


NELLI PETROSYAN*

YSU Faculty of Theology, Graduate Student

ASPU Department of Philosophy and Logic

n.l.petrosyan@mail.ru

0000-0001-5543-0962 

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THE REFLECTION OF MORAL AND MORAL- EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE WORKS OF NERSES SHNORHALI

Abstract

The Catholicos of All Armenians, Saint Nerses the Gracious (c. 1100–1173), engaged in prolific activities across ecclesiastical, cultural, political, literary, scientific, and educational fields. Through his diverse works, he contributed significantly to the advancement of Armenian literature, particularly its poetic tradition. The hallmark of his genius is evident in nearly all medieval liturgical manuscripts, which he refined as a theologian, doctrinal scholar, exegete, liturgist, philosopher, and artist. His spiritually oriented writings and hymns elevated Armenian medieval art to a new, higher level, enriching both literature and music. Moreover, Nerses the Gracious contributed to the development of the text of the Divine Liturgy and the Armenian Missal, or “Advice Book,” which originated in the Apostolic period and was completed in the 10th century. Over the centuries, it was mainly enriched by the works of Gregory the Illuminator, Sahak Partev, Hovhannes Mandakuni, and Gregory of Narek, and in the 11th century, further developed through the efforts of Nerses the Gracious. Of particular significance is the Catholicos’ contribution to the liturgy, as many of his prayers, exhortations, and songs were incorporated into it. In this way, Nerses also refreshed and enriched their content.

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The Reflection of Moral and Moral-Educational Perspectives in the Works ...

Since ancient times, notions of morality and religious rites and ceremonies have played an important role in maintaining human relationships within certain permissible boundaries. Christianity, in turn, initiated a radical transformation in the field of moral understanding, a development pursued by many fathers of the Armenian and universal Church. Nerses the Gracious occupied a distinct place among them. In the vast literary heritage of this multifaceted figure, these influences are clearly reflected through his moral-educational and ethical perspectives, which constitute the central focus of the present study.

Keywords: *Nerses Shnorhali, works, ecclesiastical literature, theological struggle, didactic approach, multitiered achievements, pan-Christian principles, humanistic outlook.*

Introduction

Every significant period in the history of a nation's literature is characterized by the literary heritage of a prominent writer or group of writers, whose works most profoundly and clearly express the defining features of the era's historical-philosophical and artistic thought, as well as its main developmental tendencies. Such a role was also accorded to the works of Nerses the Gracious, whose name is closely associated with an important period in the history of Armenian national literature and culture. The time in which Nerses the Gracious lived represents one of the critical periods in Armenian history.

Nerses the Gracious was the Catholicos of All Armenians, the greatest theologian of the Armenian Cilician state, as well as an ecclesiastical and political figure, exegete, educator, poet, and composer. He lived and created during a period when the Armenian Church was entrusted with consolidating and reaffirming its doctrine and faith. By virtue of his innate theological talent, Nerses the Gracious reconciled Armenian-Assyrian ecclesiastical disagreements on key doctrinal and liturgical matters,¹ and he also addressed inter-church relations by mediating the "Union of Churches" issue between the Byzantine Emperor Komnenos and Patriarch Michael of Constantinople. He is also credited with peacemaking efforts aimed at mitigating the long-standing disagreements between the Armenian and Greek Churches. In this context, he pursued a broad-minded approach, demonstrating a rational path based on the principle of re-

¹ Nerses the Gracious 1977, 9.

specting the freedom of each church's traditions. These traditions must be mutually acceptable and agreement can only be reached through mutual concessions.

Indeed, the ecclesiastical, diplomatic, and literary contributions of Saint Nerses the Gracious, Nerses of Klaia (the Songwriter, 1166–1173), Patriarch of the Armenians, are invaluable. As Wilfrid aptly remarked, there is no "kind of skill or craft in which this renowned patriarch did not succeed".²

The significant shifts in socio-economic relations during the 9th–12th centuries proved to be a turning point in Armenian social life and ideological thought, leading to a weakening of religious fervor and the secularization of customs and perspectives. All of this created favorable conditions for the emergence and development of a "New Intellectual Current" in literature, as well as in other spheres of human thought and culture, which progressed along a path marked by the resolution of complex contradictions.³

On account of his multifaceted talents, his contemporaries called him "Nerses Shnorhali" (the Gracious). This honorific appears in ancient manuscripts and chronicles and is particularly associated with his exceptional abilities in eloquence, teaching, and exegesis. Thus, in the 12th century, Armenian literature was entering a new stage of development, characterized by a deepening secularization, more stable principles for the aesthetic perception of reality, a clear aspiration to bring literature closer to life and respond to its vital concerns, an expansion of literary themes, enrichment of content with new dimensions, the development of older literary genres alongside the creation of new ones, and the adoption of diverse new poetic forms.⁴

The most characteristic expression of this new phase in the development of literature was the work of Nerses the Gracious.

Building upon the traditions established in previous centuries and grounded in the national artistic mindset, Nerses the Gracious continued Armenian ecclesiastical literature, elevating it to a new stage of development and shaping its subsequent course and direction within Armenian reality. It is precisely for this reason that the value of his literary heritage is significant not only for medieval Armenian literature but also for contemporary scholarship.

² Alishan 1873, 491.

³ Nerses the Gracious 1977, 13.

⁴ Nerses the Gracious 1977, 15.

The Works of Nerses the Gracious

As a prolific author, Nerses the Gracious left an immortal name in both prose and verse and was considered the greatest translator of his era. He worked in a wide variety of literary forms and genres, advancing Armenian national literature in every direction and producing masterpieces in each form.

As noted, his works caused a significant turning point in the fields of literature and art, consolidated the theoretical foundations of the Armenian Church's doctrine, and as a result, earned him enduring recognition and praise from subsequent generations under titles such as "Second Illuminator of the Armenians," "Teacher of Universal Light," "Great Genius," "Master Orator," "Sage," and others.⁵

The life and work of the great medieval Armenian poet, thinker, and translator have long attracted the interest of a wide range of scholars. However, this study will focus specifically on his literary activity, particularly those works in which his moral-educational and ethical perspectives and approaches are evident. In Armenian ecclesiastical literature, the work known to us under the name of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, *"The Frequently Used Discourse"*, is considered the first composition and the first religiously oriented work to have a significant impact on the Christian thought and moral education of the Armenian people, as well as on the development of education for subsequent generations, through its moral, didactic, and pedagogical mission.⁶

Drawing on the example of the renowned Armenian writers and composers of previous centuries, Nerses the Gracious did not neglect moral-educational and didactic issues. In his works, he consistently prioritized the moral and educational concerns of the younger, developing generation. This is why his writings simultaneously reflect and uphold moral values and ethical lessons. For him, both were equally essential, like the two eyes of a person. To achieve this, Nerses the Gracious often preferred the accessible art of expression to make his message more understandable, while also appreciating stylistic diversity in speech. In this respect, his works are exceptional, as they established a clear and comprehensible literary style that influenced subsequent generations.

⁵ Catholicos of All Armenians 2008, 194.

⁶ Petrosyan 2022, 100.

In Nerses' writings, the historical fate of the Armenian people became the central focus of his concern, which in turn imbued his best compositions with a pronounced spirit of patriotism.

Interestingly, when addressing the fate of the Armenian people, Nerses the Gracious does not seek consolation in, nor offer comfort through, the prospect of the afterlife. Instead, he urges his compatriots to "value the present life",⁷ relying not on the Christian principles of tolerance or the maxim "do not resist evil", but calling the children of his nation to resist the enemy with arms if necessary. A similar exhortation was made by Yeznik of Kolbatsi in his "Refutation of Sects" when speaking about the struggle against the enemy.

