

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTIC OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Abstract

The article presents the cultural characteristic of early Christianity in Armenia. In the end of the 3rd century Christianity had a large number of followers. 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 Illuminator 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.

The adoption of Christianity was a powerful twist in country's external and internal policy but it rejected by the religious aspect the faith of the centuries, the pagan culture and literature. But nevertheless, remained only pre-Christian spiritual and cultural values which were created by people.

Christianity created its culture, literature, school. In Armenia constructed Christian churches, next to them were opened Christian churches in Greek and Assyrian languages.

In the history of the Christian culture 4th and 5th centuries historical situations were the most important factors for the development of Early Medieval Armenian art and ecclesiastical literature and oriented its essence and uniqueness giving impetus to the creation of high bibliographic monuments.

Keywords: St. Gregory the Illuminator, Tiridates III, Constantine the Great, Constantinople, Mesrop Mashtots, Armenian alphabet, Christianity, polytheism, historiography, ideology, religion, Christian churches, theology, natural science, rhetoric, local culture, cultural characteristic, philosophical-anthropological, socio-political, historian's testimony, ecclesiastical literature, bibliographic monuments.

In the end of the 3rd century Christianity had a large number of followers (Hacuni, 1927, p. 574). 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 (History of Armenian

People, 1982, pp. 71-72; Gevorgyan, 2001, p. 15) 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) (Manandyan, 1978, p. 131) 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. In declaration of Christianity in Armenia it is important to take into account a delicate political circumstance – the Peace Treaty between Rome and Persia in 298, Mubin. The fact is that Armenia was a bone of contention between two superpowers and according to that contract Armenia was recognized in borders of 66 BC, the Armenian king was committed to promote peace accepting a crown from Rome but maintaining neutrality. Judging by further events they probably have forced the same to Virq and Aghvanq and the general responsible of the solution became Tiridates III. It is clear that the religious situation of the end of the 3rd century could not promote to the neutrality policy, because Tiridates III even though had an obvious neutral position anyway Persia would think that in Armenia dominated Greco-Roman pagan cults and Rome would see that Armenia was predominantly Zoroastrian. In these conditions, the Armenian king as a statesman and diplomat had to add religious neutrality to the military-political and economic neutrality.

And the religion, which wasn't officially accepted either in Rome or in Persia but which had an informal registration as a community form in both countries and at the same time had a sufficient distribution in Armenia and could serve as a social support for a new

religious upheaval, it was Christianity. In the name of his political and religious neutrality, Tiridates III leaned against Christianity declaring it as a state religion, of course regardless of his personal religious sympathies or antipathies. In this case, the king prefers the independent statehood interest and not personal preference and it is better if both coincide¹. And indeed, the policy of religious neutrality was spread in Virq and Aghvanq and it gave its beneficent results in development of the country, till 40-year-old peace ended the formalization of Christianity by Constantine the Great in the new capital Constantinople (337).

The adoption of Christianity was a powerful twist in country's external and internal policy but it rejected by the religious aspect the faith of the centuries, the pagan culture and literature. Nevertheless, only pre-Christian spiritual and cultural values – created by people – proved to be persistent.

Christianity created its culture, literature, school. In Armenia constructed Christian churches, next to them were opened Christian churches in Greek and Assyrian languages.

In this regard, the spiritual culture of Early Medieval interweaving with the cultures of Christian and not only Christian countries but also Western Asia's, became a new cycle of national mentality shaped in previous centuries. The period of 4-5 century in Armenian history was a period when the national culture was on a new rise, being active in historical-social movements. In that problem the Chris-

¹ Due to the "History of Armenian church"- unprinted lecture of A. Sahakyan we have information about the revelation of the new reason of Christian nationalization in Hayq. Other reasons see in "History of Armenian people".

tianity had an important role too as a new and perhaps more progressive ideology. But it does not mean that it is required to create a barrier between Christian and pre-Christian periods and connect the Armenian new culture of the 4th century with the fact of accepting the Christian faith.

The spiritual and material culture of the Early Medieval was a result of national mentality in its new period of history. In this regard, it is required to consider the Armenian culture of the 4-5 centuries as its continuation.

Actually, in the Middle Ages the national art and cultural attributes got a new formulation which allowed to impersonate the destined difficult and at the same time full of heroic existence.

In Armenian history, in terms of policy, the 4th century was a period of centralization and collapse of Armenian state also a period of struggle of autonomy and independence of Armenia. In terms of public mentality it was a period of a Christian religious mindset.

In the history of Christian culture 4-5 centuries are characterized as a period of formation and development of local culture, when Armenian culture having remarkable achievements reached a considerable level (Azaryan, 1975, p. 9).

In Armenia after the establishment of Christianity the culture would be succumbed to the ideology of that time but even the views and perceptions of people preserved stubbornly got into the new emerging culture having their success in almost all branches (Sahakyan, 2014, pp. 21-25).

The royal court supported Armenian church in ideological, political and economic ways. The royal court took methods to keep people closer. Thus, the ruling class was try-

ing to popularize the new religion and strengthen it and make a big power (Araqelyan, 1949, p. 7). And the church became not the support of the people but of the centralized state.

The situation was changed at the time of Arshak II (345-367) and his son Pap (369-374). They made great efforts to centralize and strengthen the state but they had different methods. The father wanted to involve the church in the policy of strengthening the central power and the son seeing the political method's failure of his father, wanted to achieve the same goal at the expense of the church, reducing its ownership which also did not have any success². Soon, due to the delicate and flexible policy of Pap king, the Armenian Church became independent from the universal power creating a new level and clarified the relationship between state and church and laid the foundation of the further autonomy. As a result, however they could not fight against Sassanid conqueror and Rome. Therefore, the country was divided into two parts (387) and then both were dethroned one after another, Western in 390, Eastern in 428 bringing the end to the Armenian independent statehood. Armenia became Western and Eastern regions of superpowers (Yeghishe 1904: 12).

Under the current heavy historical conditions, in the 5th and 6th centuries were started insurrections against Persian and Byzantine dominions (451, 481-484, 536, 571-572). Sassanid Persia during its domination could not suppress Armenians and dominated administrative, military and financial affairs of

² A. Sahakyan, Lectures from the history of Armenian church (unprinted).

the country. In fact, Armenia was independent and the Persian dominion sometimes was becoming nominal, especially after the rebellion of 481-484 years and almost till the beginning of the Arab domination, the middle of the 7th century (Araqelyan, 1949, p. 7).

The Armenian people losing the statehood and the political independence, they surprisingly were always at the highest level of civilization, survived not only physically but also maintained and developed their national spiritual culture.

In the conditions of the similar political relations, when Armenians were seeking to regain the country's independence they also were making big steps towards the rise of civilization and culture. First, in the 4th century, when due to Gregory the Illuminatore's cultural activity and Tiridates III king's support the Christianity became the state religion and during the following centuries it had a role of national preservation in the Armenians life. Almost after a century, in the beginning of 5th century happened the second most significant step, Mesrop Mashtots created the Armenian alphabet which was immediately followed by the rapid development of the Armenian culture and appeared translated literature (Ter-Mkrtychyan, 2011, pp. 129-151). From the middle of the 5th century the Armenian literary mind gave its own first creations. Independent and translated literature was expanded so fast that soon it included almost all of its time branches – theology, philosophy, rhetoric, grammar, astronomy, natural science etc. It is very appropriate the historian's testimony:

“Then, for the tuition of flocks were established schools, increased the number

of writers which surpasses each other and was decorated the holy church cult...

The churches brightened, added splendor to Saints evidence and were restored by flourishing with the testament's offering which always were renewed...” (Parpeci, 1907, pp. 35-36).

With the creation of the Armenian alphabet, indeed, were opened new horizons for strengthening the foundations of substantive national culture and its further advancement.

In Armenia was started a literary and cultural power which was unique scale for its period. For the sake of the idea and spiritual identity, the creation of the Armenian literature became imperative of the century which was destined to become a powerful bulwark against the policy of foreign domination and assimilation.

The beginning of the Armenian schooling was not gradually but in the way of powerful flight. In the case when we take into account two factors: first the serious political situation of Armenia which was deprived of independent statehood and second when comparing with the next few centuries, we remember that the initial phase of the national schooling was at the highest level of schooling.

After the invention of the Armenian alphabet, the beginning of a new period of the Armenian history commenced – Christian in its culture and literature. As we saw, the Armenian literature of the 5th century developed in two directions: first translation, then national. Mashtots personally participated in translation turmoil and as the author of the first translation he was the initiator of the Bibliography of the 5th century. Along with translations with a few decades of difference ap-

peared the first Armenian famous monuments, especially classical works of historiography, the historical works of Parpetsi, Pavstos, Khorenatsi, Yeghishe, Agatangehos, Koryun, as well as the famous philosophical-theological work of Yeznik Koghbatsi and by means of those marked the birth of the great national literature.

The main trends of the ideological content of the classical works of the initial period of Armenian literature, their historical-philosophical and aesthetic principles were imposed on the unique complex circumstances of the socio-political and religious life. The first substantive works were little different from the translated literature, as the ruling ideas were religious. That is why the style of the substantive works was similar to translated.

It is quite obvious the enormous significance of the Bibliography of the 5th century. But it is equally indisputable its huge influence on the all aspects of the national spiritual culture of the further centuries even until the late Middle Ages, as it is actually defined the main thought process of history, artistic development, theology, philosophy and aesthetics.

These mentioned historical situations were the most important factors for the development of Early Medieval Armenian art and ecclesiastical literature and oriented its essence and uniqueness giving impetus to the creation of high bibliographic monuments.

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