

# ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL, AND POLITICAL?<sup>1</sup>

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Why should Armenian Evangelical youth be involved in societal issues, and how can they be prepared to face their environment confidently, and what happens if they are not ready for the challenge?

Indeed, it is of great value for the youth of a church to be assured that the religious outlook they have been developing in their formative years corresponds directly with the issues of society at large. To be more specific, youth need to find correspondence with those strata in society that present themselves as competing with religious outlooks and institutions. For Armenian Evangelical youth, membership in the church has the potential to be more than a pro-forma affiliation. For them the church is, at its best, a group of experienced elders, a reliable network of people, resources, and ideas, a witness to the faith history of the community, a representative of all that transcends their immediate situations, a provider of ideology and commitment, a secure launch pad to the future, and the scene for a myriad of activities in which faith, talents and worldviews are tested.

Institutions, communities, and older generations have a pivotal role in the identity formation of adolescents.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it is a responsibility of theirs. The identity formation of the youth is critical for the church because it is what determines, to a great extent, the preparedness of youth to join the adult world with a hopeful and trusting vision of the future, with a commitment to the good of all, and with stability of character. The vitality and the future of the church depend on it.

What is the extent to which the church needs to be concerned with and deliberately involved in the identity formation of its youth? The question gets especially complicated in matters that have not been viewed by the Armenian Evangelical Church as traditionally 'religious.' Political matters are a good example. Some in the church actually ask: Why not preach the plain Gospel and let God take care of the rest? Why not trust that social interaction, family dynamics, schooling, and various other phenomena will help youth find a way out of their social crises?

Others, compartmentalizing life into religious and secular, ask: What is the ultimate goal of the church in its teachings and theology? Is it the enhancement of the psychosocial well-being of its youth, or the development of their faith in God? Can the church not prepare its youth for the world and

still be faithful to the Gospel of Christ? Can the church not encourage the development of any sociopolitical identity and still prepare faithful, decent, and trustworthy elements in society?

Duncan B. Forrester, in his Beliefs, Values, and Policies, presents three understandings of the responsibilities of theology in the world. First, he says, there is the individualistic and private theology "which understands Christian faith as a private option without public relevance."<sup>3</sup> In line with this understanding, it is quite justified to stay away from issues that concern the general public because the domain of theology is a "spiritual" realm. Second is the view that theology is one academic discipline among many others, each having its field of interest and expertise. Therefore, "in relation to most matters on the secular agenda it can say nothing."<sup>4</sup> But Forrester favors a third understanding of theology in which theology is concerned with the wholeness of life as a natural outcome of the belief in the universal lordship of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, theology is not "limited to a spiritual realm so that it has nothing to say to temporal concerns. It is not confined to the sphere of human inwardness and subjectivity."<sup>5</sup>

As seen in Forrester's third understanding of theology, life is not a set of unrelated domains but a whole in which all parts are interdependent. Every aspect of the life of the church is related to the others; every act of the church is in correspondence with the total life of the church; and every theological position of the church is expected to be a part of the witness of the church.

The church is not church if it does not prepare its members for the world. The church is not church if it creates a dichotomy between sacred and secular realms in life. The church is not church if its life, including the life of its members, is not perceived wholistically. Such a view is evident in Armenian Evangelical thinking as well.

Not only religion and faith, but also ideology, and personal and communal identity, are seen as related to both the deepest of human experiences from the earliest days of one's life and to the future hopes and potentialities of individuals and communities. It is only in such a sense that any Armenian Evangelical negligence of the sociopolitical sphere has to be seen as problematic.

### A MATTER OF 'WITNESS'

For the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East, concern with the wholeness of life is a matter of special importance. The Armenian Evangelical understanding of education<sup>6</sup> as well as the community oriented cultures in the Middle East emphasize a wholistic view of life. The self-understandings of the Eastern Orthodox churches can serve as examples. It is their understanding that in the life of these churches one does not find demarcation



lines between secular and religious realms of life, nor indeed between faith and politics, or theology and ideology.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, the personal faith, work habits, household traditions, social involvement, and institutional affiliations of an Armenian Evangelical individual, or any individual in any confessional group, are seen as intimately belonging to the theology, life of worship, liturgy, multiple activities, and the policies of the Church as a denomination. All these and more, combined, are perceived to represent the witness<sup>8</sup> of, for example, the Armenian Evangelical Church.

Concern with the witness of a church is exaggerated with a group such as the Armenian Evangelical Church, first, because of the history of tension it has had with its socio-religious environment, and second, for being a more or less homogeneous minority group. A certain conduct of an Armenian Evangelical individual may be considered by the public or by official authorities in Syria or Lebanon as an expression of the attitude of the whole Armenian Evangelical Church, and the positions or traditions of the Church are seen as necessarily those of each individual member. It is not uncommon for official authorities to hold the head of the Armenian Evangelical community, i.e. the minister representing the denomination before the government, morally responsible for the misconduct of an individual who may be registered as Evangelical, especially when the person's misconduct has religious connotations.<sup>9</sup> The opposite is also true. Quite often individual Armenian Evangelicals cause others astonishment when they behave in a certain way or express a certain opinion that is not known to be traditionally 'Evangelical,' such as belonging to a political party or using swear words. More specifically, it catches many Armenians by surprise to discover that some of the organizers of the Armenian political parties in the 19th century were Evangelical by confession. They are surprised because the Armenian Evangelical Church has been known for its neutrality and even discouragement of political involvement.

All this is to say that the Armenian Evangelical Church, as a confessional community, is perceived by outsiders to have a unified witness. In such a witness all members are expected to be in agreement, all facets of the witness belong to each other, the expressions of one individual are the expressions of the whole, and the positions of the denomination are the positions of each of the individuals who, by birth or by conviction, belong to that community.

Therefore, whenever the propriety of a certain policy or decision of the Armenian Evangelical Church is questioned, the subject of the general witness of the Church is introduced. Consequently, this puts a heavy burden on any church by limiting its freedom, both as individuals and community; certain aspects of the life of the church could be paralyzed, and the way of reform could be hindered. Positively speaking, however, emphasis on the overall witness can keep the whole community aware of the power and presence of a witness that transcends the immediate concerns, problems, and positions of indi-

viduals and even the whole denomination. It could keep the church community and its members critically sensitive to their self and group identity and edifying role in society.

The question of preparing youth for the world is, at heart, a question of witness. Therefore, it is of vital importance to ask: what happens to the witness of the Armenian Evangelical Church if it takes steps in preparing its youth to face a highly political society, and what happens to the witness if the subject is neglected altogether?

Fortunately, the choice is not always between remaining faithful to the Gospel and keeping the integrity of the witness of the Church intact. Often both mean the same thing, especially when the theology of the community and the institution of the Church are not "a free-floating theory or a detached ideology,"<sup>10</sup> to use Forrester's words. Still, it is important to remember that the church can err and, as Forrester says, "fidelity to the gospel can sometimes be in tension with the current teaching of the institutional church."<sup>11</sup> This kind of a tension is costly in communities such as the Armenian community in the Near East where any discrepancy between the positions of the institutional church and the teachings of the gospel will clearly weaken the overall witness of the Church. This is so because, in the Near East, the popular expectations from the church are quite high. The church is expected to be all things to all people. Among many things, it is seen to be the herald of truth, the advocate of justice, the embodiment of the Good News, and especially the guardian of the identity of communities.