According to Nerses the Gracious, in the fierce struggle for the survival of the nation, it is not enough to "have faith only in true belief"; one must also:

*"... unite one's deeds with righteousness
in accordance with faith.
For faith without deeds is dead,
in which neither action nor fulfillment exists..."*⁸

The author ranks among the greatest human virtues strength, courage, and bravery, incorporating them into works written in a wide variety of genres and styles. For example, in *"Tragic Epic in the Letters of the Saints"*, he implores God:

*"O Mighty One, grant me to be strong,
and to stand firm against the raging evil..."*⁹

In his blessing *"To the Holy Angelic"*, he expresses the desire to eradicate "the root of corruption among people and to ignite courage..."¹⁰ In his admonition addressed to "lords and rulers", he urges them, instead of accumulating treasures and wealth, to unite those around them "through the wise and the brave". Nerses the Gracious devoted numerous brilliant poetic lines to courage as a supreme virtue of the Christian individual, particularly in his *Homeric Epic* and especially in *The Lament of Edessa*, consistently seeking to instill in the reader an unyielding spirit of bravery and heroism.

⁷ Nerses the Gracious 1973, 134.

⁸ Nerses the Gracious 1973, 103.

⁹ Nerses the Gracious 1830, 55.

¹⁰ Nerses the Gracious 1830, 273.

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To educate Armenian youth fighting for freedom and independence in the spirit of their ancestors' "noble aspirations" and "glorious courage", and to instill in them patriotism and a strong sense of national identity, Nerses the Gracious, at a young age (1121), composed "*Composition in Homeric Epic*", a historical poem in verse. Its material is drawn from Movses Khorenatsi's *History*. This work is not a comprehensive history of Armenia, but rather a selection of notable episodes from previous centuries.

It becomes quite clear that Nerses was so well acquainted with Armenian national literature, particularly the historiographical principles already established during the Mesropian era, that he not only continued their tradition but was able, even at a young age, to create such a work. In this poem, the author pays particular attention to past events that bolster Armenian national pride, as well as to the circumstances surrounding the establishment and consolidation of statehood.

He compares Armenian kings to the celebrated heroes of universal history, and at times even considers them superior.¹¹

In this instance, the author resorts to exaggeration, aiming to instill confidence in people fighting against a powerful enemy. Deeply concerned with the fate of his nation, the statesman and poet was also attentive to issues of intellectual and moral education within society and the individual. Here, too, Nerses the Gracious's humanistic thinking is evident, expressed throughout his various works, but especially in his didactic-educational poetic admonitions.

His series of "introductory" admonitions, "*The Word of Faith from the Beginning in Armenian Letters Composed in Verse by Nerses*", "*The Lord Nerses' Introductory Instructional Admonitions from Our Letters, Verse by Verse*", and "*The Lord Nerses' Educational Admonitions for Children in Alphabetic Verse*", represented an important innovation in Armenian literature, not only in poetic form but also in their content.

Nerses the Gracious did not limit himself to the education of "schoolchildren," but pursued a much broader moral-educational goal, aiming at the instruction and ethical development of people of all ages and of all strata of society, "from the whole of the soul." While most of his admonitions are moralistic in nature, and sometimes religious, he is far from being an ordinary moralist or

¹¹ Nerses the Gracious 1830, 505.

preacher. Even the ideas related to Christian commandments, which he composed in poetic form, are imbued with his own moral-educational principles.

In his poetic admonitions, he is guided by humanistic ideas. At the foundation of moral education in society, he places the principle of harmoniously cultivating both the intellectual and physical capacities of the individual. According to him, without bodily strength, there can be no spiritual resilience:

*"If your body is weak,
your soul will be sick and frail..."¹²*

In his poetic admonitions, the author emphasizes the development and cultivation of the individual's intellectual world, assigning a prominent role to reason, study, and knowledge. He exhorts his readers not to be "lazy" in learning, to emulate the "wise", "to unite one's soul with the sages", and "to cultivate brilliance", developing the idea that it is only through this path that a person can find their proper place in life.¹³

Nerses the Gracious was confident and firmly believed in the truth that, without intellectual development, without the purification of societal morals, and without spiritual strength, the continued survival of the nation is impossible.

The issue of moral education within society is also reflected in Nerses' journalistic and publicistic writings, particularly in the pamphlet *"To All the Armenians of Our Time"*. In this work, he addresses numerous problems of religious and ecclesiastical life, as well as the shortcomings and undesirable phenomena present among various strata of society.

His series of canonical and publicistic works continues with *"Universal Letters of Saint Nerses the Gracious"*, addressed to all the faithful, which, due to its moral-educational significance, stands as a cornerstone of Armenian and, more broadly, Christian literature.

Particular attention is due to his observations on social life and interpersonal relations, especially when addressing the rulers and lords of the country. He advises:

"Do not unjustly burden your subjects with heavy and oppressive coercion – for this cannot make them strong; rather, judge according to law and, in accordance with each one's capacity, assign strength ap-

¹² Nerses the Gracious 1830, 337.

¹³ Nerses the Gracious 1830, 349.

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appropriately...¹⁴ Nerses the Gracious, of course, did not aim to eliminate social inequality, but sought only to mitigate its effects.

When addressing different strata of society, he prescribes rules of conduct, a sense of tact, impartiality, and other skills, which, even if derived from pan-Christian principles, are presented concretely as practical means for educating individuals. Another notable observation, drawn from a sermon addressed to all the faithful regarding the upbringing of children, is Nerses' advice to begin a child's education from an early age, keeping them away from vices and various corruptions, and instilling virtues.¹⁵

Nerses the Gracious wrote with great love and respect about Armenian national heroes and patriotic kings, with patriotism and the ideals of the homeland forming the core of his works, and the liberation of the nation regarded as a primary concern. He emphasized that each of the five main social classes - clergy, rulers, soldiers, urban dwellers or merchants, and peasants - was called to play a specific role in public life. Therefore, they should cooperate for the well-being of the nation. The Armenian historian-patriarch sought to regulate the interrelations of all these social strata through stable laws and principles of justice.

The Gracious perception of the individual, rooted in humanistic ideas of the Renaissance, is also reflected in his poetic hymns, in the poem *"Jesus the Son"*, and in other works.

Conclusion

In human relations, we all wish to be treated justly, according to truth and law, and with love. The Biblical "Golden Rule" seems to embody the noblest principle for regulating human interactions, excluding falsehood, evil, envy, and hypocrisy. Moreover, this rule simultaneously encourages the opposite: to do good willingly, sincerely, with love and compassion. A person who lives and acts according to the Golden Rule never errs in their deeds. The commandments of Scripture, possessing inner strength and power, guide the individual to do the greatest good for their neighbor. Undoubtedly, Christian morality serves as a driving force in this regard. This is why Christian ethics provides no path toward inactivity or indifference.

¹⁴ Nerses the Gracious 1871, 69, 70.

¹⁵ Nerses the Gracious 1977, 58.

From this perspective, Nerses the Gracious, as one of the most prominent and original figures in medieval Armenian classical literature, played a significant role in the crucial work of educating and morally cultivating the Armenian people. By dedicating his natural talents to this purpose and placing the commandments of Scripture at the foundation of education, he continued to nurture generations according to moral principles. Centuries have passed since Nerses' birth, yet the vast legacy he left behind still offers valuable lessons today, not only in Armenian ecclesiastical literature, pedagogy, and ethics, but also in other fields. His works provide modern readers with a comprehensive understanding of 12th-century reality, social life, and the customs and morals of the time.

