

The religious Quarrels of the 14th century
preluding to the subsequent Divisions
and ecclesiological Status of the armenian Church*
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The 14th century is, for more than one reason, a decisive period for the later history of the Armenian Church and, especially, for the development of the various tendencies that will determine the formation of the main ecclesiological components of Armenian Christianity. Not in the sense that those divisions as such were already actually given during the period in consideration — this will happen only much later —, but in the sense that the premisses which lead to the successive developments were already clearly announced.

The 14th century marks the period sealing the displacement of the reference axis for the definition of the self-image of the Armenian Church from Byzantium to Rome. The consciousness of her own identity in the mid of her many vicissitudes through the centuries, in the multiple dimensions of doctrinal orthodoxy as well as of liturgical and canonical specificity, had, for the Armenian Church till the end of the 12th century, in Byzantine Orthodoxy and, especially, in Byzantine Chalcedonism the main referents to be measured with. From the 14th century onwards the main, often unique, referent will be on the contrary the Roman Church. The 13th century represents in this respect a transition period, already announced by certain trends appearing in the course of this century, especially in some decades of it.

The displacement of the reference axis from Byzantium to Rome implied of course something substantially new in the contents of the diatribe: the primacy of jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome in conformity with the ecclesiology typical of the Roman Church.

The belief in the Papal primacy is although, in theory, a question belonging to the theological and, more specifically, to the dogmatic sphere, it was and is nonetheless, by its very nature, charged with a strongly juridical valency concerning the constitution itself of the ecclesiastical community. Hence the tendency towards an overstressed polarization of the ecclesiastical power. A result of this polarization will be the formation of a complete bicephaly within the Armenian Christianity with the creation, in 1742, of a distinct Armenian Catholic Hierarchy. Something like that had not occurred as a normal status even in the most turbulent periods of the Chalcedonian debates but for a very short period between the 6th and the 7th centuries.

Thus the purpose of this paper is that of deciphering the main moments and factors of the above mentioned evolution, in its initial phases, in order to get a key of lecture, historical and theological at once, of the effects that the evolution in question could produce at brief and long terms.

I. Decisive factors in the relations between the Armenian and the Roman Churches

a. Political circumstances and the ascent of latinophile Catholicism

The Cilician era not only announces and draws, from many a point of view, what will form the destiny of Armenian Christianity in its hierarchical and ecclesiastical ramifications, but it also constitutes the epoch in which the essential elements determining the ‘Armenian Question’ appear on the horizon. Reasonably enough, although in the mid of some rather inconsistent proposals, Joseph Laurent traced back the origins of the Armenian Question to the age of the Crusaders.

In fact, from then onwards Armenia and the Armenians will find themselves at the heart of the dialectics that will draw the new geodetics redefining at one time both the Armenian geopolitics and the collective political imagery of the Armenians as well. The following are the main trends of this evolution:

- 1) the displacement of the Western axis of the Armenian geopolitics from Byzantium to Europe, more precisely to the Western Europe (a return almost, however under different modalities, to the pre-Byzantine era when the Western referent for Armenia was Rome, the Roman Empire);
- 2) the start for the formation, in relation to Armenia, of a Western Islamic axis which will be somehow integrated — certainly with many ambiguities but, nonetheless, in an actual and effective way — into the political reality of the European West. This axis will be first represented by the Seljukid Sultanate of Konya and by the Ottoman Empire later. As to their integration into the West and the ambiguities of the Western policy in their regards, let it be enough to recall the Crusaders' exploitation of the Seljukids in an anti-

Byzantine function, or François I's alliance with the Ottomans, until the Turco-Germanic alliance, resulted in a disaster for the Armenians, just on the eve of the 1st World War;

3) the outline of a strong Armenian messianism, all oriented towards the Christian Roman West, which will represent the red thread of the Armenian movements of liberation through the centuries.

Such a politico-ideological context offers the frame within which the relations of the Armenians with the Roman Church will develop during the Cilician period. Prepared during the second half of the 11th century by the highly probable direct relations of the Catholicos Grigor Vrkayasêr with the Roman Church, those relations blossom, in this initial phase under the Catholicosate of Grigoris III Pahlawuni, rather friendly and without peremptory pretensions on both sides.

The Pontifical documents, addressed to the Armenians, bear in this period accents rather respectful and warm. They only express some remarks on particular points without hiding their authors' wish to see them 'corrected', but all in an accurately subtle style, different enough from the usual imperative tones that will prevail in the 14th century. These earlier documents invite the Armenians to revise some of their traditions which, supposedly, could raise 'scandal'. No question in any case of errors, heresies, abjuration or conversion, as the case will be with crescent emphasis from the 13th-14th centuries onwards. No explicit reference, in particular, to the non-Chalcedonian or, rather, pre-Chalcedonian orientation of the Armenian Church. There is, on the contrary, a clear approbation by Gregory VII of the orthodoxy of the Armenian creed as professed by the official delegates in Rome.

This attitude of the Pontifical documents of the 11th and 12th centuries, strange perhaps at a first glance at the light of the successive developments, should not be attributed, we believe, simply to reasons of an initial tact and moderation. An explanation for it should rather be sought in that the dogmatic creed and, especially, the christological faith of the Armenian Church had nothing substantially wrong or 'heretical' to "offend pious ears".

Hence the Romans, who probably had no clear idea, in these earlier stages of mutual relations, about the historical back-ground of the theological and terminological developments in the Armenian Church, hearing simply her doctrinal profession did not perceive in that anything unorthodox or scandalous. The scenery will change in proportion of the growing historical information that the Romans will progressively get on the Armenian Church. Unfortunately they too, as the Byzantines before them, will not be able to distinguish between substantial orthodoxy and its various possible dogmatic formulations. Pointing out the lack of such a distinction we do not think to exceed by anachronism. That distinction was in fact clearly proposed and plainly formulated, in the 2nd half of the 12th century, by St. Nersês Šnorhali during his negotiations with the Byzantines in view of the union of the two Churches.

In any case, even in this initial phase in which the Roman Church does not yet express grave doctrinal reserves on the account of the Armenian Church, she does not hide nevertheless her firm will to bring her partner to accept some liturgical and canonical criteria which she considered as necessary for ecclesiastical communion or, at least, to avoid 'scandal'. It is, for instance, moved by this latter motivation that Gregory VII asks the Armenians to suppress from the chant of Trisagion the words "*qui crucifixus es pro nobis*", without thinking, of course, of the great scandal that the adjunction of "*Filioque*" had caused in the Byzantine East.

The politico-ideological context of the Armenian Principdom and Kingdom of Cilicia, that we have concisely described, together with the growing demands and pretensions of the Holy Tiara, had as a result the development, especially in the ranks of the high Armenian clergy, of large strata not only of sympathisants of the Roman Church, but also of 'latinophiles' or 'romanophiles' even in the most intense sense that the term '-phily' may express. This tendency will reach the top, both amid the clergy and the palatine aristocracy as well, in the last decades of the 13th century, having in the persons of King Het'um II (1289-1293, 1299-1301) and of the Catholicos Grigor VII Anawarzec' i (1293-1307) its highest representatives.

b. *The movement of the 'Fratres Unitores'*

The history of the *Fratres Unitores* is one of the best known and best studied chapters of the Armenian Church and of her relations with the Catholic West, even if there still is an unimaginable volume of archive

material uninvestigated.

However different the evaluations of those Brothers' missionary activity may be, not only according to the different standpoints of the researchers, but also according to the various dimensions and effects of that activity itself, there can be no doubt that it belongs to the hardest kernel of the most latinizing conception of mission, of the ideology of a totalitarian Catholicism in conformity with the Papacy's world vision in the Late Middle Ages and plainly expressed in Innocent III's ideal of one faith and one kingdom.

The zeal for a catholic unity based on this extremely latinizing conception will find its most inebriating application in the linguistic phenomenon known as 'latinizing Armenian' (*latinaban hayerên/ladinapan ha3yren*), not proposed by the Unitors themselves, but in full conformity and continuity with their ideology. The *latinaban hayerên* will have as an aim and a rule those of modeling the Armenian language, as closely as possible, on the norms and peculiarities of Latin. Inspired by the conviction of the superiority of the latter as an unequable expression of catholicity, the creation of the latinizing Armenian was also due to the function attributed to Latin as a supreme gage of theological orthodoxy.

The official establishment in Armenia, in the Thirties of the 14th century, of the Order of the *Fratres Unitores* — an emanation of the *Fratres Peregrinantes*, this latter being in its turn an emanation of the *Fratres Praedicatores*, that is the Dominicans — was itself prepared by the progressive penetration into Armenia of the mendicant Orders, and especially, at the beginnings, of Franciscans. The most excellent result of this penetration was the dressing of the Franciscan frock by Het' um II (1293), who will abdicate to the throne for the Franciscan ideal. Subsequently the Unitors will have a rather quick diffusion and will take root in many regions of Armenia, especially in the East. The immense effort that their adversaries had to deploy to face their progress gives better the idea of their force of grip.

II. The great Armenian Councils of the 14th century

Four Councils dominate the ecclesiastical scenery of Armenia in the 14th century: the three Councils of Sis (1307, 1342, 1361) and the Council of Adana (1316).

These Councils represent, in their doctrinal and disciplinary positions, the main ecclesiastical orientations characterizing the life of the Armenian Church.

The first two Councils of 1307 and 1316, inspired by the late Catholicos Grigor Anawarzec' i, whose ecclesiastical policy and basic principles were adopted there, supported by royal connivence, marked the prevalence not only of the adherence to ecclesiastical communion with Rome, but also of the tendencies to a ritual latinization, more or less excessive. A complex of ecclesial inferiority, of which Anawarzec' i seems to have suffered, underlies to the statements of these Councils.

The Council of Sis of 1342 already presents, in this respect, a different proceeding. The Catholicos Mxit' ar Gr nerc' i (1341-1355), although not a rival of the Latins, does not appear in any case in the functions of a servant or of a fanatic of Latinity, as appeared on the contrary to be his predecessor Anawarzec' i. Mxit' ar dares to protest in a humble, but vigorous way, against the one hundred and seventeen errors wrongly attributed to the Armenians at the Papal Court. He does not break altogether his relations with the Roman Church nor does he contest to her the right to question the Armenians. However, Mxit' ar does not dare to restore the older traditions typical of the Armenian Church. Perhaps would he liked to do so. Yet we have no evidence of such an attempt. Mxit' ar appears as a man of mediation, even of wise compromise in some regards. If he is united with Rome, he is not subjugated by Rome; if he is decided enough to defend the orthodoxy of his Church, he is not it enough to restore the most typical traditions disavowed by the two preceding Councils as his successor Mesrop I will on the contrary do some years later.

The last Council of Sis in the 14th century marks, in its turn, a turning point. It restores the practice of the old Armenian traditions. The Catholicos Mesrop I Artazec' i (1359 -1372), who convokes it because of the troubles caused by the decisions of the preceding Councils, orders the restoration of the Armenian liturgical traditions. He too does not break with the Latins, he even cultivates relations with them, but at the same time he delimits the space and the requirements of ecclesiastical communion, of rite, of traditions proper to each Church, of the ethnic, ecclesiastical, and cultural identity.

At this point a clarification is necessary in order to proceed further to a conclusion. Speaking in this paper of opening to Rome, of communion or even of union with Rome, we have used these terms in a rather

historical than theological or dogmatic sense. In other words, we did not put the question, how those representatives of the Armenian Church of an open attitude towards Rome or, even, disposed to stay in communion with it, actually conceived, on the ecclesiological ground, the meaning of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome.

We know that this function has been subject in the course of the centuries to different conceptions as to the juridical contents and the concrete forms of its exercise, even within the Roman Church herself. What a distance, for example, between the primacy theories of an Innocent III or, even, of a Pius IX and those underlying the ecclesiology elaborated by the Vatican II!

We also know that a certain primacy of 'honour', which is not in any case an empty word, but has a historical density, was often, and is also to-day, recognized to the Bishop of Rome by the Orthodox tradition.

Hence two grounds of problems are to be distinguished: *a)* a first, historical, ground concerning the historical relations and the attitudes of estimation, friendship, peace towards and with the Roman Church; *b)* a second, theological, ground concerning the ecclesiological meaning and interpretation of these attitudes according to the documented view and prospects of their protagonists.

There is no a priori reason to suppose that all Christians who had or tried to have evangelically peaceful relations with Gregory VII or Boniface VIII shared without reserves their ecclesiology, centred on an extremely strong affirmation of the Papal primacy. We ought, on the contrary, to ascertain case by case the typology of the underlying ecclesiology and, especially, of its conception of primacy.

If the methodology adopted by some people, of an unauthorized jump from the historical to the theological ground or simply of forgetting their respective distinction, sins for an excess of theological rationalization, not of a lesser methodological importance would be to avoid another temptation which often makes itself feel: that of ignoring or canceling the theological reason in favour of a purely historicist interpretation, namely reducing to expressions of mere politeness or even of political opportunity any affirmation recognizing a special function, whatever it may be, to the Bishop of Rome.

Conclusions

We think that four basic tendencies appear, within the Armenian Church, from the historical panorama outlined above:

a) We find first a latinophile current which understands the communion and union with the Roman See in a rather radical way. The more or less exceeding conformation to the customs and habitudes of the Roman Church is seen by this current as an indispensable, or almost, condition for ecclesiastical communion. The Catholicos Anawarzec`i can be considered as a prestigious representative of this tendency.

b) A second group is represented by those who lead to its extreme and most servile consequences the latinophile tendency: that of adopting the Latin rite. However these two groups may seem close to each other, there is between them an important difference in the very conception of Church unity, which was exactly observed also by contemporaries, as for instance the Unitor Mxit`ar Aparanec`i, who is probably the first one trying to make a classification of ecclesiological typologies within Armenian Christianity.

c) Both of these latinophile currents were much strongly contrasted by those who did not admit any kind of hierarchic communion with Rome. These were the partisans of the complete autocephaly of the Armenian Church. They are often called 'Nationalist' or simply 'National' not only for their zeal to keep pure the traditions and so to save the identity of their Church, but also because they identified the space of a major unity in the Church with a nation's identity and spiritual frontiers, which in the specific case were those of the Armenian nation.

Although this party had its stronghold in Eastern Armenia, it was remarkably present also in Cilicia and even in some circles of the royal Court. But no one of the four Cilician Councils of the 14th century is directly dominated by this party. Nonetheless it will be able to conditionate, by its very hard reaction following the Council of Sis in 1307, the attitude of the Council of Sis of 1361. It was not yet a complete victory. This will arrive, in our opinion, but during the 18th century with the definitive prevalence, over all the Sees of the Armenian Hierarchy, of the tendency that finishes with Rome. But the Council of Sis of 1361 marks already a turning point which clearly puts an end, in the ranks of the high Armenian Clergy, to

all velleities of latinization.

d) A fourth current, finally, appears from the above described panorama with less clear exterior outlines and more accentuated variants at its interior in comparison with the former groups: the current of those who believed in the perfect orthodoxy of the Armenian Church and in the full legitimacy of her rites and traditions, but did not exclude a dialogue, even communion and union with Rome. Communion, whose ecclesiological contents and theological meaning are to be ascertained and defined, as we have already said, case by case. Remaining in the 14th century we can indicate the Catholicoi Mxit' ar I and Mesrop I, each of them in his own way, as representatives of this tendency. This was inspired, we believe, in final analysis, by the great ecumenical lesson, elaborated into a deep and original theology, of those brightest luminaries of the Armenian Church in the 12th century who were both Nersês, Š norhali and Lambronac' i. They distinguish themselves as two solitary peaks amid all Medieval Christianity for their ecumenicity *avant-lettre* both in practice and also in theory overwhelming the limits of time and country.

These four main currents, that we have picked out in the Armenian Church of the 14th century, will cross the following centuries with more or less of strength, undergoing deeper or lesser adaptations, transformations and having different destinies.

The strictly Unitarian current (group *b*) will not survive to the 18th century, certainly for its radically denationalizing character which lead even to mass defections from the Christian faith, as the case was with the latinized Armenians of Nakhitchevan (Naxij? evan/Naqi]ywan, Nakhtchavan, Naxivan). The other three groups will flow into the three main ecclesiological typologies of the 18th and 19th centuries, although as to the hierarchic ecclesiological status they belong to two basic formations existing within the Armenian Christianity from the 18th century onwards. We can describe as follows these three main ecclesiological typologies rooted in the heritage of the late Middle Ages:

a) the autocephalist typology, going back to the 'national' wing and incarnated in the autocephal Armenian Church, which will largely prevail amid the Armenian people and for whose official denomination the epithet 'Apostolic' will be current since the 19th century; b) the Uniatist typology (to be carefully distinguished from the Unitarian typology). This current, going back to the moderately latinophile trends of the earlier centuries, will express itself in the 18th century in the creation of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate; c) the Mxit' arean or Mekhitarian typology, represented by Abbot Mxit' ar (Mekhitar) of Sebastia, founder of the Monastic Order of the Mekhitarist Fathers. This typology takes its stand in the ideal and historical continuity of all those tendencies that thought possible and wished to conciliate opening to Rome with a non compromising fidelity to the traditions, both liturgical, theological and canonical, of the Armenian Church.

The Mekhitarian 'ideology' gathered sympathisants, in some decades numerous enough, also outside of the Mekhitarist circles. Let it be enough to mention here the great movements for Union in Constantinople between the years 1809 and 1820, concertingly promoted by the Mekhitarists of Venice and their sympathisants within the Apostolic Church. Movements that failed because of the strong pressions, from both sides, of the Uniatists and of the Autocephalists.

Our final vow can be but to wish that all these currents and groups may endly meet in a dialogue, frank and sincere, also independently from the theological results that eventually and hopefully may be reached, refinding one another, without losing themselves one in the other, in the basic unity of their unique faith in Christ — true man and true God — , of their common and rich religious and cultural heritage, and of their national identity so intimately linked with their Christian history.

The history of Armenian Christianity, and of all Christianity as well, troubled by divisions which no theological reason could sufficiently explain without the concurrence of completely contingent factors of power, interest and intrigue, may finally show the strength of a fatidical lesson, so to spare for the Churches and for the whole mankind as well the tragedy of new wars of religion, no matter if faught with a blooded sword eighther with empoisoned words or, even worse, with not wordly espressed empoisoned feelings.