We should admit that the Armenian Evangelical Church has neglected a dimension of Armenian life in the Near East, namely, the political dimension. The problem is not that it avoids taking partial positions on various issues other Armenian churches and organizations argue about. Rather, it is that the Armenian Evangelical Church does not exhibit awareness of the need of its youth and young adults, in particular, to integrate political views and ideological convictions into their budding sense of identity. The church pedagogy and agenda show no awareness of the fact that youth cannot be Armenian Evangelical only in a narrowly defined religious sense, but that they need to become aware of themselves in psychosocial and political senses upon as well and relate all to their faith experience.

In order to address the aforementioned problem let us ask several questions that will explain the complexity of the challenge that faces Armenian Evangelicals, and will also suggest ways of thinking about it and resolving it.



## WHY INSPIRE INVOLVEMENT?

If the Armenian Evangelical Church needs to prepare its constituency, especially its youth, to participate in shaping the life of the community, then it needs to know why consciousness of, and sometimes involvement in the socio-political issues of the community is necessary.

Let us start with a few words of caution. First, the involvement of the church as an institution and as a people is not justified if the main incentive is to prove to society at large that the church is a presence that has to be reckoned with (although such a sentiment is often detected in all churches). The church should not become a hostage of its creed and the most powerful institutions of society (such as the political parties among Armenians). Socio-political consciousness and involvement are not justified if the sole purpose is to compete with other denominations, their activities and political statements (although such a competition may sometimes be unavoidable). Again, the Armenian Evangelical Church must not become a hostage of a competition with the Armenian Apostolic or Catholic Churches.

Second, a call for a change in the Armenian Evangelical position in relation to society does not mean only change in the strategies of its denominational leadership. It is not enough to see the governing bodies of the denomination get involved before the congregations themselves are prepared or interested in such an involvement. The positions, aspirations, and fellowship of the congregations have to be discerned before a denomination acts. For a democratic ecclesial institution such as the Armenian Evangelical Church, to have open communication inside a congregation and then among various congregations and committees is vital for any viable approach to sociopolitical involvement.

On another scale, the Armenian Evangelical Church is yet to settle on a position with regard to the degree to which its work needs to be centralized and to what degree decentralized. Currently, a constitutional debate is going on with regard to how much more centralization is needed in the Armenian Evangelical Church of the Near East.<sup>12</sup> All these are considerations a minority ecclesial group like the Armenian Evangelical Church must entertain if a better involvement in the affairs of society is to be achieved.

To repeat, to know why involvement is the preferred way is a question believers as well as their representative bodies in the church have to struggle with. Without such a knowledge the church loses its integrity and becomes an instrument of various social or political forces, sometimes in ways that are contrary to its very principles. This is a potential problem the Church and theology have faced since the earliest times of the Church.

It is generally agreed that there can be no church and no theology that is devoid of a certain social and political setting. There has been less agree-

ment, however, on what the relationship between the two is. Duncan B. Forrester, in his *Theology and Politics*, agreeing that "every religion and every political system must generate a political theology of some kind,"<sup>13</sup> proceeds to trace some major historical responses to this question, beginning with the early Christian era. The following are three major approaches to the subject in the form of political theologies:

1) At one extreme is the view of theology as distinct from the social order. This is represented by Tertullian (c.160-220), for whom the church was a counter-culture institution. Therefore, Christians, learning from Christ's rejection of an earthly kingdom, have to separate themselves from the secular world. The Church is a parallel community to the secular one, and it represents a challenge to society because it stands for an alternative way of understanding and ordering life.<sup>14</sup>

2) At another extreme is the view that theology and politics are partners. It is represented by the positions and works of Eusebius of Caesarea (264-340), who sought to find a favorable relationship between Christianity and the empire of Constantine. There was, for him, a perfect harmony between Church and State, theology and politics, where one legitimized the other, and working together they could provide justice and peace for the world.<sup>15</sup>

3) The Augustinian notion of the City of God represents a midway between the two extreme positions. There the heavenly city transcends but does not contradict the earthly one. Augustine (353-430) had critical views on both sides. He taught that the earthly city was corrupt, just as the Roman Empire was, but the Church too was not pure to the degree of being identical with the City of God. It was only a partial manifestation of that City.<sup>16</sup>

A history of a century and a half seems to show that the Armenian Evangelical Church has been on the reacting end of the church/state, and theology/politics discussions. It is no wonder, then, that one may have difficulty locating this Church on the spectrum discussed above. The Church does not agree with an intimate partnership between the two; it does not advocate a separation, at least openly, of the secular realm from the spiritual; but it does not show how it could be located in a midway position either. The discussion is basically absent. However, one cannot but consider its silence as a political statement itself; it is a neglect of politics without necessarily believing that the church is opposed to culture. There was a time when Armenian Evangelical silence about politics was intentional. The revival movement of the first Armenian Evangelicals was, to put it dualistically, for the spiritual realm not the temporal; it was to reform the piety and theology not the polity of the church. But such is not the position of the church today. First, dualism is not advocated; and second, the silence of the Armenian Evangelical Church is neither examined nor intentional. The church is aloof today because the past



church was aloof.

It would be an oversimplification of things to view the apolitical stance of the Church as a result of Puritan influence through the foreign missionaries. The Evangelical movement among Armenians in its earliest days represented a protest against the close partnership, or rather the ideological and social fusion, between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the institutions that represented or governed the Armenian people. The Puritan influence, however, provided an ideological umbrella for the Armenian Evangelical critique of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

A typical Armenian Evangelical approach to the issue can be summarized in the thinking of one of its leaders, the Rev. Hovhannes Aharonian.<sup>17</sup> Aharonian presents a critique of the close partnership between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the concept of 'nationhood'. At the same time, however, he insists on the involvement of all individuals in the affairs of society, as a Christian duty. By opposing over-involvement and under-involvement at the same time, Armenian Evangelicals seems to be striking a balance among a variety of positions, setting a pattern of such positions. With regard to the ecumenicity of the Church, the divisions in the Church are lamented, yet those who compromise certain positions in the same realm are criticized; with regard to social action, primary importance is assigned to helping the poor, yet he criticizes those who center their preaching on such issues are criticized. This general attitude of Aharonian's, I think, represents the Armenian Evangelical reality of striking sets of balances in the Near East quite adequately.

The Armenian Evangelical wish to find a balance among various theological views that are in apparent discord with each other could be seen as a strategic way of maneuvering in the midst of more powerful ecclesial and political groupings. But it is not only so. It is a reality that points to deeper levels of danger and insecurity. It can even be characterized as a "Protean" response to the life that is presented to this Church.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, the Armenian Evangelical Church, made wary by its own struggle to survive and constantly prove its legitimacy as "Armenian" and as "church", tries to find a uniqueness in holding positions that are only seemingly contradictory.

Involvement in the society and its affairs is to be encouraged, according to Aharonian, because of the nature of the church:

#### 1. **Locality is Responsibility:**

The church is both local and universal. However, Aharonian's emphasis is more on the locality of the church than on its universality. Emphasizing the local character includes relationships with various churches in the neighborhood. Even the universality of the church is seen in the fact that each local church lives with the awareness that it is a part of the universal church spread not only throughout time but also throughout the globe. Attention to the local

character highlights the need for relationship and cooperation with those in the immediate vicinity, while attention to the universal nature points to the fact that the local church, and indeed, each individual, needs to be interested in and responsible for more than local and contemporary issues of the immediate world. This challenges all Christians to be other-oriented and other-interested at all times.<sup>19</sup>

## **2. Availability is also Action:**

The fact that the church exists "for the world" and "to serve the world"<sup>20</sup> puts the church in a posture of availability to the world. Aharonian asserts that the Armenian Evangelical Church is not a self-enclosed church, but he does not dwell on how this church can be available to a world that is wider than the Armenian community in the Middle East. In his view, availability is envisioned as preparedness to help, to teach, to relieve, to liberate, to reconcile and to point to God's kingdom. Availability has an 'action' aspect to it that can be most engaging for all members of the church, but primarily for the youth. Indeed, as one learns from Erikson, availability can evolve, for youth, into rituals of service to the neighborhood and the world, giving the youth a sense of solidarity with each other for such service and a deep sense of commitment to the Gospel and the meaning it brings to life.

## **3. Save the Neighbor?**

The church is not only the communion of the saved, it is also a saving body. The purpose of salvation, Aharonian says, is not "self-glorification" but "being responsible for sharing with others the same grace that one has received."<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, he adds, the Armenian Evangelical Church needs to be 'outgoing' and 'outreaching', thereby living out its faith. This raises a critical question. If one of the definitions of faith is "giving oneself to one's neighbors"<sup>22</sup> then it is only natural to expect the church and its constituency to acquire a knowledge of and a relationship with those neighbors. It is the duty of the church and the older generations in the church to teach the younger ones who is considered a neighbor and who is not. It is also the duty of the church to teach, in accordance with the teachings of the Gospel, how one can relate to one's neighbors.

The subject of the neighborhood of the Armenian communities in the Middle East, and that of the Armenian Evangelical Church in particular is a highly complicated one, and the Church has much to do to delineate its position in this regard. It is also a complicated matter to ask which of the neighbors the Armenian Evangelical Church and its community should trust, love and serve. Moreover, what form of neighbor-love should the Church embody and teach? A self-sacrificial love, a mutually beneficial one, or another?<sup>23</sup>

In Aharonian's mind, as well as in most Armenian Evangelical minds,



the neighborhood of Armenian Evangelicals starts with fellow Armenians and gradually extends to the very ends of the earth. Unfortunately, however, all that lies between these two extremities receives little or no attention. It is often forgotten that there is a world that is not as close as the Armenian and not as distant as the whole oikumene. The Church has been quite oblivious to the non-Armenian Christian and non-Christian groups that surround the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East. Feeling satisfied with formal relationships with some of these groups in such ecumenical organizations as the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC), and with being law-abiding citizens, the Church feels it is doing all that is required of it.

In a sense, this is a discussion of the identity of not only Armenian Evangelical individuals, but also of the Armenian Evangelical Church. A group's identity cannot be totally separated from the identity of each of its members. Much of the identification of Armenian Evangelical individuals, especially in the stage of youth, is the direct result of what the Church has presented itself and its world to be. Thus by not demonstrating to the youth how they can relate and are called to relate to their neighbors, the Church has been actively participating in the development of an identity in youth that is built on one segment of society, namely, the Armenian Evangelical, or at best the Armenian. As shown in Erikson's theory of the life cycle, it is the outcome of the identity stage that determines, to a great extent, what happens with the next stage, the stage of intimacy.

One way of viewing the stage of identity is to see it as a preparation for sharing one's life with another and with others, but this happens only after a reasonable degree of certainty is established with regard to one's own identity. In the absence of such intimacy, distantiation takes over, often standing in the way of the development of a better sense of ethics in the adult.<sup>24</sup> On a parallel scale, the subject of the neighborhood of the Armenian Evangelical Church is also a discussion of the development of the wider identity that constitutes the sense of ethics the Church advocates. It is true that a major part of the identity of the Armenian Evangelical youth is expressive of the community of the Church. However, it is equally necessary for the development of an ethical sense to find a sense of a mutuality with those who are outside that group if identity is to become ethical in orientation, an integral part of the mission of the Armenian Evangelical Church.

#### **4. Examine the Culture:**

Aharonian admits that the church is subject to the cultural movements and the civic laws of its days,<sup>25</sup> making the church the recipient of much that could be against its choice and positions. However, it is not clear who will examine these movements and their impact on the life and witness of the

church if the church itself does not do so. The Armenian Evangelical Church has not shown much awareness of, let alone evaluation of, its relationship to such external forces. Also missing in Aharonian's evaluations is an appreciation of the dynamic and interactive relationship between cultural movements and the church itself. After all, it is not culture alone that has an impact on the church. The church too, as a part of the culture, makes its impression on the people, however small that impression may be.

Whereas he recognizes the influence of various cultural forces on the church, Aharonian does not discuss the meaning of such a phenomenon. Since the church is subject to the influence of its culture, is it not better for it to help shape that culture? It is simplistic for the Armenian Evangelical Church to perceive itself as a self-sufficient community. Its young membership is in contact with the larger world as they are going to join the technological world in adulthood. Youth need from the world the same affirmation of their identity that they need from the Church, and they need the same confirmation and recognition of their unique experiences that they need from the Church. The Church does the youth good if it teaches them to be able to evaluate the affirmations and confirmations of the larger society. The Church needs to teach the youth the ability to recognize which of these confirmations and affirmations by peers and groups are meaningful and healthy and which are not. For this to happen, the Church needs to understand the complexity of the environmental images and symbols that are presented by society to the youth.

For the Church to live its life-shaping and history-making mission it has to find ways of inspiring the younger generations. Youth need to be convinced that they are not the mere objects of what history and culture force on them, but rather, that they can participate in changing cultural patterns and societal realities as well. To be realistic, however, one should mention that in their Middle Eastern context, not only Armenian Evangelical youth but all youth often feel powerless before economic difficulties, political repressions, and religious traditions. Change is neither a common word nor is it a welcome one. Still, the church should fight everything that causes it to become apathetic. After all, the church is called to be church whatever the external conditions may be.

The extent to which the Armenian Evangelical Church is a sect and the extent to which it is an institutionalized church is determined by the way the church examines and relates to its cultural environment. At present the Armenian Evangelical Church seems to occupy middle ground between the two extremes. While some of the old attitudes prevail with regard to, say, the rejection of 'worldliness', the Armenian Evangelical Church is now a traditional institution parallel to the Apostolic and the Catholic Churches. The Armenian Evangelical Church has managed to avoid seeing itself and presenting itself as in "tension with the environment." Instead, it has introduced a cer-



tain mode of tension, that of overlooking the fact that such a tension does exist, and attributing disagreements with the environment to the unique character and approach of the Armenian Evangelical Church.

While discussing why the youth must be inspired to be involved, it is necessary to address the following additional factor pertaining to the type of entity the Armenian Evangelical Church has: although the Armenian Evangelical Church is perceived by outsiders, and described in Aharonian's writings, as having a unified witness in its environment, Aharonian himself reminds us that the Church is a divided body. The divisions in the church of Christ hold true among Armenian Evangelicals themselves too. So it is to be expected that various Armenian Evangelical individuals and congregations will have different views on why involvement is necessary and what the limits of involvement are. This is especially true in view of the fact that the Armenian Evangelical Church claims to be a democratic community.<sup>26</sup> There, the value of the person and his/her uniqueness is respected.

Nevertheless, the church remains a family, and family dynamics and tensions are expected to be operant in that community.<sup>27</sup> Often the church is a family for those young individuals who come from dysfunctional families; it is a father and a mother to those who have not enjoyed the care of their parents;<sup>28</sup> and it is a teacher to those who have not had enough education to make it on their own in their world.

To repeat, why is the church expected to inspire its youth to be interested in their environment, to be conscious of its underpinning's (including the political), and to seek constructive roles in it? Because not to do so would leave the development of the ethical sense of the youth at the mercy of haphazard phenomena, experiences, and institutions in society that could easily diffuse the identification fragments, the self-image and the community-image these youth have been raised with. It could also prove the Armenian Evangelical Church to be only an institution that is detached from reality, having little to do with the daily and temporal struggles of its members. Now if there are things that could hurt the 'witness' of the Church, what could hurt more than detachment from the socio-political world of reality?

### INSPIRE INVOLVEMENT IN WHAT?

It is not enough to be convinced that the church needs to inspire its youth to be involved in the affairs of the world. Neither is it enough to know why involvement is desirable. The church does not intend itself to be a land of fantasies, even though it aspires to embody ideals that are believed to have eternal value. Inspire what, or involvement in what? This is as important a question as "why be involved." One may find numerous forces, institutions, and organizations which may be willing to suggest, if not dictate, to the church

what it should get involved in. Therefore it is critical for the church to know how to proceed. What should the youth be taught about the various domains of involvement?

Every group or institution follows certain priorities and ways of doing things. Both inside and outside the church, those people and forces that have a control on setting the agenda of discussion are the ones who determine for the most part how an institution like a church acts, what occupies its time, and what creates its worries or relieves them. In that way, those powers that force an agenda are the ones that indirectly determine what is to be taught in the church and what is not. Therefore one should ask: who and what sets the agenda for the Armenian Evangelical Church of the Near East, especially regarding matters that pertain to involvement in the world outside the walls of an Armenian Evangelical congregation?

### **1. The Agenda of the Religious Environment?**

There are at least three major religious forces that have an impact on the present day Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East: the Armenian pietistic/revivalistic movements (traditionally the Armenian Evangelical Brotherhood Church), the Armenian Apostolic Church, and Islam. The Armenian Brotherhood Church began in the bosom of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Aleppo, Syria, in 1924.<sup>29</sup> Through its pietistic and evangelistic fervor, this Anabaptist church represented and still represents a dissatisfaction with the liberalism of the Armenian Evangelical Church<sup>30</sup> and its "lack of spirituality." It therefore stands, alongside more recent Armenian charismatic and Pentecostal movements as a constant challenge to the Armenian Evangelical Church in the following way: if you separated from the Armenian Apostolic Church because of disenchantment with the unsatisfactory level of "spirituality" and "morality" in that church, then make sure you do not fall into that same level.

While disagreeing with some of the theological positions of the Armenian Brotherhood Church, many Armenian Evangelical pastors and lay people in the Near East have words of praise for that church. Sometimes secretly, but often openly, they express envy of the emotional fervor among the membership of the Armenian Brotherhood Church and regret the fact that Armenian Evangelicals seldom exhibit equal enthusiasm for the mission of the church. In this envy it is often forgotten that there are theological differences between the two churches, and the differences are minimized to a variance in the degree of "spirituality." The most significant and noticeable difference between the two is that the Armenian Evangelical Church lays heavy emphasis on wholistic-ly, (i.e. socially, physically, mentally, etc.) educating the people in the ways of Christian life and keeping them connected to the church, whereas the Armenian Brotherhood Church is a revivalistic church.



Secondly, while it remains unacknowledged by Armenians, Evangelical and non-Evangelical alike, the impact of Islam on the life of the Armenian Evangelical Church and any other church in the Middle East should not be minimized. The Islamic context defines some of the boundaries of all Christian groups, especially with regard to issues of moral values. Most importantly, however, the Armenian Evangelical Church's thinking about evangelism is influenced greatly by the fact that Islam as a religion and as communities does not tolerate the conversions of its members to Christianity. Therefore the Armenian Evangelical Church is careful not to give the impression that it is inviting Muslims to the Christian faith.

And thirdly, the Armenian Evangelical Church is in constant reaction to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The fact that most Armenians are Apostolic in confession makes Armenian Evangelicals conscious of the differences between the two churches. Armenian Evangelicals, as a church and as individuals, often make efforts to show that their differences are minimal and that they are not very different from them after all. This is yet another example whereby the Armenian Evangelical Church has been trying to ease tensions with its environment.

The Armenian Evangelical Church is not always mistaken to accept the challenges that are put forth by the overwhelming presence of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Brotherhood Church, or Islam. No. Some challenges and agenda may function for the good of all. The Armenian Evangelical insistence on celebrating Christmas with those in the Mother Church on Jan. 6th and not December 25th is such an example.<sup>31</sup> It furthers the ecumenical and national harmony among Armenians while not compromising the principles upon which the Armenian Evangelical Church stands.

What is a mistake, however, is to become a reactive church instead of being a proactive one; reacting to the Armenian Apostolic reality instead of formulating an Evangelical vision for the Church and trying to live it out; buying into the accusations of revivalistic churches without focusing on the degree to which these accusations are founded; and shying away from taking risks in new and effective ways of living out the gospel in the Middle East out of fear of an Islamic reaction.

## **2. The Agenda of the Political Climate?**

At least two components define the political climate of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East: that of the Armenian political parties, and that of the larger and extra-Armenian political climate of the region. In a latent way the Armenian Evangelical Church finds itself competing with the Armenian political parties to provide for the ideological needs of its youth. It presents itself as an alternative to these parties. But it neither has the resources nor the preparation to do so. If ideology has to be lived out in society, then the

Armenian Evangelical Church needs to address that consciously.

On another level, the political climate of the Middle East, as a region and as separate countries and communities, is and has been for a long time one of upheavals and tribulations. The Armenian Evangelical Church has kept a distance also from the political events of its non-Armenian neighbors, an attitude that is not unique to Armenian Evangelicals but is shared with other Armenian churches and organizations and a number of Middle Eastern ethnic or religious minorities as well. The Armenian Evangelical Church, like most other churches in the region, realizes that it has no control over Middle Eastern politics. Therefore it stays out of that realm altogether, an attitude that has kept Armenians in relative peace with their often-feuding neighbors. Armenians have insisted that they are a cultural entity in the Middle East and not a political one, so they do not posit a threat to any governing or influential political leader, party, regime, or country.<sup>32</sup> In this regard Armenian Evangelical aloofness in the larger Armenian world is quite similar to Armenian aloofness in the larger Middle Eastern world. The question remains, however, whether keeping the peace is a sufficient expression of the justice, love, and reconciliation that the Christian church preaches.

### 3. The Agenda of its Tradition?

"We have always done it this way" has become a well-known position of social institutions that have existed long enough to develop traditions and ways of doing things. The case of the Armenian Evangelical Church is no exception. For many, the fact that the Armenian Evangelical Church has so far been aloof from Armenian politics is enough of a reason to justify remaining aloof in the future as well. So, the agenda for involvement or non-involvement is also presented to this Church by its tradition. The Armenian Evangelical Church has been involved, among other things, in the schooling of Armenian children, in social work with the needy, and in organizing Summer camps and conferences for Evangelical and non-Evangelical Armenians. However, any new avenue of involvement in society will be perceived to modify the character of the Armenian Evangelical Church, and therefore will be met with resistance.<sup>33</sup>

Saying that tradition is one of the factors that determine the agenda of the involvement of the Armenian Evangelical Church in society does not mean that tradition has to be always viewed negatively. Some traditions are to be upheld and lived over and over again, but when tradition is made to have the last word on the course of the church, that is when the Armenian Evangelical Church needs to re-evaluate its life.

The tradition of the Armenian Evangelical Church is first and foremost the Holy Scriptures, as the first Armenian Evangelical reformers declared. Therefore holding any other tradition to be the authority on what the church



should teach and do is the gravest error the Armenian Evangelical Church could commit against its own position.

The Armenian Evangelical priority for involvement is determined by those people, groups, or factors that get to set the agenda for the life of this church. But it is not the religious environment, political climate, and traditions of the past alone that determine that agenda. It is also the committees that oversee the life of the Armenian Evangelical Church, the pastors that have the role of teaching in the church, and, to a considerable extent, the interests of the members of Armenian Evangelical congregations.

There are two principles that need to be taken into consideration in the discussion of the involvement of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the affairs of its socio-political environment: first, it is the church itself that should decide what is worth getting involved in. In this way it guards itself against becoming a mere instrument in the hands of political parties and autocratic leaders that could derail it from its course. But second, despite its familial and ethnic nature, the church, and the Armenian Evangelical Church, specifically, is an "open system."<sup>34</sup> It is neither closed as a social entity nor is it closed as a religious entity. It acknowledges that all social and outer forces within the realm of which it functions are as real as the spiritual, theological and inner realities within which it exists. The answer to these two considerations can be summarized in the fact that the mandate of the Scriptures is the first and foremost authority of the Armenian Evangelical Church, and that mandate is to go and preach the gospel to the whole world.<sup>35</sup> So the choice of the church should be one of a thorough knowledge of and dedication to the welfare of the environment it exists in. In other words, the church should set the agenda of involvement as it interprets the mandate of the scriptures and as it gets to know its neighborhood, but it does that as a result of its obedience to the scriptural mandate and for the sake of the world, and not for its own survival. The survival of the church can only be a by-product of its living out of its mission.

### BEING 'CHURCH' MEANS INVOLVEMENT

So what should the Armenian Evangelical Church inspire its youth to get involved in?

First, for the church to be more than a Sunday activity, it needs to meet the people where they are in their daily lives, in the workplace, home, school, club and so forth. Therefore the church should be involved in all that its members are already involved in in their lives.

Second, the church needs to encourage its members to be involved in all that its members consciously or unconsciously neglect for selfish reasons.

Third, the church should encourage involvement in all that asserts both the narrow identities and the wider identity of the youth. The church needs

to humbly admit that it is neither an expert in nor an authority on every human knowledge and experience. However, a church that aims at presenting a general outlook on life, if not a 'wholistic education', can teach the people ways of thinking about situations and styles of behaving as well.

What fills the ideological interests of Armenian Evangelical youth? For some it could be the feeling that they belong to a minority that is not fully accepted; it could be their activities like sports competitions, music, etc.; it could be a spiritual sense of other-worldliness; or it could be the Armenian Evangelical emphasis on such values as education and intimate congregational life.

The Armenian Evangelical Church often teaches its constituency that religion alone can fill any and all the ideological interests of a person and that it is not necessary to look outside of the church. But since it is not possible for the Armenian Evangelical Church to synthesize all the data of its environment, a dichotomy can be created between things that are religious and things that are not. The Armenian Evangelical Church, by failing to deal with socio-political issues, may be sending a message that everything the church does not get involved in is anti-religious or anti-Armenian Evangelical.

Can religion be the only ideology for Armenian Evangelical youth? No, not the way things have been dealt with in the past of the Church. Religion cannot be the only source of ideology because so much of the input contemporary youth is gathered from a variety of non-church sources. Here is an illustration.

In the 1970's and early 1980's the sentiment among many Armenian political groups was one of impatience with the silence of the international community with regard to the Turkish massacre of Armenians earlier in this century. A number of Armenian militant groups (such as the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia - ASALA) surfaced, calling for direct terrorist action against Turkish diplomats and official organizations. Bombings and assassinations were planned and executed in a number of Western countries. Following these developments, every Armenian family, at least in the Middle East, found itself forming an opinion about the propriety of such methods of retaliation. A majority understood the impatience of the younger generations and agreed that Armenians had no other option but to use violence. A minority of Armenians, however, found these methods to be counterproductive or morally unacceptable. The Armenian Evangelical Church did not give a formal teaching on the issue, but it was clear that it inherently disagreed with retaliatory actions such as these. Surprisingly, many Armenian Evangelical youth, including some faithful members of the church, agreed with the retaliatory acts and, in the absence of other methods, found no moral problems with the approach.

The illustration does not need much interpretation. Clearly, even some



of the most faithful members of the Armenian Evangelical Church have been getting much of their ideological input from sources other than the church.

It is not realistic to expect the Armenian Evangelical Church to be the sole provider of ideology to young people who read literature, watch films, listen to songs, talk to neighbors, evaluate history and enter careers, none of which is the product of the Armenian Evangelical Church and its 'educational' agenda. Religion, for Armenian Evangelicals is not the only ideology. Non-religious worldviews and outlooks seem to have as powerful an impact on Armenian Evangelical youth as religious ones. In fact, Erikson is on target when he explains that "ideologies take over where religion leaves off, presenting themselves as historical perspectives on which to fasten individual faith and collective confidence."<sup>36</sup> For Armenian Evangelical youth, their church does not seem to satisfy their ideological thirst, and it may be that it should not be expected to.

As long as the Armenian Evangelical Church neglects such important aspects of its youth as the political, then, it cannot be the one institution to guide their orientation in life, even if it claims to provide a multi-dimensional education. In fact, the Armenian Evangelical Church cannot become the sole provider of ideology for its youth no matter what it does. Individual lives, however communal they may be, are open to uncontrollable and often undetectable influences from their environment. But all this does not and should not mean that the Armenian Evangelical Church cannot play a more prominent role in the formation of the ideological dimension of its members' lives, if for no other reason, then for the fact that ideology for human beings is intertwined with the innermost being, existential concerns, feelings, and self and other-perception of the youth. To put it clearly, religion needs to be turned into faith commitments that encompass all of life.

What we have been discussing here is what basically Armenian Evangelical youth get from their church. In other words, we have been trying to examine how deep the teachings of the Armenian Evangelical Church can penetrate into the lives of the people, and we have been trying to see whether and how the Armenian Evangelical Church is the provider of identity and orientation in life even in such aspects as the political.

Instead of asking: "Inspire involvement in what?" we should rather ask: "How deep into the lives of its members does the Armenian Evangelical Church want to penetrate?" The political is a part of the people's lives. If the church wants to acknowledge this reality then it should address all factors and experiences that are considered a part of the lives of the people.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While dissatisfied with the over-nationalism of other groups, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church is required to show how, then, one can express nationalistic feelings, exhibit political awareness and social responsibility, and remain faithful to the message of the gospel. My overview of aspects of the life of the Armenian Evangelical Church has held that what the church needs is the translation of the Gospel it preaches into all the everyday struggles of the people, not only the ones that have been addressed in the past. Hopefully this will lead into better awareness of the wider issues that exist in society and that affect its membership directly or indirectly. It is wrong to assume, however, that the church has a proper grasp of the Gospel and that all it lacks is some convenient way of implementing it. There cannot be a separation between these two. The Armenian Evangelical Church may be exemplary in how it manifests social responsibility in certain aspects such as working with the elderly, the economically underprivileged, the children, and so forth. On the other hand, all Armenian Evangelical pastors and parishioners would agree that the church needs a renewal of its dedication to the basic and simple principles of the gospel of Christ to avoid becoming only yet another Armenian religious institution. So the matter concerns both a renewed grasp of the Gospel and a critical appraisal of how the Gospel is lived out.

These pages cannot single-handedly propose how the Armenian Evangelical Church can be faithful to its *raison d'être*, but it certainly can underscore the necessity for addressing at least one aspect of the life of Armenians, namely, their national and political life seen through the lenses of a faithful church.

For a change to happen the church first needs to start systematic discussions about its embeddedness in and responsibility toward its Armenian and non-Armenian environment.<sup>37</sup> Only later can the church discuss how it is related or not related to other churches, political organizations, the Republic of Armenia, and various Middle Eastern countries where it exists. The technology of doing this is beside the point. Primary is the conviction that the church has larger responsibilities than it has traditionally assumed, and that its members are going to be unavoidably receptive to the ideological and political input of their environment whether the church likes it or not.

What I have been discussing is not so much that the church should speak out, as much as it is raising Armenian Evangelical youth to be prepared to see the political realm as a dimension of their social and religious life that cannot be ignored.

I am not proposing that the church should take a position on every single issue that strikes society. That is a secondary issue if we consider the fact



that the church is usually silent about political agenda altogether. I am proposing, however, that the church provide ways of thinking, believing, behaving and speaking about various aspects of social life. The church cannot control all that makes its way into the Armenian Evangelical individual's life but it can certainly help the believer discern how to respond and evaluate to them, from whatever domain of life and of society they may come. This is part of the reforming and transforming character of the Church.

## NOTES

1. This article presents the major arguments and portions of Chapter Four of the author's doctoral dissertation entitled *Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's "Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology"* and Erik H. Erikson's *"Understanding of the Continuity Between Individual and Community"*, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ., 1994. Hereafter cited as *Dissertation*. The title of the above-mentioned Chapter Four is "Armenian Evangelical and Political?", *op. cit.*, pp. 198-234.
2. My views about adolescence are mainly based on Erik H. Erikson's understanding of human development. see, Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, New York, 1968.
3. Duncan B. Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Policies in a Secular Age*, Oxford, 1989, p. 10. Hereafter cited as *Beliefs*.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. For this point see Hovhannes Aharonian, *Hay Avetaranakan Yekeghetsin Djanaparhnerou Khatchadzevounin*, Beirut, 1988, pp.88-114.
7. Such an understanding appears in Aram Arch. Keshishian *The Witness of the Armenian Church*, Beirut, 1978, p. 42. Cf. Karekin Sarkissian, "The Witness of the Oriental Churches," in Charles Malik, ed., *God and Man in Contemporary Thought* Beirut, 1970, pp. 114-131.
8. The witness I am describing is not unlike Charles Wood's explanation of "Christian witness," in his *Vision and Discernment*, Atlanta, GA, 1985, pp. 21-35. Witness, and specifically "Christian witness", Wood says, "is meant here in a comprehensive sense, roughly equivalent to a similarly broad sense of "Christian tradition," that is, one embracing both the activity of bearing witness (or handing on the tradition) and the substance of what is borne or handed on." See *Op. cit.*, p. 21.
9. This is reminiscent of the religious system of the Ottoman Empire and the concept of millets or confessional communities, each of which had a head that was its moral and sometimes judicial representative. See Kemal Karpat, "Millets and Nationality: The Roots of the incongruity of nation and state in the post-Ottoman era," in Benjamin Brande and Bernard Lewis, eds. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire; the Functioning of a Plural Society*, New York, 1982, p. 142. Personal conversations with pastors in Syria and Lebanon confirm that this reality still persists.
10. Forrester, *Beliefs*, p. 13.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
12. General Assemblies of the Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East (UAECNE) as late as early as the 1970's and as late as 1996 have discussed this subject.
13. Duncan B. Forrester, *Theology and Politics*, Oxford/New York, 1988, preface, p. vii.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26.
17. See Chapter Two of author's dissertation, pp. 75-138, where Aharonian's works and thinking are discussed at length. Chapter Two of the dissertation bears the title "Toward an Armenian Evangelical Theology."
18. The "Protean type" is presented in various works by Robert J. Lifton, as it relates to "self-process." Lifton explains the "Protean style" of individuals as "the capacity for psychological shape-shifting (involving belief systems, relationships, and styles of living) as well as for acting on multiple, seemingly divergent images that are simultaneously held- can apply to large groups of people, even to societies. We can thus speak of a Protean historical situation in which, in terms of imagery and sometimes behavior, everything becomes possible." Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and The Continuity of Life*, New York, 1983, pp. 296-297. With regard to the relevance of these thoughts to the Armenian Evangelical Church, it is more 'holding various positions together' than 'shape-shifting' that I have in mind. Lifton's views are not very different from Erikson's views on the some historical situations and groups in which identity vacua and moratoria seem to be more prevalent than in others. See for example "Identity and Uprootedness in Our Times" in Robert Lifton, *Insight and Responsibility*, New York, 1964, pp. 81-107.
19. See *Dissertation*, Chapter Two, p. 89.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 92-94.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
23. A stimulating discussion of various norms of neighbor-love is found in Garth L. Hallett's *Christian Neighbor-Love: An Assessment of Six Rival Versions*, Washington, D. C. 1989. According to Hallett, neighbor-love can have the character of 1) Self-preference; 2) Parity; 3) Other-preference; 4) Self-subordination; 5) Self-forgetfulness; and 6) Self-denial. See, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-6.
24. For a detailed discussion of this subject see Erik H. Erikson, pp. 135-138.
25. See *Dissertation*, Chapter Two, p. 89.
26. It could be argued that the neighborhood of the Armenian Evangelical Church, i.e. Oriental churches and the Islamic community, is not democratic, and therefore, this Church, with its congregational views and democratic polity is a misfit and can have only limited acceptance among the Middle Eastern people. It is worth mentioning here that some sociological factors such as a unique understanding of family and the city are said to have made Protestants in the Levant "aliens" in their own families and neighborhoods. See Wanis A. Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds*, Beirut, 1986, pp. 77-97.
27. *Dissertation*, Chapter Two, p. 90.



28. One cannot help but be reminded of Erikson's description of the struggles of the young Martin Luther, specifically that his tensions with his mother and especially with his father which were channeled to a tension with the institution of the church and its authorities. In this struggle Martin's need to feel "justified in the eyes of God" and win God's recognition took precedence. See Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, New York, 1958, pp. 156 and 119 consecutively.
29. Tigran Kherlobian, *Voskematian*, vol. I, Beirut, 1950, pp. 280-286.
30. Vahan H. Tootikian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church*, Detroit, 1982, p. 104.
31. *Dissertation*, Chapter Two, pp. 131-132.
32. According to Hermassi, in the Middle Eastern countries "any attempt to force politics and culture into the same mold will surely lead to disaster." See Elbaki Hermassi, his "Politics and Culture in the Middle East," *Social Compass*, vol. XXV nos. 3-4, 1978, p. 463. Armenian peaceful survival in the region is an example of the truth of this thought.
33. This struggle is evident in contemporary efforts by the Armenian Evangelical Church to find ways of addressing a newly independent Armenia, whereby traditionalists wary of Evangelistic involvement in Armenia.
34. Applying biologist von Bertalanffy's "systems approach" to the life of organizations, Gareth Morgan explores the necessity for social organizations to be open systems for them to survive in their environment. A system is "open", says Morgan, if, among other things, it puts a proper emphasis on the environment in which it exists, and if it views the organization as interrelated subsystems. See Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization*, Newbury Park, 1986, pp. 39-76, especially pages 44-48.
35. Aharonian, p. 209.
36. Erikson, in Lifton, p. 127.
37. Tootikian, argues that a change in the structural form of the Armenian Evangelical Church worldwide could help in living out the mission of the Church. First, he advocates a structural unity among all Armenian Evangelical congregations worldwide, and then he proposes a centralized structure for it. Such a centralized system, he says, can "cement all Armenian Evangelical churches for the common purpose of sharing in the needs and deeds of each others' lives." Moreover, centralization can be an "instrument for mutual assistance in serving the Armenian people and others, than independent parishes working in isolation." See vahan H. Tootikian, "The Unfinished Reformation," *AEUNA [Armenian Evangelical Union of North America] Forum*, Autumn, 1991, p. 22. In fact, the Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East [UAECNE] itself is currently considering a revision of its constitution into a more centralized one.

P. H.

## ՀԱՅ ԱՒԵՏԱՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ, ԵՒ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆ

(ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ)

ՎԵՐ. ԳՈԿՏ. ՓՈԼ ՀԱՅՏՈՍԹԵԱՆ

Կրօնական եւ ոչ-կրօնական ընկալումներու իրարմէ տարանջատումը կամ իրարու հետ միագոյումը հիմնական խնդիր մըն է Հայ Աւետարանականութեան համար. առ այս՝ հրապարակ կու գայ հարցումը որ կը սպասէ իր պատասխանին – պէտք է որ հայ աւետարանական երիտասարդը պատրաստուի լոկ եկեղեցական ու կրօնական ընկալութեամբ եւ ձգել որ կեանքը կատարէ մնացեալը՝ թէ՞ ոչ անհրաժեշտ է զայն պատրաստել ազգային, ընկերային, գաղափարաբանական եւ այլազունի ընկալութեամբ նաեւ, եւ այդ ձեւով զայն ընծայել ամբողջական:

Կեանքի ամբողջականութիւնը եւ համապարփակութիւնը հիմնական հարցերէն մէկն է Հայ Աւետարանական Եկեղեցիին եւ աւետարանական ըմբռնումին Միջին Արեւելքի մէջ, եւ այդ իսկ պատճառով, որպէս աւետարանական աւանդութիւն, ժամանակի ընթացքին աւետարանականներու մօտ ստեղծուած է կրօնական, եկեղեցական, ընկերային, քաղաքական եւ այլ տեսակի համամանութիւն մը՝ որպէս հետեւանք անոնց ջանքում զաստիարակութեան, այդքան՝ որ այժմ քաւ է անոնցմէ ճանչնալ մէկ հոգի՝ ճանչցած ըլլալու համար բոլոր անդամները համայնքին: Այս կացութիւնը ցոյց կու տայ իրողութիւնը «միացեալ վկայութեան» մը, որ կը հակադրուի «անհատական վկայութեան» եւ կը դրսեւորէ հանրագումար արտայայտութիւնը կեանքին իմացական, զգացական եւ հաւատամքային տուեալներուն: Մէկ կողմէն՝ այս մէկը կ'անդամալուծէ եկեղեցին եւ հաւատացեալին համապարփակ զարգացումը եւ արտայայտչականութիւնը եւ միւս կողմէ՝ կրնայ գերզգայնութիւն մը յառաջացնել հաւաքական ինքնութեան հանդէպ: Այսօր Մերձատոր Արեւելքի Հայ Աւետարանական Եկեղեցիին համար անհրաժեշտ է գտնել ուղիղ ճամբան եւ ճիշդ ու ամբողջական ձեւով պատրաստել նոր սերունդը:

Հակառակ այս անհրաժեշտութեան՝ այժմ ընդունուելու է որ անիկա մէկդի է ձգած քաղաքական եւ ընկերային պատրաստութիւնը նոր սերունդին եւ կամատոր կերպով մոռցած որ աւետարանական երիտասարդին համար հիմնական պահանջ է գիտնալ ազգային իր պատկանելիութիւնն այդքան՝ որքան որ է կրօնականը, որովհետեւ կարելի չէ իրարմէ անջատել այս երկուքը. այսուհանդերձ պէտք է շատ զգոյշ ըլլալ, որ եկեղեցին չիյնայ ճիրաններէն ներս կուսակցական կազմակերպութիւններու, որ անիկա չիյնայ փէշին մրցակցական վազքի մը այլ համայնքներու եւ կազմակերպութիւններու հետ, եւ հոսկ՝ չբաւարարուի լոկ գործունէութեան փոփոխութեամբ եկեղեցական ղեկավարութեան՝ այլ անկէ շատ առաջ փորձէ նախապատրաստել համայնքն այսպիսի յարաբերական փոփոխութիւններու համար:

Ընդհանրապէս ընդունուած է, որ չկան եկեղեցի եւ աստուածաբանութիւն առանց քաղաքական եւ ընկերային տուեալներու որոնք ծառայեն անոնց. հիմնականը սակայն փոխյարաբերութիւնն է եկեղեցիին եւ անոնց:



Հայ աւետարանականութեան վերջին մէկուկէս դարու պատմութիւնը ցոյց կու տայ, որ եկեղեցին միշտ ալ խուսափած է այս փոխյարաբերութիւնը հաստատելէ, ու թէ երէկ Հայ Աւետարանական Շարժումը կը նկատուէր զուտ հոգեկան եւ կրօնական բարենորոգում մը՝ այսօր ալ տակաւին կան գայն այդպիսին նկատողներ, մինչդէռ, իրականութեան մէջ, կրօնական պարտականութիւն մըն է դէր վերցնել ընկերային հարցերու մէջ: Ըստ Վեր. Ահարոնեանի՝ այս դերը կ'արտայայտուի եկեղեցիին վայրին, տեղի ու ժամանակի պատկանելիութեամբ եւ անոր փոխյարաբերութեամբը շրջակայ այլ եկեղեցիներու եւ կրօնական եւ այլաբովանդակ գանազան հաւաքականութիւններու հետ: Ի վերջոյ եկեղեցին գոյութիւն ունի տեղ մը կեանքէն ներս եւ տարածութեան, անոր ծառայելու կոչումով ու մանաւանդ անիկա ունի փրկարար դեր մը ո՛չ միայն ինքզինքին հանդէպ՝ այլ մանաւանդ իր շրջապատին եւ աւելին՝ անիկա, կամայ եւ ակամայ, ենթակայ է ազդեցութիւններուն օրուան մշակութային շարժումներուն, քաղաքային օրէնքներուն եւ այլ խարտոցումներու, եւ այս բոլորը՝ հակառակ ալ իր կամքին: Հայ Աւետարանական Եկեղեցին շատ չէ մտահոգուած այս հարցերով, սակայն նախընտրելի պիտի ըլլար, որ անիկա նախապատրաստէր աւետարանական երիտասարդը դիմագրաւելու ամէն ինչ, կշռելու եւ դատելու լաւն ու վատը, եւ կատարելու իր ընտրութիւնը:

Որպէս ռամկապետական հաստատութիւն՝ Աւետարանական եկեղեցին արդէն իսկ ունի ներքին թէ արտաքին բաժանումներ, եւ ուր կը յարգուի անհատին անգուգականութիւնը. այսուհանդերձ՝ ընտանիք մըն է անիկա, որուն անդամներէն ներս գործօն են անոնց ներքին մղումները եւ ձգտումները: Դիշդ հոս ալ կը կայանայ բարոյական դերը Աւետարանական Եկեղեցիին՝ դաստիարակել անհատը որ կարենայ ապրիլ միասնութեան մէջ, տալ անոր անհրաժեշտ ուղղութիւնը եւ հեռու պահել գայն պատահական ազդեցութիւններէ: Ահա թէ ինչո՞ւ համար անհրաժեշտ է Եկեղեցիին համար գիտնալ, թէ ի՞նչ պիտի տայ անիկա մոր սերունդին եւ ինչպէ՞ս:

Հոս ի յայտ կու գայ անհրաժեշտութիւնը ուսումի եւ դաստիարակութեան հիմնական ծրագիրի մը, որ ընդգրկէ կրօնական շրջապատը, քաղաքական կլիման եւ աւանդութիւնները: Արդարեւ՝ «եկեղեցի» կը նշանակէ գործակցութիւն, փոխյարաբերութիւն եւ գործօնութիւն, անիկա լոկ կիրակնօրեայ դպրոց մըն չէ, ինչպէս որ չէ կիրակնօրեայ գործունէութիւն մը: Անիկա ստիպուած է զբաղիլ ինչպէս նեղ ու մասնայատուկ՝ նոյնպէս նաեւ լայն եւ ընդհանրական հարցերով, գաղափարաբանութիւններով, ընկերային եւ քաղաքական շարժումներով, իսկ ինքն առանձինն բաւարար չէ ամբողջական աճին ու զարգացումին համար հայ աւետարանական եկեղեցիին:

Անշուշտ այժմ իրատեսութիւն չէ ակնկալել, որ Հայ Աւետարանական Եկեղեցին միանշմբոցը կրնայ հանդիսանալ սա աճին ու զարգացումին համար, իսկ կրօնը միանշ գաղափարաբանութիւնը որ պէտք է հայ աւետարանական երիտասարդին: Որքա՞ն ատեն որ Եկեղեցին մերժէ զբաղիլ այս հարցերով՝ այդքա՞ն ատեն եւ վստահօրէն պիտի ձախողի անիկա առաջնորդի եւ ղեկավարի իր դերին եւ առաքելութեան մէջ:

Արդ՝ ի՞նչ պէտք է ընել վաղը: Յստակ է որ չի բաւեր հարցերուն մօտենալ ինչպէս եղաւ անցեալին: Անհրաժեշտ է աւետարանական ուսումն ու զարգացումը ջամբել այնպէս որ անիկա համապատասխանէ երիտասարդին կարիքներուն, առօրեայ կեանքին, եւ մանաւանդ օգնէ անոր իր դժուարութիւններուն լուծում մը բերելու, եւ ընէ այնպէս որ ազգային եւ քաղաքական կեանքը դրսեւորուի հաստատ եկեղեցիի մը հայեցակէտին ընդմէջէն: Առաւել՝ ընել այնպէս, որ անիկա ցոյց տայ կամ մերժէ ցոյց տալ, թէ ինչո՞ւ եւ

ի՞նչպես ինք «կը մատչի այլ եկեղեցիներուն, քաղաքական կազմակերպութիւններուն, Հայաստանի Հանրապետութեան, եւ Միջին Արեւելքի զանազան երկիրներուն ուր ներկայ է ինք: Հարց չէ ձեռն այս մատչումին: Հիմնական է համոզումը թէ եկեղեցին ունի անելի մեծ պատասխանատւութիւն աւանդականօրէն իր ունեցածէն, եւ թէ եկեղեցին ուզէ կամ ոչ, իր անդամները անխուսափելի կերպով պիտի ենթակայ մնան շրջակայքի գաղափարաբանական եւ քաղաքական ազդեցութիւններուն»: