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PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE “FESTAL HOMILIES”

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Abstract: Throughout its centuries-long development, philosophy has made a significant contribution to the formation of the spiritual culture and intellectual tradition of the Armenian people. The adoption of Christianity in Armenia and the invention of the Armenian alphabet greatly facilitated the development of Armenian national philosophical thought. The earliest philosophical orientation to take shape within this tradition was Christian apologetics. Representatives of Armenian apologetic philosophy and theology acted as enlighteners and organizers of educational life, defending and substantiating the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Armenian Christian apologists, while critically engaging with the materialistic and dualistic cosmological theories of ancient philosophy that denied the doctrine of creation, produced theological and philosophical works consistent with the dogmatic framework of the Armenian Church, in which the principle of monotheism was systematically articulated. In the process of substantiating Christian doctrinal positions, Armenian apologists frequently drew upon philosophical reasoning and scientific knowledge. A distinctive feature of Armenian Christian apologetics lies in the fact that theology and philosophy, faith and reason, were not perceived as mutually opposing domains but rather as components of a unified intellectual system characterized by internal coherence and interdependence.

The article referred to the literature St. Gregory the Illuminator named extant work, which affected the further development of Christian and philosophical thought.

Keywords: “Festal Homilies”, St. Gregory the Illuminator, Armenian Christian philosophy, philosophical perspectives, Christian principles, homiletic tradition, moral-didactic and apologetic discourse.

In the early Christian period, the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and Christian principles

was primarily carried out through homilies and sermons. Sermons or homilies, as forms of

living speech, were delivered in churches. The homilies of prominent ecclesiastical figures, delivered on various occasions and recorded either by the authors themselves or by scribes, were subsequently copied and disseminated, eventually becoming part of the collective spiritual heritage of the believing people. Homiletic literature experienced particularly intensive development during the first to the fourth centuries, when there was an urgent need to explicate the Holy Scriptures and Christian revelation. The homilies of the Fathers and Archpriests of the Universal Church translated for this purpose, become an important stimulus for similar speeches to be written or recorded during oral sermons in the Armenian reality, such as the famous “Festal Homilies” by Gregory the Illuminator and, of course, speeches written by others in later centuries.

Among the works transmitted under the name of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the Festal Homilies represent a homiletic text that reflects Christian legal, religious-philosophical, moral, aesthetic, and other normative and ideological principles expressed through rules and exhortations. The collection may be viewed as a coherent and systematically organized source that offers valuable insight into the Christian legal tradition, religious thought, philosophical concepts, and moral framework characteristic of its historical context.

In the end of the 3rd century Christianity had a large number of followers. How it was seen in Armenian historiography, as a monotheistic religion it was important to strengthen the centripetal monarchy and unite Armenian ministers around Arshakuni king and therefore it has promoted to the most important preconditions of national agreement, unity and solidarity. Besides, Christianity gave an opportunity to resist with national unity the external invaders and protect national independence and autonomy. Assessing correctly the situation, in 301 Tiridates III (287-330) by the initiative of Gregory the Illuminator declared Christianity as a state religion in Armenia. Gregory the Illuminatore could show that

only due to Christianity it was possible to ensure the further history of Armenian people. He also explained the philosophical-anthropological bases of that religion, contrasting that with the visible simplicity of polytheism.

However, the Festal Homilies, which occupy a distinctive place within the Armenian manuscript heritage, have traditionally been ascribed to St. Gregory the Illuminator, although this attribution has been critically reassessed since the nineteenth century. Although a number of studies have been conducted with the aim of clarifying the authorship of the homilies, no definitive conclusions have been reached. On the contrary, several possible hypotheses of authorship have been proposed, and the arguments presented by other researchers have been ignored by most researchers, which has generated additional questions (Zarbhanalyan, 1932, pp. 196-199, Bishop Pogharian, 1971, pp. 2-3, Khachikyan, 1973, p. 30, Kyoseyan, 2018, p. 12).

The authorship of the homilies has traditionally been ascribed to St. Gregory the Illuminator, because the texts have been preserved under his name. Moreover, the name of St. Gregory the Illuminator appears not only in the title of the entire collection but also individually in the heading of each preserved homily. It is likely, however, that the appearance of St. Gregory the Illuminator's name in the manuscripts represents a later addition, made with the intention of lending the text greater authority (Abeghyan, 1968, p. 138, Martirosyan, 1982, p. 113). This view is further supported by Abraham Terian's observation that the preserved titles of the homilies often do not correspond to their actual content. Consequently, attributing authorship solely on the basis of these titles may be considered inappropriate. A. Terian, who recently conducted the most extensive study of the authorship of the homilies, presented it in the preface to his English translation of “Festal Homilies,” published as a volume in the “The Fathers of the Church” series of the Catholic University of America (Terian, 2021, 143 vol.). While A. Terian's study offers a valuable comparison with earlier research, the identity of the homilies' author remains uncertain (Sahakyan, 2022, p. 184). Indeed, this does not in any way lessen the value of the collection, which has served for centuries as one of the primary theological and religious-philosophical works within the Armenian Apostolic Church.

However, the current study does not address the question of the authorship of the work; rather, it focuses on the philosophical perspectives reflected in the homilies.

The Festal Homilies consist of 23 (XIII) substantive and instructive sermons, each dedicated to either doctrinal or moral subjects (Ter-Mikelian, 1894, p. 8). In addition to their religious content, the homilies engage with other important matters, aiming to direct the individual toward self-consciousness, comprehension of the natural world, and cosmological understanding.

St. Gregory the Illuminator, to whom these homilies are traditionally attributed, as the spiritual leader of the Armenian nation and the first Catholicos of all Armenians (301–325), utilized the preaching of these sermons during the formative period of Armenian Christianity to secure and strengthen the relationships between the Church, the state, and the people, while simultaneously regulating the implementation and practice of moral and didactic norms.

The adoption of Christianity as the state religion in Armenia in 301 CE had already played a decisive role in defining the cultural and value-based orientation of Armenian society. The change in the religious system was not accidental and was determined not only by the spiritual and cultural development patterns of Armenian society but also by the demands of ethnic self-preservation. The adoption of Christianity thereafter became essential for organizing the spiritual and cultural life of Armenian society in accordance with the principles, symbols, and fundamental concepts of the new faith. Within the Christian doctrinal framework, a model for the organization of social and political life emerged, emphasizing that internal social and state relations, as well as their interactions, be conducted according to the principles of Christian ethical foundations.

Philosophically, the Festal Homilies represent a work of unique importance as one of the earliest literary works of Christian philosophy in ancient Armenia, embodying the ideological and conceptual framework of Armenian society during that era.

The worldview of the author of the Festal Homilies is reflective of the social, cultural, and historical realities of his time. He undertook a deliberately planned effort to strengthen the ideological foundations of Christianity. A civilization

rooted in the often harsh principles of the pagan world, where physical strength and force were valued over moral and spiritual virtues, was naturally unsustainable, as the morality founded upon these principles was unstable and easily perishable.

Within Christian moral thought, limitless egocentrism was to be controlled through the guidance of the commandments, homilies, and moral instructions, so that every member of society would occupy a position of equal moral and legal standing. In his works, he aimed to achieve two significant goals. The first was to establish the foundational principles of Christianity and to offer a philosophical exegesis of these doctrines. Here, the author’s aspiration as a Christian thinker is evident: to philosophically interpret religious doctrines, to substantiate them with rational arguments, and to render them acceptable to reason. The second aim of his work was to defend Christian doctrine, reinforcing the monotheistic faith in opposition to diverse pagan conceptions.

The principal philosophical viewpoints in the Festal Homilies can be analyzed and distinguished along several thematic lines

- The author expresses his philosophical, moral, and ideological positions and perspectives.
- Individuals are the agents of their own choices and the bearers of responsibility for their actions.
- An individual’s life depends not only on external forces—such as fortune and environmental circumstances—but also on the moral choices they make.
- The primacy of moral values over political and personal interests.
- History is presented as a chain of lessons and the past as a teacher for both the present and the future.

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that the homilies are not merely repetitive speech forms or frequently delivered sermons; rather, they embody profound philosophical content and possess a moralizing character. The homilies express values such as justice, loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice. Overall, they serve as an instrument for the dissemination of philosophical and ethical concepts. Thus, the power of speech is perceived as an instrument of influence, and on certain occasions as a force that shapes reality.

The Festal Homilies and the author played an

exceptionally important role in the foundations of Armenian philosophy. Armenian historians consistently testify to the immense role of the Festal Homilies collection in the history of the Armenian Church. The creation of homiletic works within the Armenian context ensured their subsequent development in ecclesiastical literature. It represented a new achievement in theological and philosophical thought, intended to unite the people around authentic Christian and national-ecclesiastical values while fostering a focus on the preservation of the nation.

Indeed, the Festal Homilies is one of the first works of Armenian philosophical and religious apologetic literature. The basic concept and principles of the Bible and Christian worldview are in depth presented in these Homilies. The Festal Homilies has become the oldest provenance after the Bible where the doctrine of Armenian Apostolic Church and its moral principles are brought together. The substantive features of these work is highlighted and their exceptional significance in Armenian bibliography is emphasized in the frames of the article. It is also proven that in the 5th century, before the creation of Armenian bibliography and writing, work containing instructive, moral and educational homilies and sermons were already known.

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