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ՆԵԼԼԻ ՊԵՏՐՈՍՅԱՆ

*ԵՊՀ աստվածաբանության ֆակուլտետի հայցորդ
ՀՊՄՀ փիլիսոփայության և տրամաբանության ամբիոն
n.l.petrosyan@mail.ru*

0000-0001-5543-0962 

ԲԱՐՈՅԱԿՐԹԱԿԱՆ ԵՎ ԲԱՐՈՅԱԴԱՍՏԻԱՐԱԿՉԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՅԱՑՔՆԵՐԻ ԱՐՏԱՑՈԼՈՒՄԸ ՆԵՐՍԵՍ ՇՆՈՐՀԱԼՈՒ ԵՐԿԵՐՈՒՄ

Ամփոփում

Ամենայն հայոց կաթողիկոս Սուրբ Ներսես Շնորհալին (մոտ. 1100–1173 թթ.) եկեղեցական, մշակութային, քաղաքական, գրական, գիտական և մանկավարժական բեղուն գործունեություն է ծավալել տարբեր ոլորտներում: Նա իր բազմաժանր ստեղծագործություններով հաստատել է հայ գրականության, մասնավորապես բանաստեղծական մշակույթի առաջընթացը: Նրա հանճարի կնիքն են կրում միջնադարյան գրեթե բոլոր ծիսական մատյանները, որոնց կատարելագործմանը նա նպաստել է որպես աստվածաբան, դավանաբան, մեկնիչ, ծիսագետ, իմաստասեր և արվեստագետ: Նրա հոգևոր բնույթի ստեղծագործությունները և շարականները զարգացման մի նոր՝ ավելի բարձր աստիճանի բարձրացրեցին հայ միջնադարյան արվեստը, թե՛ գրականությունը, թե՛ երաժշտությունը: Ինչպես նաև Շնորհալին իր նպաստն է ունեցել Պատարագի տեքստի և Հայոց «Պատարագամատույցի» կամ «խորհրդատետրի» կազմավորմանը, որը սկիզբ էր առել առաքելական շրջանում, բայց ամբողջացավ ավելի ուշ՝ X դարում: Դարերի ընթացքում հիմնականում այն հարստացավ Գրիգոր Լուսավորչի, Սահակ Պարթևի, Հովհան Մանդակունու, Գրիգոր Նարեկացու կողմից, իսկ XI դարում արդեն Ներսես Շնորհալու ջանքերով: Հատկապես մեծ է Շնորհալի կաթողիկոսի

բերած նպաստը ժամերգությանը, որի մեջ ներմուծվեցին նրա բազում աղթքները, հորդորներն ու երգերը: Ընդ որում, արդյունքում Շնորհալին թարմացրեց նաև դրանց բովանդակությունը:

Փաստորեն հնագույն ժամանակներից սկսած մարդկային հարաբերությունները որոշակի թույլատրելի սահմաններում պահելու խնդրում կարևոր դեր ունեին բարոյականության վերաբերյալ ժամանակի պատկերացումները, կրոնական ծեսերն ու արարողությունները: Քրիստոնեությունն էլ արմատական փոփոխության սկիզբ դրեց մարդկանց բարոյագիտական պատկերացումների բնագավառում: Ինչին հետամուտ եղան հայ և ընդհանրական եկեղեցու բազմաթիվ հայրեր: Շնորհալին էլ նրանց շարքում իր ուրույն տեղն ունեցավ: Բազմաշնորհ գործչի գրական հսկայական ժառանգության մեջ դրանք նկատելի արտացոլված են նրա բարոյադաստիարակչական և բարոյակրթական հայացքների ներքո: Ինչն էլ հանդիսանում է ներկայիս աշխատանքի հիմնական առանցքը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Ներսես Շնորհալի, սրբեղծագործություն, եկեղեցական մատենագրություն, դավանաբանական պայքար, խրատական, բազմադաշնություն, համաքրիստոնեական սկզբունքներ, հումանիզմի հայեցակետ: