

THE SYNTHETIC NATURE OF THE ARMENIAN MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: The Armenian philosophy is a significant part of the medieval Armenian spiritual culture. During the long centuries without statehood, spiritual culture resources became decisive in preserving, reproducing and developing the Armenian identity. Based on the fact that the main institution, responsible for implementing this project, has been the Armenian Church, we refer to this model of the Armenian nation, formed in the early Middle Ages, as a model of a cultural-confessional nation. The Armenian spiritual culture, in general, and the Armenian philosophy, in particular, are characterized by their synthetic nature. Some elements of philosophical synthesis can be found in the patristic philosophy of Eznik of Kolb. The philosophy of David the Invincible is a brilliant manifestation of universal synthesis, too. Anania Shirakatsi's natural philosophy represents a synthesis of ancient scientific-philosophical concepts and the Christian worldview. The Armenian medieval education system also has a synthetic character.

Keywords: Armenian medieval philosophy, national identity, principle of synthesis, spiritual culture, cultural-confessional identity.

Introduction

The Armenology is an interdisciplinary system of studies, a significant component of which refers to the history of the Armenian philosophy. The establishment of the latter as a separate academic discipline took place in the second half of the 20th century, thanks to the efforts of V. Chaloyan, S. Arevshatyan, K. Mirumyan, and others.

The strategic significance of Armenology to-

day is determined not only by a purely cognitive interest in the past but also by practical considerations: on the one hand, it comes up to reconnect Armenians with the origins and values of their spiritual culture, and on the other, it is based on the objective to present the image of the Armenian “cultural” nation to the world. In this context, understanding the place and role of the Armenian philosophy within the framework of the cultural-confessional model of Armenian identity, which essentially continues to function today, becomes

especially important.

Main Study

At one time, building on the conceptual ideas formulated by such academicians as S. Arevshatyan (Arevshatyan, 1973) and K. Mirumyan (Mirumyan, 1994), we developed the concept of the cultural-confessional model of Armenian identity (Sargsyan, 2017). We concluded that, in conditions of complete or partial absence of statehood, the primary factors shaping Armenian national identity were cultural and confessional elements. In our view, this process of identity construction was the result of implementing an original nation-building project. Such a model of identity enabled Armenians to function as a unique networked nation, even without their own state. This also explains the phenomenon of the relatively stable diasporic network of Armenian communities that has endured for centuries.

Understanding the identity of contemporary Armenians requires analyzing the historical specificities of the formation and development of the Armenian nation. Unlike most Western nations, where the primary actor in constructing national identity was the state (which we might term “state-based nations”), the Armenian case demonstrates the exceptional role played by cultural and confessional factors (what we term the “cultural-confessional nation project”). On the one hand, this was due to the centuries-long absence of Armenian statehood. On the other hand, this model allowed the Armenian nation to thrive even while embedded within various imperial-state formations.

The identity of the Armenian nation is not an immutable given but a phenomenon that has undergone a long and unique historical evolution. In this development, we observe both periods of revolutionary transformation and phases of isolation and stagnation. In our opinion, the foundations of modern Armenian identity were established in the 4th-6th centuries as a result of a unique identity policy: the adoption of Christianity as a state religion, the process of sovereignization-nationalization of the Armenian Church, the invention of a national script, the creation of a distinct written culture, the establishment of a national education system etc. This model of Armenian identity, while inherently

national in essence, simultaneously possessed an open and synthetic character. This openness allowed Armenians to absorb the most progressive innovations of world civilization, enriching their identity while maintaining its national character (Sargsyan, 2011).

This synthetic model, in which a nation remains creative and keen for self-development even in the absence of its own statehood, where the primary resource for constructing identity is civilizational-cultural and religious-confessional, can be conditionally termed as a cultural-confessional model of national identity. We believe that this model remains a core element of Armenian national identity even today.

The identity of modern Western nations seems to be constructed differently. It is evident that the leading role in unifying identity here was, and continues to be, played by the state. Professor V. Achkasov titled a section of his book, where he addresses the formation of Western European nations, as follows: “Western Europe: The State Creates the Nation, Not the Nation the State” (Achkasov, 2014, p. 102). Notably, this mechanism, in our view, applies not only to Western European nations but to many others as well. Various tribes and ethnic groups, uniting within emerging nation-states, underwent a form of political totalization (Ortega y Gasset, 2003, p. 13), where political and civic values, rather than spiritual and cultural ones, played the defining role. Only later, having formed as civic nations, did these peoples, as a consequence, begin to create their distinct national spiritual cultures. This model of constructing national identity can be termed as the state-national identity model.

The very act of adopting Christianity as the state religion (in 301 AD) can already be considered as a policy in which ideological and cultural factors were prioritized. By adopting Christianity, King Tiridates III erected an ideological barrier against the ideological expansion of pagan Rome and Zoroastrian Iran.

Subsequently, the threat of losing statehood—or, perhaps, the realization of its inevitability—compelled the nation’s political and cultural elite to shift their focus almost entirely to the cultural and ideological domain. They reinforced the national element in this domain to distinguish Armenia, first within the broader context of a globalized yet decaying Hellenistic world, and later

within the emerging and similarly globalized Christian world. A vivid expression of this approach is the process of the Armenian Church's sovereignization.

It is well known that Christianity is a world religion, inherently supranational, emphasizing universal human values. However, it is also known that the early Christian ecumenical church did not last long, fragmenting into numerous autonomous (autocephalous) churches. These newly formed churches gradually acquired a national character, becoming national churches. To be national meant to be sovereign. Thus, the process of church sovereignization unfolded as a process of nationalization—acquiring a national character.

One of the first to pursue a course of sovereignization and nationalization was the Armenian Church. The sovereignization of the Armenian Church became a tool of preserving and developing spiritual distinctiveness in the face of weakening, and later the complete absence of, national statehood. The process of sovereignizing the Armenian Church can be divided into three stages: organizational-administrative, liturgical, and doctrinal (Sargsyan, 2007).

From the perspective of the formation of medieval Armenian culture, the creation of the Armenian script in 405 AD by Mesrop Mashtots holds enormous significance. This phenomenon demands serious reflection. In 387 AD, Armenia was officially divided between the Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran. Western Armenia (the Roman part) was turned into an ordinary province of the empire, while in the Iranian part, although an Armenian king, Vramshapuh, formally reigned, his power was purely nominal. By 428 AD, the Armenian Arshakid kingdom ceased to exist entirely. Logically, a nation that had effectively lost its independence should have entered a period of cultural stagnation, or possibly even degradation. Yet, the opposite occurred: not only was a unique alphabet created, but an unprecedented cultural renaissance began, ultimately earning this period the title of the “Golden Age” of Armenian culture.

The creation of the Armenian script was driven by two interconnected factors. First, it was necessary to achieve the liturgical sovereignty of the Armenian Church, translating church literature into Armenian and conducting rituals in the Armenian language. Second, it aimed to create

and develop a national culture in the Armenian language as a powerful tool for fostering national identity.

This task was extraordinarily challenging from both ecclesiastical and political perspectives (Ormanyan, 2001, p.325; Mirumyan, 2006). In the early Christian era, the official languages of the Christian East were Greek and Syriac, while in the Western Christian world, Latin and Greek dominated. Using a local language for church rituals was considered heretical. Thus, it was crucial to skillfully navigate the tensions between the Greek and Syriac churches, as well as between Iran and Byzantium, to secure their “permission” to create and use a unique script. Through the efforts of Mashtots, with the support of Catholicos Sahak Partev and King Vramshapuh, this mission was accomplished.

With the creation of the alphabet, church rituals and ceremonies began to be conducted in Armenian. Before the invention of the script, Hellenistic schools operated in Armenia, but a national education system now emerged. Armenian schools became a spiritual synthesizing factor for a nation divided between Iran and Byzantium. The school system became a critical channel for reproducing and developing Armenian identity, serving as a bridge between the ecclesiastical-political elites and society (Mirumyan, 2019, p. 22).

An unprecedented wave of translation activity emerged during this period. Initially, the Bible and all classical works of Christian literature were translated. Following this, a body of original patristic literature was developed. The next phase focused on assimilating the cultural heritage of antiquity, a process associated with the so-called “Hellenophile School.” While the term “Hellenophiles” (or “lovers of Greece”) is traditionally used, this activity was driven by the urgent demands of national existence and, in this sense, bore a distinctly national character. The work of this school was necessitated by the ideological and doctrinal struggle against the Byzantine Empire (and its imperial church). Thanks to this school, a rich body of scientific literature in the Armenian language was created. First, classical works of world scientific literature were translated and “Armenianized.” Notably, several ancient works have survived only in their Armenian translations. Second, commentaries and interpretations of classical works were produced.

Third, original Armenian scientific literature was developed. As S. Arevshatyan demonstrated, the Hellenophile School operated according to a structured program—grammar, rhetoric, logic, and so on (Arevshatyan, 1973, pp. 141-165) — indicating that the deliberate development of spiritual culture, designed to meet the needs of national existence, was part of a broader national-cultural project.

The historiography and the philosophy of history occupied a special place in this emerging written culture. By the fifth century, Armenian historians were already articulating the idea of national sovereignty. Their arguments often rose to a philosophical level, transforming into a philosophy of history. They justified the concept of national liberation struggles against foreign oppression and resistance to the ideological aggression of invaders. These ideas are evident in the works of Yeghishe and, especially, Movses Khorenatsi, who was the first Armenian thinker to attempt to create a conceptual model of national development—emergence, formation, and evolution. He philosophically argued for the Armenian people's natural right to possess a national state. Khorenatsi's teachings represent the theoretical expression of an already well-formed national consciousness among Armenians.

Thus, in the 5th-7th centuries, a time when “cultural darkness” began to dominate elsewhere, Armenia developed and actively advanced a spiritual culture rooted in ancient traditions. In the absence of statehood, cultural factors assumed a compensatory role, becoming the primary means of preserving and developing national distinctiveness. This context explains the extraordinary rise of Armenian culture during its “Golden Age,” despite the profound political, economic, and social crises of the time.

It is particularly important to emphasize that the Armenian culture developed in its native language. This is a unique phenomenon for the “globalized” medieval period, during which culture predominantly evolved in a few “cultural” languages: Latin in the Western Christian world, Greek and Syriac in the Eastern Christian world, and later Arabic in the Islamic world. Only a few nations in the medieval period advanced their culture in their national language.

As we can see, medieval Armenian culture, being a reflection of the nation's existential reality, had a distinctly national character. This na-

tional orientation even influenced seemingly abstract domains of spiritual culture, such as theology and philosophy (Sargsyan, 2010).

Another characteristic of medieval Armenian culture was its synthetic nature. This synthesis involved the fusion of spiritual (religious) and secular (ancient scientific and philosophical traditions) elements. A vivid manifestation of this synthesis was found in the sphere of education (Sargsyaan, 2011). Educational institutions, often attached to monasteries, were funded by the Church. Naturally, Christian literature was a significant part of the curriculum, yet the core of the educational system remained the “seven liberal arts.” The trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) formed the first stage, while the quadrivium (arithmetic, music theory, geometry, and astronomy) formed the second. Thus, during an era when the traditions of ancient science and philosophy were being forgotten throughout the Christian world, philosophy, logic, and natural sciences flourished in Armenia.

This synthesis was already evident in early medieval Armenian patristic philosophy. In particular, the Eznik of Kolb (5th century) in his work *Refutation of Heresies* criticizes various doctrines, especially Zoroastrianism, and seamlessly combines the logical and philosophical tools of antiquity with the foundational principles of Christian teaching.

The pinnacle of synthesis in early medieval Armenian culture was the work of the aforementioned Hellenophile School. The goal of this school was to quickly assimilate and synthetically integrate the key achievements of ancient culture into the framework of Christian medieval Armenian culture. The work of this school followed a systematic program, further evidence that the nation's cultural elite clearly recognized the importance of culture in preserving national identity. The activities of the Hellenophile School and the cultural synthesis it achieved laid the groundwork for the unprecedented cultural renaissance of Armenia during the 5th-7th centuries, a period in which much of the Christian world was sinking into cultural “darkness.”

The crowning achievement of the Hellenophile School in the realm of philosophy was the work of David the Invincible, particularly his renowned treatise *Definitions of Philosophy*. This work is a brilliant example of implementing a synthetic approach. The prominent Russian

thinker and expert on ancient culture, A.F. Losev, highlighted this synthesis in David's methodology. He described it as a virtuosity of thought that "strives, on the one hand, toward the smallest distinctions, and on the other hand, to elevate these minimal distinctions into a new universal synthesis." David's significance does not lie in proposing new specific ideas—these ideas were already present in the vast heritage of ancient thought. Instead, it is in his "virtuosic novelty of thinking." From this perspective, Losev gave David exceptionally high praise, asserting that even within the grand philosophical tradition of antiquity, "it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a thinker for whom philosophical virtuosity is a defining feature. (Losev, 1984, pp. 27-28)" It is no coincidence that Losev titled his article about David "The Philosophical-Historical Feat of David the Invincible".

An analysis of medieval Armenian thought shows that David the Invincible's universal and virtuoso philosophical synthesis became the methodological foundation for synthesis in more specific fields of knowledge. In the 7th century, an attempt at synthesis in natural philosophy and science was made by the renowned Armenian thinker Anania Shirakatsi. Shirakatsi's scientific interests were diverse, encompassing mathematics, geography, and calendrical studies. However, from the perspective of synthesis, his cosmological views are particularly significant. Shirakatsi was the only 7th-century thinker to adhere to ancient cosmological concepts, which he interpreted through the lens of Christian dogma. His attempt to synthesize ancient and Christian cosmology enabled him to be one of the first in medieval thought to propose the idea of a natural-scientific justification for the existence of God (Sargsyan, 2003). He developed a cosmological argument for God's existence, enriching it with natural-scientific and philosophical reasoning.

The synthetic methodology developed by early medieval Armenian thinkers remained foundational in subsequent developments of Armenian medieval thought, manifesting in various fields such as natural philosophy, logic, theology, and more. In theology and church dogmatics, the synthetic approach was evident in the moderate positions taken on doctrinal issues. A moderate position incorporates elements of extreme views, striving to merge them organically. In the context

of dogmatic disputes among confessions, such moderation allowed for flexible policies, skillfully navigating between extremes. A prime example of such a moderate synthetic stance in the Armenian Church is its formula of moderate Monophysitism. This position allowed the Armenian Church to navigate between extreme Monophysitism and Dyophysitism while maintaining its dogmatic sovereignty.

The synthesis of extreme positions not only reinforced the Armenian Church's theological independence but also exemplified the broader cultural tendency of Armenian thought to integrate diverse influences into a cohesive whole, ensuring the preservation and development of Armenian identity through a creative and balanced engagement with the broader intellectual currents of its time.

Another manifestation of the synthetic approach among Armenian medieval thinkers was their adoption of moderate nominalism—a position closely aligned with conceptualism—in addressing one of the central issues of medieval philosophy: the problem of universals (the relationship between the general and the particular). Moderate nominalism represents a synthetic stance that reconciles the extremes of radical nominalism and realism, asserting that the general exists within things. This position was most fully developed by the renowned Armenian philosopher and theologian of the late Middle Ages, Grigor Tatevatsi. Through his resolution of the problem of universals, Tatevatsi provided a logical and theological argument for the sovereignty of the Armenian Church. He argued that a universal Christian Church could not exist without sovereign national churches, thereby reinforcing the unique theological position of the Armenian Church within Christendom.

A unique figure in medieval Armenian culture is Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni (11th century). As a magistros of the Byzantine Empire (governor of the empire's eastern provinces), he not only found time to translate scientific and philosophical works from ancient Greek (e.g., Plato's dialogues, Euclid's Elements) and write original works (including textbooks for Armenian schools) but also established a higher educational institution that was mobile in nature. As Academician S. Arevshatyan noted: "According to the curriculum followed by Grigor Magistros, a significant role in education was given to secular

sciences, with religious education complemented by diverse secular knowledge” (Arevshatyan, 1982, p. 171).

This synthesis of spiritual and secular education later found its most vivid expression in the activities of Armenian medieval universities. Armenian universities (“vardapetarans”) were established within monasteries and funded by the Church and some noble houses. The most notable among them were the University of Gladzor (founded in the late 13th century) and the University of Tatev (14th–early 15th century). These institutions offered instruction not only in theology but also in all the secular sciences known at the time, including philosophy, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, logic, rhetoric, astronomy, and calendrical studies. Graduates of these universities were called “vardapets”, a unique phenomenon in medieval Armenian culture. A vardapet was both a clerical rank and, in essence, an academic degree. Vardapets wrote and defended dissertations, earning the right to teach. These institutions embodied the synthesis of spiritual and secular elements, fostering an intellectual tradition that preserved and advanced Armenian culture and identity. The combination of rigorous theological study with a broad secular curriculum exemplifies the Armenian cultural elite’s commitment to intellectual and cultural development as a means of national preservation.

Conclusion

Deprived of statehood for centuries, the Armenian nation focused on the preservation and development of its identity. The cornerstone of this overarching goal was the maintenance of national-cultural distinctiveness, even while being integrated into multi-ethnic and multi-confessional states and empires. Under such conditions, the cultural factor effectively became the primary means of preserving self-identity. However, this does not imply that Armenian culture was isolated or confined within its own boundaries. On the contrary, medieval Armenian culture was characterized by its synthetic nature, creatively absorbing the achievements of other cultures: Greek, Syriac, Greco-Christian, Latin-Christian, and even Arabic. Armenian thinkers dialectically justified the connection between the national and the universal, i.e. the national is a materialization

of universal values, while the universal can only exist through the national. In this context, K.A. Mirumyan’s assertion is particularly interesting: Armenian culture was “national in form and universal in content” (Mirumyan, 2019, p. 21).

Thus, synthesis is a defining feature of both medieval Armenian spiritual culture and its philosophy. The synthetic nature of medieval Armenian philosophy was an expression of a unique methodological approach and a distinct type of synthetic thinking. The principle of synthesis served as a methodological framework for the complementary integration and organic merging of diverse elements.

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