The sources and specificity of Armenian spirituality

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Spirituality in its various nuances is always in opposition to material, lay, or temporal values. In a broader sense spirituality has to do with sensitivity or attachment to religious values; in an older meaning it was more specifically anything that belongs to the church or to a cleric. The breadth of our conference underlines the multiple domains under which spirituality can be examined. In its over-arching scope, the conference, its list of communications, and its participants, appear as a celebration of the Armenian Church in this commemorative year. It is not the first or the last conference devoted to the conversion of Armenia to Christianity, yet from the beginning it has had a focus, one chosen specifically by His Holiness Aram. In the coming days each of us has been asked to look at the spiritual nature of the domain we are presenting: theology, exegesis, liturgy, homiletics, and monasticism are natural topics for the study of the non-material nature of Armenian Christianity. Consideration of spirituality in music, poetry, literature, and the arts, however, requires, perhaps, a more deliberate analysis, since these disciplines are not exclusive to the spiritual realm. Indeed, architecture, paintings, and liturgical vessels are material objects, made of matter and not spirit. In considering their ‘spirituality’, there is a danger of engaging in a discussion of symbolism rather than spirituality.

In approaching the question of the sources of Armenian spirituality we are forced to rely on a historical examination. The sources of Armenian spirituality are the same as those of Armenian Christianity, its practices and beliefs. Many of these sources are common to other churches. Our task is to try to discern the particular essence of Armenian Christianity and spirituality.

It is possible in a Christian context to think of spirit as the Spirit, a part of the Trinity. This would lead to an examination of Trinitarian doctrines and how Armenian views on the Holy Spirit developed, but I do not
think that by the sources of Armenian spirituality we mean a narrow theological notion, but rather the bases of religious practices. The sources of Armenian spirituality are thus to be found in the historical review of the Church’s position on ecclesiastical questions, especially in the first two centuries of Armenian Christianity, but also the refinement and modification of these positions in the medieval period, the pre–modern period, and finally the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the early centuries these sources are virtually identical with existing Armenian literature, since secular texts, original or in translation, that is works of grammar or science, are rare. The corpus of sources is now well known, and though unpublished manuscripts are still being edited, we can feel confident that much of the raw textual material has been systematically presented in bibliographies (such as Robert Thomson’s) and manuscript catalogues. This was the heroic task undertaken by 19th and 20th century philologists; perhaps the work of the 21st century will be directed more toward an analysis of this mass of information, the foundations for which have already been laid.

The question of the specificity of Armenian Spirituality is much more challenging and, I think, it is the underlying theme of this conference. What is specific to Armenian ecclesiastic ways and beliefs? How does Armenian spirituality differ from that of neighboring or distant Christian churches and, for that matter, from the spirituality of Islam or Judaism or earlier pagan religions with which Armenians had close contact? Specificity does not necessarily mean special, yet its use as a term implies particularity, identification. Who would or could deny that Armenian spirituality is inseparable from Christian spirituality, sharing in common attitudes and perspectives prevalent in Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches. We are meeting in an ecumenical center belonging to a World Council of nearly all Christian churches; the last fifty years have witnessed the patience with which theologians of all denomination have sought the similarities in Christian belief rather than emphasizing the differences. Yet our assignment is quite exactly to seek out the specific elements that mark and identify Armenian spirituality and we must not retreat from that task.

From the spiritual point of view, are Armenian religious beliefs simpler, more transparent, easier to understand and interpret than those of sister churches? Patriarch Maghakia Ormanian suggested that they were, just a few years before the genocide of 1915, which was to traumatize and change all Armenian institutions, Armenian social organization, and even Armenian discourse. In his book The Armenian Church, Ormanian maintained that because the Armenians only accepted the first three ecumenical councils, whose deliberations and canons were and still are accepted by all Christians, they were freed of later theological and dogmatic conflicts that tore apart Christian unity and greatly complicated Christian belief. Are the sources of Armenian spirituality to be sought in the decisions of the Councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus? Is the specificity of Armenian spirituality to be defined through the positions taken by the universal church in the first century of its legitimacy? Probably not solely, though Ormanian’s idea is a very fetching one that may, indeed, contribute to explaining the liberal aspect of Armenian Christian belief and its relative freedom from excessive dogma. There is a remarkable tolerance in the Armenian Church, often to the embarrassment of its own members and clergy schooled in western ways of conduct and discipline. If Ormanian’s position is valid, does less dogma lead to a more natural, primary spirituality? It is a subject of reflection, one that has not been much engaged.
Since World War II there has been talk of reforming the Church, reforming Christianity, modernizing it, making it more consonant with modern life and modern ways. The Armenian Church has not been immune to these ideas and discussions. The Armenian Church has been caught up in deep controversy over reform. Church leaders have been vocal in calling for reform, yet quite reluctant to change anything. The substitution of vernacular languages for classical Armenian in the Mass is much debated especially in the Armenian diaspora, which for many decades now contains the overwhelming majority of Armenian population. The Armenian Church has been unwilling to take such a dramatic step, which the much more dogmatic Catholic Church embraced. Would the reform in language, one that is no longer understood, mean the ending of a mystery or spiritual dimension embedded within it? Would it mean a diminishing of spirituality? Or would the understanding of the liturgy, understanding directly the real meaning of the word, add to spirituality in the Armenian Church? Such a reform question as well as others like the role of women in the church, abortion or various dynamic social issues, impels us to reconsider both the sources and the specificity of Armenian Spirituality.

Spirituality, defined in a broad sense as the Church and its beliefs, cannot be separated from the destiny of its believers. That destiny was a genocide, which totally transformed Armenian life. It annihilated the major source of Armenian tradition, that is, life lived in a homeland. A geography where Armenians lived close to nature, in towns and villages of homogeneous population or in dense urban ghettos. The social stratification had specific classes: agriculturists, craftsmen, merchants, and the clergy. Those living on the land or from it represented the majority. Today there are no Armenian farmers living in the diaspora except for isolated areas like Fresno and Anjar. Even in Armenia and Karabagh, a minority of the population lives off the land. Have we tried to understand what affect this has had and is having on Armenian spirituality? Those living close to nature see in the rising and setting of the sun, the change of seasons, the growth of crops, something beyond the material world. The concept of spirit was closely associated with the above, the heavens were in the sky, the gods were in heaven, a belief common to all primitive societies, which were predominantly agricultural. Has this natural or naturalist source of Armenian spirituality been lost forever?

Examining again Armenian social structure through a different class produces a similar reflection on the question of spirituality. By the 17th century Armenia had developed a very powerful merchant class, whose antecedents go back to the early medieval period. When the naxarar system, dominated by Armenian nobility, collapsed, the new elite was made up of merchants: khojas, chelebis, and amiras. Those engaged in commerce are considered, probably rightly, to have been more involved with the material than the spiritual. From that perspective, even though the bulk of the population in the nineteenth century was still rural and attached to the land and, according to the paradigm presented above, more inclined toward a spiritual outlook on life, the dominant class in control of Armenian institutions (including the Church) was the merchant class. The genocide only accentuated this condition by annihilating the land-based mass and leaving in the vast diaspora Armenians who were predominantly involved in business. If one of the sources of spirituality is to be defined by the outlook, the worldview, of social classes, than perhaps this new situation, at least in the diaspora, can explain the apparent decline in spirituality within the Armenian nation and by analogy perhaps in the Armenian Church. As for the argument that the Republic in the years after the Genocide, that is the past 85 years, had and still has a considerable rural, agricultural class in the numerous
villages of Armenia and the Karabagh, it is overwhelmed by the anti-religious policy of Communism, which succeeded in destroying any spirituality based on Christian understanding that was alive before the Sovietization.

Our conference treats the various aspects of Armenian spirituality, but even a superficial glance at the topics makes clear that its concern is primarily with the historical sources of spirituality, mostly medieval, and hardly occupied with the present crisis in spirituality affecting not just the Armenian Church but almost all religions today. The roundtable discussion on Friday focuses on ‘Armenian spirituality and the Ecumenical Movement’. Perhaps it will consider the real problems confronting the Armenian Church with regard to faith, belief, and spirituality.

There have been a number of conferences on the Armenian Church in Armenia and in the diaspora over the past few years. Only one or two, those in the United States, have tried to engage the central problems confronting the Church: church unity or at least a commonly understood policy with regard to church matters; the need for a clear catechism or elaborate statement of the precepts of the Armenian Church; the general ignorance of Christian precepts among Armenians; the lack of adequate and consistent training of clergy; church reforms (language, celibacy, etc.). Such questions, and the reforms that might address them, cannot be decided by intellectuals (lay or religious) meeting in conferences, but only by the Church, especially its hierarchy meeting regularly and working diligently. A committed observer recently remarked that it almost appears as though Armenian Church leaders put more time and effort in ecumenical matters than in considering the needs, perhaps viewed by them as too parochial, of the Armenian Church itself. Surely an exaggeration, yet the location of this very conference in an ecumenical center and with a single contemporary topic, on ‘Spirituality and the Ecumenical Movement’, reinforces such a reflection.

The Armenian Church, like all churches, has been plagued throughout its history by conflict, persecution, dissension. From its inception it had a pro-Western and pro-Eastern rivalry, followed shortly after by pro- and anti-Chalcedonian camps. Agreements for union with the Greek Church and the Latin Church were simultaneously accepted and rejected; there were multiple supreme patriarchs, often rival catholicoi. There is today an administrative split in the Armenian Church, which affects the diaspora. The spiritual heads proclaim brotherly love between the catholicosates but the reality is sometimes different. In this age of instant communication is there not a need for a single constitution to organize and govern the life of the entire Armenian Church and its clergy, encompassing both the Etchmiadzin and Cilician Sees and the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople. In the 2000-year history of Christianity, no church has escaped such tribulations. Yet, in the Armenian experience with a population divided between homeland and diaspora, can the modern sources and the specificity of Armenian spirituality be defined without unity, or at least harmony, among the various religious authorities?

Are the sources of Armenian spirituality today the same as they were a century ago or even fifty years ago? If we say ‘yes’, and by that affirmative answer we mean the Armenian liturgy and the ancient and medieval religious texts, which are in fact the same, who are today’s translator-communicators of those sources to an Armenian population that not only cannot read classical Armenian or understand it, but a nation fully half of which cannot read Armenian at all and can hardly speak or understand it? It is true, that the primary sources
are now translated into the vernacular, as is the liturgy. Most Armenian Churches in the west have Sunday schools, and in Armenia a faculty of theology has been opened in the State University. Even assuming there can be perfect transmission of information to the faithful, how many are actually touched by this teaching, by this path to the sources of spirituality? In the United States, Canada, and France far fewer than 10 per cent of Armenians attend church. In Armenia even with the rehabilitation of the Church since the demise of Communism and a religious revival, it is hard to imagine that more that 3 to 5 per cent of the population are churchgoers, that is, have direct contact with the sources of Armenian spirituality.

The specificity of Armenian spirituality today is directly related to the above observations. Armenians in the diaspora have a poor understanding of the basic precepts of Christianity; in Armenia itself, they have no understanding at all. This is true even among educated and committed Armenians, and though it can be said that this ignorance of basic religious tenants is a plague on all churches today, Evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches seems to be doing better in inculcating Christian beliefs, the source of spirituality. Where then are Armenians to find the sources of spirituality? What then is the specificity of Armenian spirituality today?

Yet, despite this pessimistic view, the Armenian Church appears to be flourishing. Perhaps in part due to the impetus of the 1700th anniversary, perhaps due to the newly found freedom of religion in the former Soviet republics, the past five years have seen the church and church matters capturing a major portion of Armenian public attention throughout the world. New churches are being consecrated; new dioceses formed; enrollment in seminaries has increased; and the church is materially much richer. The dichotomy may be explained by insisting that the Armenian Church is on the verge of a major reawakening, a revitalization, the full results of which will only be evident in the coming generation, one that will witness a resurgence of spirituality.

Another explanation, less charitable toward the idea of an increased religiosity, is connected with nationalism. The Armenian Church has always been considered a national church with its own language and its own traditions. Armenian historiography, especially in recent decades, underlines the role of the Church as leader of the nation when Armenians were no longer self–governed. We have been taught that the Church came to the rescue of the nation in times of crisis, and it did. Is it possible, however, that today the nation is saving the Church, insisting on its preservation and glorification as a symbol of the national ethos? Has faith become the belief in the eternal survival of the nation and its preservation, rather than acceptance of God and Jesus Christ as redeemer? Has the Church—strongly influenced by material and political interests—become more important than the religion for which it is merely the visible sign? Has the Church marginalized spirituality, let it pass unexercised, and replaced it with an ethic of good works, by which I mean generous giving? These

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1. On a personal note: I have taught Armenian art and iconography to university students for the past thirty years in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. The majority of the students, perhaps 60 percent, was and is Armenian. The content of Armenian art in the medieval period is entirely Christian. Only one in five students has a vague notion of events in the life of Christ such as the Nativity, Baptism or Crucifixion, only one in ten the Annunciation or Last Supper, and one in twenty (usually an Evangelical or Catholic) about the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, or Pentecost. Those who are affiliated with the Armenian Church or have attended Sunday schools when younger, or even those who have served as altar boys or sub–deacons, are no more able to articulate basic tenants of Christianity than those who have never come in contact with the church.
are rhetorical questions of course, posed not for answers, but for reflection.

The failure of the new Armenian Republic to separate church and state similar to the Russian Orthodox Church’s insistence on religious exclusivity is hardly encouraging. The inability of the Church to deal with evangelical ‘sects’, as they are called, reflects more a feeling of inadequacy on the part of the Armenian Church in being able to keep its token believers rather than a concern with orthodox belief. A national church is one thing, a nationalistic church quite another.

This is not to say that the Church and the clergy should not be involved and concerned with secular and political issues. Of course the Armenian Church should be engaged in all aspects of human endeavor. But it must be careful not to become the appendage of a state or political party, for then spirituality will have to give way to materialistic reality. Such materialism, no matter how many new churches it may patronize or how many medieval monasteries it may restore, can never serve as an adequate source of spirituality.

The value of this conference on Armenian spirituality is precisely to review its traditional sources, to assess just how this blessed heritage is to be adopted, adapted, and revived so that the specificity of Armenian spirituality will continue to be non–material, nourishing, and eternal.

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