

Boghos Levon Zekiyani

INTRODUCTORY SPEECH

Dear friends and colleagues,

No one can doubt that Armenian-Turkish, Turkish-Armenian relations have been, since the fatal date of 1915, all along the 20th century, and up to present, at a blind alley. There are certainly, in our days, more complicated, and even more tragic issues, as for instance, to mention only one, the Israel-Palestinian conflict. But it would be a blunder to look for consolation in such comparisons, and not to leave, on the contrary, any stone unturned to search for a way out from the dead end. This is the basic mood at the ground of the present initiative which gathers Armenian and Turkish scholars with the participation of colleagues of other ethnicities.

Paruyr Sevak, the Armenian poet, wrote once in a famous poetry: “when there is no more any help and solution, crazy people find a way out”. Let us hope to be ourselves those crazy people. Not forgetting, however, the warning of a popular proverb: “a crazy throws a stone in the well, but ten wise men cannot pull it out”. This means, I think, that the secret of a real achievement in life whereas superior values are in question stays somehow between craziness and wisdom: between the boldness and the fearless courage of the former, the circumspection and the balance of the latter.

A meeting of Armenian and Turkish scholars, with the eventual participation of colleagues of other ethnical backgrounds, could be concentrated, and not without valuable reasons favouring a similar choice, on the very problem of the awful tragedy of 1915, the Armenian genocide, which is, no doubt, the ‘original sin’ – to use a term of Christian theology – or the ‘black hole’ – to speak in terms of contemporary astronomy – at the origin of the cul-de-sac in which we are now. Such a choice has been already practiced in more than one similar meeting, as those, for instance, of Paris organized by CRDA, of Chicago, or of Müllheim, with some appreciable results as much as I can guess from information available through media.

Our present meeting moved, however, from a different inspiration as to the choice of its subject. This is to realize immediately from its title: “In History and Beyond History. Armenians and Turks: A Thousand Years of Relations”. Why such a choice? Without contesting at all the validity of other possible choices, it has been and is our conviction that whatever event can be understood, explained, and evaluated better, either in positive or in negative, when we are in possess of a more adequate vision of its historical roots, of its economical and ideological, or anyhow infra- and super-structural instances, and of its inner dynamics, that is when we consider it in the frame of a historical context, immediate or remote. That is why we thought it suitable to start with a global approach to the long history of Armenian-Turkish relations, even if – it is self evident – the genocide and related questions will still take the largest share in topics and debates. This is probably the first time that those millenary relations are being made object of a scholarly approach in a public conference which is not organized nor promoted by a State authority,

Such a contextualization may have, we hope, a positive influence for both Armenians and Turks for a more balanced vision of their mutual relationship since they are condemned by fate, whether they like it or not, to live side by side as neighbouring countries and peoples. The Armenians, horrified by the awful trauma of the genocide, often cannot see in all their history with the Turks but extortion, oppression, death and slaughter. The Turks, on the contrary, brain-washed by more than eight decades by a strongly nationalist and very efficient State propaganda, are often inclined to see their dominion over Armenians, as well as over other nations, as a kind of an earthly paradise for those peoples. Both attitudes need of correction, and it is our hope that this conference may offer a help on this way.

In this frame, it is our conviction, as a great philosopher, Soeren Kierkegaard said: it is not possible to live without looking towards future, but it is not possible to understand and construct the future without looking to the past. So I do not think that it will be possible to build between Turks and Armenians a net of normal, and peaceful relationship until there will not be a healing, a deep healing,

in the limits of human possibility, of the bleeding wound caused by the Genocide. Turkish negationism often provokes a growing obsession on the Armenians side. I think, both attitudes, negationism and obsession, cannot allow to look towards future with serenity. Hence the necessity of a turning-point in Armenian-Turkish relations, of a radical “*katharsis*”, of a way out from the vicious cycle of death that captures the heirs of both the perpetrators and the victims, both the deniers and the obsessed. In an interview, given in recent years, in 2000, the well-known French scholar, Alain Finkielkraut, searcher of ethnic issues, said: “If this negationsim continues so, Armenians will finish becoming crazy”. And addressing his Jewish compatriots said: “Think a moment what would it be with us, if we had still today, after more fifty years, to prove that we have been slaughtered intentionally?”.

A second important feature of this conference is that it is not a political meeting. This means: it has neither political targets nor are its participants bearer of any political investiture, even if some of them may have responsibilities within the State apparatus of their respective countries. Once again our choice is not inspired at all by any lack of esteem of political activity in its indefinitely varying forms. Quite the opposite! We know that political meetings between Armenians and Turks have taken and continue to take place at various levels, both official and not official. This is not the right place to express an evaluation about the results of those meetings. We also know that evaluations on this matter differ, and sometimes strongly enough, both among Turks and Armenians. I should rather briefly explain the main reason of our choice.

Firstly, we the promoters of this meeting are not politicians. This would be enough to explain the why of our choice. There are, however, other and, probably, deeper reasons.

Our main concern was to make this gathering and its participants independent, as much as possible, from political conditionings. This is not said absolutely in the utopian conviction that we may have a perfect independence from political or any other kind of conditionings both at the interior subjective level of our personal individuality as well as at the exterior objective level of an infinity of factors that challenge us. Independence of judgement is an ideal that each of us must try humbly to reach being altogether quite conscious that perfection is not of this world. Hence excluding a political target from this meeting, our hope is that scholarly reasons may prevail upon the political ones.

Another motivation determining our choice was the following. Hoping that this first step or round may have a satisfactory result, at least for the majority of the participants, we would like to make them a proposal: that we may form an initial core for a permanent group of scholarly research on various aspects of Armenian-Turkish history and relations. This would be, I think, of a topic interest in order to continue the dialogue initiated here. In this frame, it is also our intention to publish the papers presented to this colloquium not in the classical form of proceedings, but as parts of an ongoing research so to complete one the other and to be the first expression or volume of that research which must be developed and enriched with further discussion, gatherings, and contributions.

I would also like to add that there is today fortunately a greater number of serious and even excellent specialists dealing with the questions that interest our meeting both among Armenians, Turks and other ethnicities. The choice we made does not absolutely imply any underestimation of their value and achievements. It is simply due to limits of time and finance. We hope, however, as I have already hinted at, that this initial group may grow up and further occasions of meeting and collaboration may be offered to a larger group of scholars and intellectuals, and in general of people that have these issues at heart.

Finally, we did not and cannot forget the irresistible strength of ideas. Intellectuals have been the main inspirators of many revolutions, even if later fanatic militants sadly overwhelmed them. I am sure, Turkish and Armenian intellectuals in search for a reasonable solution will be able to inspire their respective societies and, even if this will need some time, to lead them towards reconciliation, and especially not to leave them to be overwhelmed by fanatical and extremist instances.

I started saying that we are at a blind alley. This is not, however, to say that no progress at all was made during all this time that separates us from that awful date. It is joyful and hopeful, on the contrary, to remark that some, even, substantial changes occurred in Armenian-Turkish relations in this last ten-fifteen years. To say it with one word: no one could even think or imagine of a similar

meeting, I do not say, thirty, but even fifteen years ago, not even perhaps only ten years ago. It would be crazy, in the worst sense of the word, not to realize this. Things are changing, some real progress has been made, even if still at an embryonic stage. We cannot have today a sufficiently optimistic view, but there is no reason, I think, to yield ourselves to a dark pessimism.

But beyond our conference, I would like, before putting an end to my words, to mention very shortly two facts, among others, which seem to me important evolutions towards a more promising future as hard as its way may be.

The first fact is that we have today some Turkish scholars who admit explicitly or in equivalent terms that the tragedy of the Armenian people in 1915-16 was a genocide in the very sense of the word, while such assertions, again, were not even thinkable more than fifteen years ago. For the time being, the number of these scholars is not great indeed, but we cannot ignore that it is growing up. There is at the same time a larger circle of Turkish intellectuals and writers who speak of the Armenians, of their history and culture, freeing themselves of those preventions and prejudices that have marked for decades what we can call the 'official' history and historiography of Turkey.

The second fact I would like to mention here, in this context, refers to the Armenians. Namely, the newly independent Armenian Republic, through its various governments, has never made reference, to the best of my knowledge, as a juridical and political milestone, to the Treaty of Sèvres which has been, on the contrary, along decades the leit-motive of Armenian propaganda in diaspora.

Mentioning these facts I only wanted to make a preliminary exemplification, but we could add other similar examples of something that changes, even if with very slow rhythms and still hesitating steps.

Dear friends and colleagues, we have indeed a hard way to go. I am trustful, however, in the Poet's message: "*Quid durius saxo, quid mollius aqua? Dura tamen saxa, molli cavantur aqua /* What harder than a rock, what softer than water? But the hardest rocks are dug by the soft water".

Let our collaboration, here and in the future, be soft like the water and stronger than the rocks.

