

SOME REMARKS ON ARMENIAN CHRISTOLOGY

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Felix Corley reports [*AIM*, December 1998] that Catholicos Aram I, referring to the Common Declaration that Catholicos Karekin I signed with Pope John Paul II in December 1996, said the following: "What was said in the declaration was very much in line with the Christology of the Armenian Church—it is 100% compatible. I don't see any deviation from it. The position of the Armenian Church in the fifth and sixth centuries differed from the position in the 12th and 13th centuries. There has been a constant evolution."

That is not an accurate statement. At least three considerations cast doubt on it.

1. The first is circumstantial. Catholic divines in general, and Pope John Paul II in particular are not known for their tolerance in matters of doctrine. One may therefore safely assume that the Declaration that the Pope of Rome signed with the Catholicos of All Armenians is entirely in line with Catholic teaching, which means that it makes no concession to the christology of the Armenian Church. Christology is the theory of who and/or what Jesus Christ was and is. We and the Latins have differed over the answers to that question for some fifteen hundred years. Unlike us, who are a "one nature" church, the Romans recognize in Jesus Christ *two* natures. Now it is true that the phrase "two natures" does not appear in the Common Declaration mentioned above, but there are more ways than one of skinning the proverbial cat. The Pope's advisers, highly competent and wily, know only too well that Armenian classical theologians abhor "two natures," and that no Armenian catholicos who wishes to keep his throne would formally adopt that phrase. So the Pope, while he does not use the *phrase* "two natures" in the text of the Declaration, weaves its *theory* into it. See below.

2. A second remark that controverts Aram I's statement is historical. His Holiness says that the position of the Armenian Church evolved between the fifth/sixth and the twelfth/thirteenth centuries. This is questionable. It is true that during the 12th century and later leaders of the Armenian Church in Cilicia were inclined to yield to the Greek insistence that we adopt their basic christological formulation. But that threshold was never crossed by the Armenian Church. To explicate:

The principal church figure within that time frame is Catholicos Nersess IV of Kta. He appears to have conceded to the Greeks that their "two natures" formulation, swaddled as it comes in all manner of qualifications, may not be objectionable. There is no indication that he deemed it advisable to abandon or change the traditional position of his own Church.

Nersess's nephew and successor, Grigor IV, known as The Boy, was more enthusiastic about getting together with the Greeks, but not all the bishops of the Armenian Church agreed with him. Grigor was particularly opposed by the clergy of the East, that is of Armenia proper, and the issue had its political side. The Greeks were a superpower. Our adopting their formula would favor both parties, but mostly us.

Superpowers have a way of exporting their culture. The Armenian clergy of Cilicia, in touch with Constantinople, eager to keep up with the Joneses of the larger church, looked upon

themselves as progressive, broad-minded men, standing at the frontiers of theological sophistication. They looked upon their brethren in Armenia, surrounded as these were by a sea of Infidels, as so many insular traditionalists, living in a state of intellectual darkness. Yet the clergy of Armenia proper had their own robust centers of learning. They, chary in turn, looked upon their Western brethren in Cilicia as exposed to the corruptive influence of Byzantine manners—manners that generated a mind-set that was surely a threat to keeping the Armenian Church in its dogmatic, liturgical and calendrical authenticity. This was an enduring tension. The move of the See of the Catholicos of All Armenians from Cilicia back to the heart of Armenia in 1441 was a major achievement for the Easterners.

There was no evolution properly speaking in the christology of the Armenian Church. Our position as to the identity of Jesus Christ remained the same before and after Nersess of Kla and Grigor the Boy. Nor should one forget, as already suggested, that there were Armenian thinkers around the time of these catholicoses, who continued to show that Greek christology must be rejected as unauthentic. Vartan Aykegtsi is one such thinker. His work, aimed at showing the better rootedness of the Armenian position, was published in 1205. As to the possible argument that the stance of Nersess of Kla shows nevertheless that the Greek (or Roman) and the Armenian positions *are* compatible, see below, the next to last paragraph.

3. The third and most important consideration that undermines Aram I's remark is philosophical. It has to do with the theory of how we perceive reality, and how words refer to things. *At the foundation of the disagreement in christology between the Latin and Armenian Churches there is a metaphysical, not directly theological, divergence.* I will put it as simply as possible, for I want to avoid highfalutin technicalities. This is the problem:

Jesus Christ is shown in the New Testament as performing two sets of actions. One of these sets of actions (such as drawing lines in the sand) can be performed by any normal human being. The other cannot. This latter set of actions (such as calling a dead man back to life) can be performed, Christians believe, by God only. The question then is, Must we therefore assume that there are *two* entities ("natures") in Jesus Christ, each of which is the agent of, or accounts for, one of the two sets of actions? The Latin answer to this question is *Yes*. The accepted Armenian answer is *No*, and there is no grey area in between.

The Armenians have consistently told the Greeks and the Latins that once Jesus Christ is divided into two as a consequence of the "two natures" theory, no amount of verbal acrobatics will restore His seamless unity. If we separate the man from God, they said (along with theologians of other Churches,) He Who died on the cross will be merely the man, and that will make of salvation a non-occurrence, for the obvious reason that someone who is a mere man cannot save the world, that is, the inhabited universe. According to Armenian christology, in the unique case of the God-man Jesus Christ, a single nature can be the agent of both human and divine actions, as well as the subject of divine and human attributes.

It must be said incidentally that we do not have the foggiest notion of what "nature" (in "human nature" or "divine nature") refers to, and what is true of us in this respect was of necessity true of medieval thinkers as well. They too could have had no notion of what *natura* or *physis* or *bnouthyoum* actually referred to, although they vehemently *thought* they did. So if we want to preserve the unity of Jesus the Christ, it is a good theological strategy to keep "nature,"

whatever it is that it means, in the singular. This is what the Armenian Church has in effect done all along. The Latin and the Armenian positions are, at any rate, precisely distinct. It is because there is no middle ground between that none has been found to this day. It is a matter of either/or, yes or no, and the Karekin/John Paul Common Declaration belongs with the Latin option. How? In the following roundabout way:

The document in question speaks of a union in Jesus Christ which is said to be "without division," "without...separation." Both of these adverbial locutions are lifted from the Tome of Leo, i.e. Pope Leo I the Great. [This is the Pope who virtually forced the then more or less united church to divide and sometimes shed blood over the phrase "two natures."] Now one does not have to have had Logic 101 to observe that these adverbial locutions imply *two* things (you have to be referring to two things in order to be able to say that they are not to be divided or separated.) The two things in question cannot, moreover, be abstract things like humanity and divinity. They have to be real things like human nature and divine nature. It is thus transparently clear that the Common Declaration implicitly recognizes two natures, and that, true to pattern, we are again overpowered in our dealings with the Roman Church—this time in an atmosphere of sweet cordiality. It is a sad comment on our church that the advisers to His Holiness Karekin I prove to have been no match to the Latin experts.

On hearing Aram I declare that "it is 100% compatible," the reporter should have asked him, What is compatible with what? We may conjecture in the absence of such elucidation that what His Holiness means is that the Declaration is in keeping with our own agelong christology, and that we and the Latins are of one mind when it comes to the fact that Jesus Christ is both God and man. This is of course true. Our underlying belief is the same. But there are bad and good, or good and better ways of giving expression to the same belief, and there is a sense in which the good and the better are *not* compatible. One reason why our giving in to the Latins is regrettable is that philosophy, for the last two hundred years or so, has been moving in a way as to favor our position. Even major Catholic and Protestant writers (Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Jurgen Moltmann) show in their writings, overtly or between the lines, that the Armenian (i.e. "Cyrillian") christological formulation ("One nature of the Word incarnate") makes better sense, that it is better attuned to the biblical world view. As to ourselves, it behooves us to realize that it fits better the rest of our Armenian faith and practice.

Does all this amount to something to be excited about at the turnstile of the third millennium, in the age of instant communication and genetic biology? Whatever your answer to this question, in *no* cultural context does it make sense to prefer the good to the better. Besides, scholarship, like charity, begins at home, and it is natural that *we* should come to the defense of the Fathers of *our* Church, particularly at a time when they appear to have been on the right track. It is true that we cannot in this day and age follow many of our Fathers in saying that those who teach as the Latins do will go to hell. But we can, indeed must, keep looking for, and evaluating critically the hidden assumptions on which our different claims stand.

Had the Roman and Armenian pontiffs adopted some such vantage point, it should have been possible for them to simply declare that both their Churches have viable beliefs as to the identity of Jesus Christ, and that their formulations to that effect, although different, are nevertheless not, by themselves, an impediment to full communion. Now *that* would have made

history. *That*, as distinct from the signing of yet another compromise statement, would have been something done in the spirit of Nersess of Kila— a spirit that can be articulated for our times as follows: You keep your formulation, we keep ours, hoping all the while that further advances in the art of thinking will lead to a more convergent interpretation of John I:14. (“and the Word became [physical] body.”). Our common aim is nothing more and nothing less than the gradually deeper understanding of that foundational assertion.

Let us not keep producing formal compromise statements at variously initiated ecclesiastical conferences and meetings, for if we *already*, truly accept each other’s orthodoxy (with a small o,) we do not have to engage in that sort of a gratuitous fraternization. Let us, instead, keep conversing in a loving frame of mind, with the full recognition that we, all of us, now see things as in a mirror, darkly.

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