I, your servant, am guilty towards you, I am sentenced to death.’

But Shabouh, taking him by the arm, took him to where the floor was strewn with soil from Armenia; and reaching there, when Arshag stepped on the Armenian soil, he became very restive and proud, and changing the tone of his voice he said: ‘Keep away from me, villainous servant, who has taken possession of his masters; but I will take the revenge of my ancestors and of the murder of King Ardavan from you and your sons.’

And again he took him towards the Persian soil and Arshag would repent of what he had said, would kneel before Shabouh and regret his previous impertinence. And when they were again on Armenian soil, Arshag would become harsher in his expressions than before. And from morning till evening Shabouh tried him many times; because when they were on Armenian soil, Arshag would be imperious, while on Persian soil he would throw himself to the ground and repent.”

Land, according to this text and in our belief, means, first of all, that soil and water which inspires courage and provides strength to the king, who personifies the people. The real link between people and land is a physical link, the very existence of the people of that land, on its land. And that link is a link of force: A people feels strong when it irrigates its soil with the waters of its rivers.

After the first World War, when the survivors of the Armenian massacres went into exile and that part of their ancient country which was declared independent later became a Soviet Republic, Armenian patriotism faced a dilemma: Could that Republic be considered the Armenian homeland, the dream of which was the last ray of light in the eyes of every dying Armenian? Consequently, and considering the great difficulty of loving an Armenia where universalist Communism was oppressing all liberties, some thinkers came to advocate the idea of a “spiritual Armenia” by creating an abstract patriotism, based on the feeling of identity, the preservation of the national heritage, the language, the traditions and above all the dream of a free and united Armenia. It goes without saying that this was an Armenia existing in the heart of the Diaspora Armenians, without its base, the land. Today, after more than fifty years, every Armenian feels, like his ancient king, all the strength of his identity completely and really when his feet touch the land of his fathers.

Many different explanations can be given to this fact. Our first historian, Moses of Khoren, in the Vth century, gave an explanation which was a biblical one; after Noah landed on Mt. Ararat, God distributed the lands to his sons, Shem, Ham and Japhet. Shem is the ancestor of Abraham, Ham of the Babylonians, the peoples of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Ethiopia; and Japhet is the ancestor of the Armenians. When the same historian explains the origin of the princes, he finds out that one of the most influential families is of Jewish origin: the Bagratides, whose ancestor, "one of the leaders of the Hebrews brought in slavery by Nebuchadnezzar, named Shambah..." asked to be settled in Armenia. The Bagratides renewed the Armenian kingdom in the IXth century after the Arab invasions, and established a *modus vivendi* with the Arab khalifs until the collapse of the Kingdom under the Seleucid attacks. What is our historian trying to prove? That there is a parallel between the history of Abraham's settling in Canaan and that of the ancestor of the Armenians in Armenia. But in the latter case, the conception of Covenant is not explicitly mentioned; it is replaced by another assumption: that the strength to protect the land is divine. The idea which underlies all the acts of courage of the Armenian leaders is protected by the famous principle mentioned by this same historian: "The borders of a brave is his sword, he possesses the piece he cuts."

You may think, after what I have said thus far, that we have quite a militaristic and chauvinistic idea of the land. If this is your impression, I have to rephrase this idea and formulate it thus: if God has chosen for you a land, He will give you the strength to protect it. The word used in Armenian for 'chosen' or 'promised' means 'announced' and in the plural form: "Many times announced land" – the same word is used as in the Annunciation, implying the idea that what is impossible for men is made possible by the direct intervention of God. From that basic conception of strength and courage in defence of the land, is derived the second principle; namely, that the 'announced' land is the only ground on which you become a *nation*.

Permit me here to quote again from our history. When, in 301, St. Gregory the Illuminator converted Armenia to Christianity, he had a vision: he saw Christ himself descending to earth and, with a hammer striking the plain of Ararat and designing with lines of light the Cathedral of the Church of Armenia. Christ's voice told St. Gregory: "Here we will build my Church..." And till now, that Church is called Etchmiadzin, "the descent of the Only Begotten". That was the Temple par excellence. One hundred years later, the monk Mashtotz, the creator of the Armenian alphabet had, after years of peregrinations and trials, another vision: the hand of God wrote on the wall of his room the alphabet in letters of fire. With these two prophetic visions, the two saints gave to the people of Armenia the Temple and the Language – the two *poles* of its national culture. Thus, the three elements of the national Church were established: land, faith and culture, all of them by Divine vision – a land protected by Divine power, a faith inspired by miraculous intervention like the Covenant on Sinai, and a culture lightened by the hand of God. A famous Armenian poet describes it, saying:

“He who is innocent,
Full of love and unshakable faith,
Who looks to the future of the Armenians with living hope,
He sees that everlighted candle pending from the sky,
As if the clear eye of God is protecting us from the sky.”

In the popular tradition, an oil lamp burning the tears of St. Gregory, hangs eternally on Mt. Arakatz. This is the description of the new Covenant, visualized by a national Church.

There is no doubt that in the oldest Christian tradition, the Church is the people of God, the new Covenant is the Gospel and the land is the whole of mankind. But how would you reconcile the catholicity of the Church so described with the concept of a national Church or, more rightly, with national Churches? We touch here upon the discussion of individual, national and universal salvation. Here lies all the difference in ecclesiology between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. Surely, the disparity does not lie in the emphasis which Protestantism puts on individual salvation, Orthodoxy on national salvation and Catholicism on universal salvation; it is not a question of size but of the very nature of the Church itself.

The disparity can be better grasped in a historical perspective, than by theological argument. In the times of the Apostles and Martyrs, the Christian assembly was a praying and celebrating assembly, expecting the Kingdom of God to come. The celebrant was the bishop. The local church was not merely a part of the Body of Christ, but its totality, headed by the Lord Himself and all the Apostles. The life of each community had, as its centre, the celebration of the Eucharist. The celebration had to be presided over by one person, the image of the Lord; this presidency had belonged to Peter in Jerusalem. All the local churches, founded by the Apostles, were identical with the Church of Jerusalem; they were living a sacramental and eschatological life, according to the description of the Church in the first twelve chapters of the Acts. The Church of Jerusalem was not a church among others, but the sole Church, presided over by Peter, on whom Christ had “founded his Church” (Matt. XVI.18). The Church of Jerusalem was the “remnant” of Israel, announced by the prophets, the part of Israel who had received the Messiah; while the Church of the Gentiles, founded by Paul, would never be more than a “grafted” branch of the main olive tree (Rom. XI.17). Governed by the twelve Apostles, it was the anticipation of the future Jerusalem, the Holy City expected to descend from Heaven, as seen by the author of the Revelation: “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. XXI.4). The place of their reunion was Solomon’s porch, and they lived as part of the Jewish society, until Herod “killed James the brother of John with the sword” (Acts XII.2) and Peter was arrested, freed by miracle and “departed and went into another place” (Acts XII.17). James, “the brother of the Lord”, became the head of the community (Acts XV). The life of the “remnant of Israel”, the Church of Jerusalem, in direct contact with the Temple, collapsed in the catastrophe of 70.

With the mission of Paul among the Gentiles, the nature of the Church was deeply changed. All local churches became “churches of God”, in which there was no more distinction between “Jew and Greek”. There were even two parallel missions, like in Corinth, one headed by Peter, the Apostle of the circumcised, and the other by the Apostle of the Gentiles, Paul. From here, perhaps, arose the necessity to create a structure and an authority in the Christian assemblies of the 1st century, proposed by the Johannine tradition and realized in the creation of the “monarchic” episcopate. The Acts of the Apostles indicate a certain collegiality in the leadership of the Churches. They mention the *episcopoī* (supervisors), the *presbuteroī* (the elders) and the *proistamenoī* (presidents). St. Ignatius of Antioch, in the 1st century, writes clearly: “I beg you, take it to your heart to do everything in divine concord, under the chairmanship of the episcop, who replaces God, the presbyters who replace the synod of the Apostles, and the deacons to whom was entrusted the service of Jesus Christ.” The essential in the ecclesiology of St. Ignatius is that the local church is a complete entity in itself, having at her head the Lord Himself and *all* the Apostles. The “apostolic succession”, in his view, lies in the collegial ministry of the presbyters. The episcop represents the Father, source and unique centre of the ecclesial unity. In the Church of the first centuries, the episcopal ministry was conceived as a perpetuation of the ministry of Peter in Jerusalem. For St. Cyprian, bishop of Cartagus, the episcopate is “one”, because of the unity of the faith as expressed by Peter. Representing the Lord in the Christian assembly, the bishop is not only the sacrificator of the Eucharist, but also the teacher of the true faith.

Although administered by an organized hierarchy, the Christian society remains everywhere sacramental and community-minded. The Eucharist of Sunday, the *agapé*, was meant to be the image and anticipation of the Kingdom to come, and was the moment when the Church experienced the plenitude of its life. That was the moment of communion, but also the day of baptism, of education, of teaching, of the election of bishops and presbyters. It was also the time when the neighbouring bishops came to ordain the newly-elected bishops and to organize local meetings to solve the problems of the day. Even the most severe persecutions did not prevent Christians from participating in the dominical *agapé*. They insisted on this form of cult and refused to replace it with an individual prayer, because they saw in it the essence of their faith. Like the community of Jerusalem, “they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of the bread, and in prayers” (Acts II.42). That was the way the Church of the Apostles and the Martyrs practiced the law of the New Covenant.

Today, many of the theologians see in the meeting in Jerusalem between Paul and Peter the breaking-point in the two tendencies of the first Church: the Judaic traditionalist tendency of Peter and after him of James, “the brother of the Lord”, and Paul’s advocacy of the mission among the Gentiles; in other words, between the old and the new Israel. But Paul succeeded: the Gentiles were admitted to baptism in spite of the opposition by Jews – and Peter went to Rome, to receive martyrdom.

As long as the central Church was in Jerusalem, opposition to the admission of Gentiles to become 'people of God' by baptism came from the side of Jews, who wanted to be and to remain another fraternity within the bounds of Jewish society. It was when Herod executed James the brother of John and arrested Peter, that the Apostles felt that the same Jewish society in which they wanted to remain, was not only rejecting them, but was willing to destroy them. The Roman persecution started in Jerusalem, with the stoning of Stephen.

But there is a fact that the Church historians usually tend to ignore: which is that worship and sacraments, the calendar and celebrations in the Church kept the pure Judaic tradition of psalmodies and offices of the Second Temple. Until today, the Orthodox liturgy in general, but specially oriental traditions, are based on the psalms and the reading from the Bible. For those who know the role of liturgy in the life of Orthodoxy, it becomes clear that the sacramental and congregational life of the Church kept perhaps more of the old Jewish liturgical traditions than some synagogues.

Things changed, when from a persecuted community, the Christian faith became the official religion of the Emperors. From Constantine to Justinian, all the efforts of the Emperors were to create what was called the "Christian Empire". In building the "New Rome", Theodosius and Justinian followed the example of their predecessors by erecting monumental temples; but instead of dedicating them to Victory or Justice they called them "Holy Wisdom" (Ayia Sofia) and "Holy Peace" (Ayia Irene). By closing the Academy of Athens in 529, Justinian considered himself the head of a completely Christian state: the limits of his power coincided with the borders of the Church. The people of God was considered as united under the sceptre of a unique sovereign. There were no more a Church and a State which had to discuss and fix their relations, but there was one society governed by two parallel powers, the jurisdiction of the bishops and metropolitans coinciding with the borders of the provinces and their capitals. The edict of Justinian published in 535 states: "The greatest presents God gave to men are the Sacerdocy and the Empire, the Sacerdocy for the service of men, and the Empire for the order of human affairs." The ideal of the Emperors was to create a situation of "symphonia" between the two institutions. The "symphonia" did not always prevail and some Emperors, like Leo III, declared themselves, like the Caliphs, "basileus kai hieros" (king and priest).

This tendency of the Emperors, which lasted for centuries, to rule a Christian Empire, unified in faith, led to intolerance towards those Christians who did not accept the Chalcedonian Council, and towards Jews who did not accept Christ. This intolerance became even more devastating, when to dogma, the Emperors added the liturgy and tried to impose the Greek liturgy on all the Christian subjects of the Empire, followed by the appointment of Greek bishops and metropolitans to Christian communities in regions annexed by the Empire.

The reaction to this imperial (not yet imperialist) takeover of the Church came from inside and outside of the Empire. The movement of monasticism is seen by

the historians of Byzantium as a massive reaction against the pomp and the magnificence of the offices in the great cathedrals and a refuge for the theologians and mystics who wanted to preserve in the Church the pure spirit of the times of persecution, to save for the praying community life in the simple joy and peace of the agapé and the direct contact with God. Outside, the Churches surrounding the Empire became more and more independent and national.

After the collapse of the Empire, all the Churches of the Middle East became minorities ruled by Ottoman Sultans, according to the *Shari'a* understanding. The patriarchs became the spiritual and temporal heads of their "millet" (Turkish word used to define a religious minority). The Ottoman law never distinguished between nationality and religion and permitted Christians to organize their national life under the leadership of the Church, which became the refuge of all the heritage of the past.

During all the three main periods of its life, – in the catacombs, on the Imperial throne or in exile on its own land, – the Church continued to live its life in its liturgy. The people saw in the participation in the common prayer of the Church the sign of the participation in the Body of Christ. Far from being "ritualism", it was a congregational understanding of the message of the Gospel, together with the conviction that the new life, given by Christ, manifests itself and is communicated in the sacramental reality of the Christian cult.

Not only in its liturgical form, but in its essence too, the Church wanted to be the continuation of the Old Covenant. The rejoicing hymn, at the end of the baptism, says: "We are called New Israel in Christ, sharing in the Lord and becoming co-heirs with Christ". The New Israel participates, shares, inherits the Covenant of God with His people, not in the sense that it substitutes itself for the people of God, but *becomes* the adopted child of the same God, sharing with the genuine Son the rights of inheritance, the inheritance of the blessing.

The only right of inheritance which was never claimed by the Church was the right to the land of Canaan, because the Kingdom for the coming of which the Church prayed, "was not of this world".

The entire ritual of the sacraments underlies this idea of inheritance. In the baptism, the reading is from the Epistle to the Galatians IV:4-7; "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law to deliver from the law those who were subjected to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted sons. The proof that you are sons is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the spirit of His Son which cries out "Abba" (Father). You are no longer a slave but a son! And the fact that you are a son makes you heir, by God's design". (The Armenian text translates the last word by "promise" instead of design). During the immersion of the baptised, the priest concludes the invocation by saying: "(name), servant of God... accepts the adoption by the Heavenly Father to become co-heir of Christ...". In the prayer, the priest describes the baptism as "The honour of adoption".

Independently from the baptism, the Armenian Church has also preserved the Jewish tradition of presenting the new-born to the Temple on the fortieth day after his birth, “according to the law of Moses”. In the prayer of blessing, the priest says: “...make him entitled to have his share in the inheritance promised to your chosen people...”. During the marriage ceremony, in the main blessing, the priest addresses God in these words: “Now, as you have blessed the marriage of our forefathers and foremothers, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Asenath, Joachim and Hannah, Zacharias and Elizabeth, and as you blessed the marriage of your just people, like them bless this marriage of your servant...”. In the administration of the sacraments, the idea which underlies all the readings, the prayers and the humns is that Israel is the Son, New Israel is the adopted Son, the same ‘people of God, the Father’. The adoption is performed by the action of the Holy Spirit, symbolised by the Chrism, the Holy Oil, whose descent makes the recipient part of Christ, a member of His Body (the Church), and co-inheritor of the Kingdom. The priest performs the sacrament, “after the order of Melchisedek” (Heb. 7).

On all levels of its life and thinking, the early Church tried to be the continuation of the Covenant, rewritten by the blood of Christ. But the assumption eloquently expressed by St. John Chrysostoms and frequently quoted as the official attitude of the Orthodox Church, – that, because the Jews “killed the Lord... they have lost all hope”, – and the “the high privileges which the Jews lost, have been transferred to the Church, which thus has been substituted in their privileged position and has become the ‘people of God’,” is the result of a later development, as we indicated. This exclusion of the Jews from the New Covenant is a result of Byzantine Caesaro-papism. It is when the Church assumes its mission by the sword, that it becomes intolerant, repressive and exclusive. When the Church in the Occident decided to become Roman in its legal forms and the Church of Byzantium became “melkite” (the imperial Greek-speaking Church) the schisms started. The cracks in the Church appeared when the main concern of the Councils was centred on the problems of jurisdiction of patriarchs, metropolitans and bishops, especially when imperial authority was used to impose these jurisdictions. In the Occident, this tendency of the Roman Church to latinize the nations she evangelized and to keep them under the direct administration of Rome, not only by the appointment of bishops, but by the imposition of the Latin language, leading to the political submission of those countries, ended in the establishment of the Inquisition. In the Orient, the claim of the Byzantine Emperors to use their political power in the theological disputes in order to protect Orthodoxy, ended in the great schisms in Syria, Armenia and Egypt. All the non-Greeks separated themselves from Byzantium and became national Churches.

Today, the concept of a national Church needs not only an explanation, but also a justification. In the United States, the word used to define this characteristic of Eastern Church is “ethnicity” a tolerant expression, depicting a Russian, Roumanian, Greek or Armenian Church in terms of religious folklore, brought from far away and preserving an exotic flavour in their ways of worship. In ecumenical

circles, the word quite often used is “culture” which has a negative ring and is linked with some kind of religious chauvinism, preventing the Churches from coming out of their carcasses, from breaking the nostalgia of their past glory and the chains of their traditions, in order to enter the modern world of internationalism.

The nationalism of a Church is quite distinct from this caricature. It is the unifying link between *a* land, *a* people and *a* faith. It is the admission by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob of all the nations in His Kingdom. It is the New Covenant between God and the Gentiles. It is the identification of each nation with the New Israel. It is God’s election of Israel extended to each nation. It is the light of the biblical faith shed on the path of every nation. It is the redemption of a nation on its own land, in its own culture, towards its own vision. This is the way the Armenians understood the Bible. And the Bible made them a nation, because they saw in the land of Ararat the promised land, which, by its Christianization became their Holy Land.

Concerning the relationship between the Synagogue and the Church, in the East there was never any persecution of the Jews *qua* Jews, and never was there any suppression of the Synagogue, for theological reasons. Christians accepted the existence of the Synagogue as the centre of Jewish national and religious life and waited and prayed for the time when the Jews would also accept the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and would become another national Church in the huge family of oriental national Churches. This was at least, the attitude that we find in our history.

The fact of becoming national does not detach and isolate a Church from the communion of the whole Church which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. On the contrary, it creates a new link between that people and God, the national link. It becomes dangerous only when a Church, identifying itself with a culture or national heritage, pretends to impose on other Churches that culture and heritage. Permit me to cite again the example of our Church. Our entire history has been a continuous battle on two fronts, on the East with the Persians and later the Arabs, who always tried to attack our faith and let us negate our religion; and on the West, the Byzantines, who always wanted to change our national characteristics and turn us from “barbarians” to Greek-Christians.

On the first front the answer of the national hero of the Vth century, Vartan, was a clear formulation of our attitude:

“From this faith no-one can shake us, neither angels nor men; neither sword, nor water, nor any other horrid tortures. All our goods and possessions are in your hands, our bodies are before you; dispose of them as you will. If you leave us in our belief, we will, here on earth, choose no other master in your place, and in heaven, choose no other God in place of Jesus Christ, for there is no other God.”

The reason which made the resistance of the Armenians so radical was that the Christian faith had given them the assurance that God would never abandon them, because through baptism they had inherited His promise: I will be your God and

you will be my people. It was more than a promise: its fulfilment was seen in the creation of the alphabet, especially for the translation of the Bible. That translation had created the language and had been followed by the Golden Age of our literature. A rich liturgy had just filled the newly-built cruciform churches with the music of Armenian poetry, penetrating the hearts of each faithful with a sense of identity. All the festive celebrations of the year and the educational life in the schools were penetrated with a vision of redemption – the redemption of a nation called upon to be witness, among other nations, of Christ. Vartan, and all the other leaders who came after him, fought and died for the preservation of this national faith.

But on the other front, the battle was much more difficult, because it was fought on theological grounds and in the name of the right faith, Orthodoxy. It would be too long and unnecessary to describe here all the intricacies of the relations between the Byzantine Imperial Church and the Churches of Egypt, Syria and Armenia, to which we have already referred. All these sections of early Christianity participated in the first three ecumenical Councils, invited by the Emperors to fight Arianism and Nestorianism, in order to formulate a common creed acceptable to all the Churches. But when the Council of Chalcedon pretended to create a church structure governed by a central power, which was practically detained by the Emperor, and especially when the hellenization of the Church started to become more evident in Byzantium, the schism was inevitable, because it touched the most sensitive points of the Syrian, Coptic and Armenian Churches: the concept of the diocese as an independent unity, having the faith and the religious life in its plenitude, the principle of collegiality which was the basis of the local and ecumenical councils and the national nature of the local churches.

What nationalism really means in connection with the Church cannot be put into clear formulas. It has a historical, a theological and a political background. It has mainly to do with identity. I remember something which happened in New York a year ago. I was meeting with a prominent Jewish leader in the United States, and during the conversation, just inadvertently, I said ‘your country’ when referring to Israel. He immediately answered: “Please, my country is the United States. I am a United States citizen, I have been in the war, I have defended my country, I pay my taxes, I have a passport in my pocket which says that I am a United States citizen, etc. My link with Israel is that I try to help them because we have the same faith.” I said to him: “I like your remark, but let me tell you that I was born in Syria, my grandfather came from Turkey, I hold an Iranian passport though I was never in Iran, I belong to the Christian faith as I understand it, so where does my Armenianism come in?” It is most difficult to define what identity means for a man. Nationalism as understood in the case of a Church like ours is near to biblical nationalism. Firstly, the right to live on a certain parcel of land which is basic to any nationalism – and without it there is no nationalism, – has a divine dimension. Secondly, the land is the land of history, especially when a nation has suffered very much for its land. It becomes like a sanctuary to which a nation has an emotional link inspired by its faith, and its history. In our prayers we always say “God of our

Fathers”: the ancestry plays an important role. But the main thing is that on the land people created their own culture and their own Church, not in opposition to others but living a life parallel to others. And by others, I refer mostly to Jewish nationalism, which was brought to us with the Bible. In the Vth century the Armenians were fighting the Persians in order to preserve their faith, not their land, because the Persians had no intention of occupying their land, but wanted the Armenians to change their religion, so that they would no longer be linked by faith to Byzantium. Before the battle the General made a biblically-inspired speech referring to many biblical figures (Moses, the Maccabees), as fighters who fought for their religious nationality, their national religion. This is not to say that until Christ came, God was fighting on the side of the Jews and now he was fighting with the Armenians. It was not a question of substitution, but of transposition by way of similarity. That created Armenian nationalism. In order to defend one’s faith, one also has to defend his land, his culture, his alphabet, his language and the sanctuaries one has built, etc. This way of thinking created a pathos of nationalism, which entered the Church especially after the sovereignty over the land was lost. Then the Patriarchs became the national leaders and the Church became what the Synagogue was in exile, the centre of national aspirations, of national education and of the national spirit. It is very difficult for an eastern man to draw a neat distinction between nationalism and religion, or between the geographical and the spiritual country.

From this historical survey, we can draw some conclusion:

- a) The concept of ‘people of God’ was always understood as applied to the Church in its entirety as the Body of Christ.
- b) The ideas of adoption and inheritance were understood in the context of the Incarnation, the constant action of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental life and referred to the status of the Church as the vehicle of salvation.
- c) The principle of substitution of the old ‘people of God’ by the new one and the exclusion of the old is the result of the Caesaro-papism when it prevailed in some of the Churches.
- d) The concept of nationalism applied to a Church is biblically inspired and creates a parallelism between the Christian and Jewish attitudes today, as a basis for constructive dialogue.
- e) Anti-Jewish attitudes, persecutions and pogroms have always resulted from governmental decisions, when Emperors or Tsars wanted to be the “shadow of God” on earth and to unite the faith of all their subjects. The theological explanations and slogans like “deicide” were exploited by the civilian power to justify its actions and excite the people. In times of tolerance, the theologians laid the emphasis on similarities, parallels and roots, in depicting the Jewish tradition. The Orthodox Churches which are all national Churches today, except in areas where the “raison d’état” still prevails, see in the redemption of Israel that God has kept his promise, and pray to the Almighty that, similarly His Kingdom come for all nations.

Some Comments on the article “People, Land and Faith – An Armenian Orthodox Perspective

by Ze'ev W. Falk*

The above lecture of Archbishop Ajamian should, perhaps, serve as a starting-point for a dialogue between Jewry and the Armenian Church. From a Jewish perspective these statements made on the theological position of this Eastern part of Christianity, might be an opening towards the mutual understanding of different religions.

There is, for instance, a deep relation between the story of Arshag II of Armenia on the native soil and the biblical belief of the Holy Land. In II Kings 5:17, Naaman the Aramaean convert to the worship of Israel is said to have asked for soil of the Holy Land to be able to transplant the true form of worship to his home. The text does not say whether this device could have been applied to Israelites themselves living in the Diaspora.

Jewish tradition knows of the temple of Onias at Heliopolis, partially recognized by the sages of Judaea, at least for the purposes of Egyptian Jewry (Mishnah Menahot 13:10). Was there some ceremony of this kind at the dedication of this sanctuary?

Observant Jews in the Diaspora often asked for the transfer of their body for burial in the Holy Land, which gave rise to criticism by the rabbis that they should have moved during their lifetime (Bab. Talmud Ketubot IIIa). Another form of identification with the land was the custom of placing some earth of the Holy Land upon the body.

There was, however, to my knowledge, no Jewish attempt similar to that of the Armenian Church, viz: to transposing the ideas of the Temple, the Holy City of the

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Land of Israel to any other part of the world. True, nineteenth century Reform Judaism deleted references to Zion and Jerusalem from the prayer, but it did not create a new "promised land".

It is very interesting to see how this unique bond between people and the land in Israel served as a model for the relationship between Armenian Christians and their land. This is, indeed, in line with the view expressed already by Saadiyah Gaon in the tenth century that the chosenness of Israel is a phrase used by the Jews to understand themselves but not to be ascribed to God himself. From this point of view every nation is his own and chosen and all the parts of the world can become dedicated to his service.

Just as the relationship between Jewry and the land forms a model for Armenian Christianity, the latter may be taken as a further realization of the biblical idea. The self-understanding of the Armenian Church, therefore, is important both for Christian positions vis-a-vis Judaism and modern Israel and for the Jewish attitude towards Christianity and the other national cultures.

The most important point in the lecture, from a Jewish perspective, is the distinction between substitution of the Jewish people, a concept rejected by Archbishop Ajamian, and the "transposition", which in his view is the correct attitude. If Christians consider themselves "adopted children" sharing together with the natural descendants of Jacob-Israel in the spiritual inheritance of Abraham, there is a basis for the Messianic hope of world peace around Jerusalem.

From the Jewish point of view, as expressed by Maimonides and Menahem Ha-Me'iri Christianity has the merit of having brought part of the biblical message to the nations. This makes for a kind of division of labour, as described, for instance, by Rosenzweig and Buber. However, the condition sine qua non for such a mutual recognition is a definition of son and adopted son, such as expressed by the lecture.

It is, indeed, remarkable that an Armenian should be able to clarify this dimension of the Jewish-Christian relations. His people being persecuted like the Jews and being in a multifold sense in a minority position has come to understand the basis of coexistence with the powers of the day. Let us hope that this understanding between two minorities in this part of the world will spread also among the third partner in the area, the Moslem component, as well as among the other Eastern Churches.

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