

## ԿՐՕՆԱԿԱՆ

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### GRIGOR NAREGATSI, MYSTIC AND POET: THE SOUL'S SEARCH FOR IMMEDIACY WITH GOD

*And now, accept these prayers of sighs and contrition,  
as you inhale the scent of this bloodless sacrifice of words,  
King of Heaven. (Prayer 88:2).*

**Բանալի բառեր.** Գրիգոր Նարեկացի, «Վարդապետ Տիեզերական», «Մատեան Ողբերգութեան», Քաղկեդոնի Ժողով, Ներսես Լամբրոնացի, Դիոնիսիոս Արիոպագացի, Անանիա Նարեկացի, Թոնդրակեան շարժում, ծայթ, «Բանալի ճշմարտութեան», Աստուածացում, «Բանն», Սուրբ Եփրեմ Ասորի, Սուրբ Աւգուստինոս:

**Key words:** Gregory of Nareg, 'doctor universalis', Book of Lamentations, Council of Chalcedon, Nerses Lambronatsi, Denys the Areopagite, Anania Naregatsi, The T'ondrakian movement, Tsayt', Key of Truth, Deification (theosis), logos (ban), St Ephrem the Syrian, St. Augustine, Thomas a Kempis.

The tenth century Armenian monk's Book of Lamentations (aka The Narek or Book of Prayers or Speaking with God from the depths of the Heart) immediately occupied a pre-eminence in Armenian literature and spirituality which it has never lost. The prayers express the ecstatic distress of the heart, convinced of its sinful and creaturely unworthiness, overwhelmed by God's loving condescension. As a doctor or teacher of the universal Church, his work, with its specifically eastern cultural and theological ethos, is now recognized as inspiration for all.

#### **Grigor Naregatsi, doctor universalis**

On April 12, 2015 Pope Francis officially declared St Gregory of Narek a Doctor of the Universal Church, following a pronouncement of his intentions on February 21st. The recognition coincided with the marking of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Immediately the electronic channels were jammed by accusations that how could the Catholic church pronounce a monk of the Armenian Church doctor universalis when the saint concerned was member of a 'Monophysite' Church or the church that rejected the Council of Chalcedon and the Tome of Pope Leo in 451.

In an article Archbishop Boghos Levon Zekian gives a personal account of the procedure.

On 4th September, 2014 Nerses Petros XIXth, Patriarch of the Armenian Catholics appointed Archbishop Boghos Levon Zekian as postulatore whose task was to present the request arguing that the person nominated for the recognition was a worthy candidate. Proof was needed that the candidate proposed for the honour was doctrinally orthodox. It had to be made apparent that the person did not just represent a faction in the Christian Church but

that he had an ‘ecumenical’ standing and appeal. The positio (official report) had to convince the committee that although Grigor Naregatsi’s theology did not match western theological categories his doctrinal status was not a controversial one. Astonishingly, proof was required that the ‘Armenian Church has never been Chalcedonian’ and the past condemnations were the result of misunderstanding [«թիւրիմացութեամբ»]<sup>1</sup>. The Armenian Church rejected the Council of Chalcedon and the Chalcedonian Definition ‘for the same reason as most of the East: because they judged Chalcedon to have betrayed the faith of Cyril, in which they saw the faith of the Church’<sup>2</sup>.

Ecumenically minded scholars in the west have charitably explained that the Armenian Church rejected Chalcedon only because it was moved by non-theological factors such as nationalism or obstinacy or even incomprehension of the true meaning of the Council’s formula. Not all together grateful for this version of the doctrine of diminished responsibility, Armenians rejected Chalcedon because they were good theologians: they had the capacity to recognize a heresy when they saw one’<sup>3</sup>.

The neatly balanced western interpretation of Chalcedon (two natures one person) obscured the mystical power of what Cyril and Oriental theologians were trying to assert, through the subtle Alexandrian tradition of the deification of the human nature. The idea in western theology that the whole argument affirming a union of God and the human in the incarnation needs to be read through the lens of Chalcedon should be abandoned. In his study Archbishop Boghos Levon Zekian expresses his astonishment ‘as to how low key was the reception of the news of Grigor Naregatsi’s declaration as ‘Universal Doctor’ by the Armenian public, including intellectuals and even by some clergy’. The reason for this lack of enthusiasm has historical precedent. Only two church fathers of the Armenian Church Saint Nerses Shnorhali and Nerses Lambronat’si are among hundreds that have been favoured by the Mkhitarist fathers only after their theology has been contaminated by interfering with their works. In the 1893 Venice edition of Naregatsi’s Book of Lamentations by a deliberate misplacement of an accent [’] the entire doctrinal position of the author is made to support the catholic doctrine of the ‘Filioque’. In the Constantinople 1774 edition the wording of Chapter 75:6 reads «Օրհնաբանեմք ընդ Հօր եւ Որդոյ եւ զանբաժանելի բղխումն՝ նոցին փառակից Հոգւոյն տէրութեան» while in the Venice 1893 edition the accent is placed «Օրհնաբանեմք ընդ Հօր եւ Որդոյ եւ զանբաժանելի բղխումն նոցին՝ փառակից Հոգւոյն տէրութեան». While the Mkhitarist scholar Gabriel Awetikian by a masterly touch does not place the accent either on the word ‘with’ [«նոցին»] nor on the word ‘springs’ [«բղխումն»]<sup>4</sup>.

The Armenian Church fathers from 506 down to the modern times have not changed their stance in relation to the Council of Chalcedon and to suggest that the rejection was the result of ‘misunderstanding’ is incomprehensible. The signing in December 1997 of the ‘Common Declaration’ between Garegin Ist Sargisian, 1995-1999, Catholicos of All Armenians and Pope John Paul III and all the Five Vienna consultations between the theologians of the Christian Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic churches prompted Francis Cardinal König to express his desire in his Preamble to the ‘Communiqués and Joint Declarations’ that while

<sup>1</sup> Levon Zekian, ‘Grigor Narekatsi Tiezerakan Vardapet’, Banber Matenadarani, 22(2015), pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Louth, ‘Why did the Syrians reject the Council of Chalcedon?’ in Chalcedon in Context Church Councils 400-700, ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool University press, 2009), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 March 1966.

<sup>4</sup> ‘We praise with the Father and the Son / the Lord Holy Spirit, **which springs** inseparably/ forth from them sharing their glory.’ In the Venice editions the accent is placed on ‘from them’ implying Double Procession of the Holy Spirit added by the Western Church to the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. The same alteration is introduced into Nerses Shnorhali’s (1101-1173) hymn ‘Light of the Morning sun of justice’ [Առաւօտ լուսոյ, արեգակն արդար].

it is true to say that all obstacles between our Churches have not yet been removed, over the past two and a half decades, we have been able to regain an enormous amount of common ground, first and foremost in the vitally important field of Christology ... allowing the ecumenical spirit eventually to trickle down from the theologians to the individual Christian on the parish level, making for a yet deeper mutual enrichment of our respective traditions<sup>5</sup>.

### *Literary legacy*

Grigor Naregatsi (known to western readers as Gregory of Nareg), whose work peaks the classical period of Armenian literature and marks the beginning of medieval Armenian literature has left an invaluable mark on Armenian Christian literature 'comparable to Homer for Greek and Dante for Italian'<sup>6</sup>. The Armenian poet Parouyr Sevak defines the literary legacy of Grigor Naregatsi as a 'temple of poesy, on which destructive action of time has had no effect'<sup>7</sup>.

The influence of his work on Armenian literature was recognized by his contemporaries and highly regarded. The Armenian historian Ukht'anes (940-1000) calls him 'Universal vardapet' [«Տիեզերական վարդապետ»]; Nerses Lambronats'i (1153-1198) theologian and archbishop of Tarsus calls him 'an angel in a human body' [«հրեշտակական վարդապետ»], while Patriarch Hakob Nalian (1702-1764) who wrote a commentary on the Book of Lamentations says 'his book is a light on the world' [«Որոյ գիրքն է լոյս աշխանի»]<sup>8</sup>. The earliest manuscript copy of his work 'Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart' [«Մատենան Ողբերգութեան»] is by the scribe Grigor Mlechets'i, copied in the scriptorium of Skevra in Cilicia in 1173 (Mat. MS. 1568)<sup>9</sup> on the request of Nerses Lambronats'i, who has added a biography of Grigor Naregats'i to the end of chapter thirty three entitled «Վարժ սրբոյ առնն Աստուծոյ Գրիգորի Նարեկացոյ»<sup>10</sup> ('The Life of the holy man of God Grigor Naregats'i). It is interesting to note that by 1173 Grigor was already recognized as a saint of the Armenian Church<sup>11</sup>. Remarkably the biography by Nerses Lambronats'i was enhanced by four full page portraits of the author – writing, praying, holding a book and a cross, and prostrate before Christ are

It is such devious interpretations of Armenian texts that are the source of suspicion. Babgen Kiwleserean (pseud. K'naser) 'Nalian yev Naregatsi' [Nalian and Naregatsi] Loys, new series, 2nd year (1906), pp. 1140-6; Gabriel Awetiki'an, Նարեկ Աղօթից համառոտ [Commentary on the Prayers in the Nareg] (Venice: Mkhitarist Press, 1859), p. 381.

<sup>5</sup> The Vienna Dialogue. Five Pro Oriente Consultations with Oriental Orthodoxy. Communiqués and Common Declarations. Booklet Nr.1 (Ferdinand Berger & Sohne, Austria, 1990), p. 5; Hagop Nersoyan, 'H. H. Karekin I and H.H. John Paul II. Some reflections on their Common Declaration', (unpublished) and The Christology of the Armenian Orthodox Church. The contemporary significance of Armenian Christology: On the controversy over the Joint Declaration of Karekin I and John Paul II (Jerusalem: St James Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Manouk Abeghyan, Հայոց հին գրականության պատմություն [History of ancient Armenian literature] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1944), Bk. 1, pp. 511-69; Hrant Tamrazyan, Հայ Քննադատություն VI-XV դար [Armenian literary criticism VI-XV centuries] (Erevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1985) Bk. 2, pp. 87-159.

<sup>7</sup> Khach'atryan Avag eds., Բան ի խորոց սրտի առ Նարեկացի: նուիրում է Գրիգոր Նարեկացու «Մատենան Ողբերգութեան» պոեմի 1000-ամեակին [Word from the depth of our heart to Naregatsi: Dedicated to the 1000 anniversary of 'Book of Lamentations'] (Erevan, Tigran Meds, 2003), pp. 127-36.

<sup>8</sup> Yakob Nalian, Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Գիրք Մեկնության Աղօթից Սրբոյն Գրիգորի Նարեկացոյ [A commentary on the prayers of Saint Grigor Naregatsi] (Constantinople: Gabriel Sebastatsi Barseghian, 1749), 1136 pp. The author ends his monumental work with the words Աղամանդէ պալատին խեցիէ դուռ շինեցի: 'For this palace studded with diamonds I made an entrance of mud and clay.'

<sup>9</sup> Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Miniature Paintings in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century (Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993), vol. I, p. 12, Figs. 21, 22-24; Vrej Nersessian, Treasures from the Ark: 1700 years of Armenian Christian Art (London, The British Library, 2001), Catalogue Nr. 85, pp. 162-3.

<sup>10</sup> Matenadaran MS. No. 1568, fols. 119a-b; available also in the eight printed editions (Constantinople 1700, 1726, 1736, 1755, 1763, 1782, 1789 and Jerusalem, 1868).

<sup>11</sup> Ter Davt'yan, K'.S., Arminskie zhitiya i mychenichestva, V-XVII vv [Armenian lives and martyrologies, 5th to

among the earliest extant examples of portraiture in Armenian manuscript illumination. The presence of the author's four portraits with four different legends is explained by reference to his prayer 72<sup>12</sup>. The first portrait depicts Grigor seated on a high chair like an Evangelist writing the first word of his 'Lamentation' «Զայն» ['The Voice']. In prayer 72 Naregats'i introduces himself to the reader in these words: 'I was called, 'Master', which testifies against me, I was called, Rabbi, Rabbi [«Ռաբբի, ռաբբի անուանեցայ»]. The first portrait has the legend 'Grigor the Philosopher' [«Գրիգոր փիլիսոփայ»] which corresponds to the above lines. Further on he says 'I was considered a saint by men though I am unclean before God' and alluding to the etymology of the Greek form of his name (Grigoros 'the one who watches') he adds: 'I was called "Awake" at the baptismal font, but I slumber in the sleep of mortality. On the day of salvation I was named "Vigilant", but I closed my eyes to vigilance'. The word «Հսկող, Արթուն» is written next to the portrait of him in prayer, hands raised to the bust figure of Christ seeking pardon for his sins. The initials «ՅՍ ՔՍ» [Y[isu]s K'[risto]s = Jesus Christ] is inscribed on either side of Christ's head. The third portrait has the inscription «Սուրբն Գրիգոր ճգնաւոր» ['Saint Grigor the monk'] which is a full frontal standing portrait of him holding a cross and book. The inscription of the last miniature is obliterated, except the letters «Յիս. Քր.» [Yisus K'ristos = Jesus Christ] but Grigor's humble attitude, prostrate before the enthroned Christ, is in keeping with the general tenor of his Lamentations entitled 'From the depth of the heart, soliloquy with God'<sup>13</sup>.

Nerses Lambronats'i short biography 'The Life of our holy man of God, Grigor Naregatsi [Վարժ արքայ առնն աստուծոյ Գրիգորի Նարեկացոյ] copied in most of the subsequent manuscripts is our earliest source on his life. It begins:

Our holy father, this priest and cleric [սուրբ հայրս մեր, քահանայս եւ կրօնաւոր] blessed by the graces of God was from the monastery of Narek in Armenia, in the province of Vaspurakan during the reign of the Roman King Basil II [c.925-after 985] and Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (945-59), who ruled over Armenia and at the time, when the king of Vaspurakan was Sinek'erim Artsruni, (908-937) a pious man of the Artsruni [Royal House] was king of Vaspurakan in the Armenian era 432 [ՆԼԲ= 432+551+983] with his brothers, 977-1003, during the patriarchate of Catholicos Vahan (965-972). He was the son of the daughter of the paternal uncle Anania tutor and abbot of the monastery of Nareg. This blessed Grigor with his minor brother Hovhannes, nurtured and instructed in accordance with the Holy scriptures ever since childhood. [...] Upon the request of pious brothers, he undertook the writing of these ninety-five Prayers. [...] He left these for our church of Christ as his living memorial<sup>14</sup>.

the 18th centuries] (Erevan: 1994), pp. 69-71. For stories of miracles attributed to him see Vardan Devrikyan, Նարեկեան էջեր Սուրբ Էջմիածնի ձեռագրերից [Episodes in the life of Naregatsi in manuscripts in the collection of Holy Etjmiadsin] (Holy See of Etjmiadsin Press, 2003). The Armenian church does not have a rite of Beatification. It is the popularity and veneration of the public that raises an individual to the rank of 'Sainthood'. The last person to receive such recognition was Catholicos Movses Tatevats'i III (1629-1642). In 2015 on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide the 1.5 million victims were beatified by an 'Order of Canonization of the Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide'.

<sup>12</sup> Azaryan, L.R., Kilikyan manrankarch'ut'yune xii-xiii d.d [Cilician Miniature Painting] (Erevan: 1964), pp. 62-3.

<sup>13</sup> V. H. Ghazaryan, ed. Հայկական Մանրանկարչութիւն Դիմանկար [Armyanskaya miniatura Portret; Miniature Armenienne Portrait] (Erevan: 'Grogh', 1982), figs. 108-110, fls. 7b, 55b, 120b, 178b., S. Der Nersessian, *ibid.* vol. II, figs. 21-24.

<sup>14</sup> Garegin I, Yovsep'eants', Yishatakarank' Dzeragrats' (5 darits' minch'ew 1250 T', (Colophons of Armenian manuscripts (from the 5th century to 1250), Ant'iliyas, 1951, vol. I, pp. 143-146; Ա. Ս. Մաքետուեան, Հայերէն ձեռագրերի հիշատակարաններ Եժմ ԴԴ. [Colophons of Armenian manuscripts VthXIII centuries] (Erevan: 1988), pp. 210-1. Cf. Arnold Toynbee, Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World (OUP, 1975); R. H. H. Jenkins, ed. Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio, vol. II Commentary (University of London, 1962); Thomas

The date of his birth is put around ca. 945 contemporary with the incumbency of Catholicos Vahan I Siwnetsi, 968-969<sup>15</sup>. His death is placed around 1003, and was buried in the Monastery, where his place of burial was a site of pilgrimage for Armenians until the first quarter of the 20th century when the Monastery of Nareg was destroyed during the Armenian Genocide by the Turks.

Although Grigor's fame is founded on his masterpiece, Book of Lamentations, he is also the author of a 'Commentary on the Songs of Song of Solomon', composed in 977 on the request of king Gourgen (968-1003); a History of the Holy Cross of Aparan (c. 1000), eulogies on the 'Holy Apostles', on 'Saint James of Nisibis' and 'St Gregory the Illuminator' and 'Letter of Confession' written to the abbot of the Monastery of Ktchway, defending himself against the accusation of being a member of the T'ondrakian movement<sup>16</sup>, as well as several canticles and odes celebrating the Feast of the Nativity, Resurrection, Transfiguration, Ascension, and Pentecost<sup>17</sup>.

As someone who lived with the Bible, and the large existing corpus of religious hymns and prayers, a man who had spent his childhood and youth in a monastery, thoroughly immersed in Armenian Christian tradition, Naregatsi was most unlikely to have remained immune of their spiritual and literary influence. In 2004 Hratchya Tamrazyan published the conclusions of his many years of study in which he discusses the influences of Neoplatonism on Grigor Naregatsi's spirituality largely through the works of Denys the Areopagite<sup>18</sup>. The reliance of Grigor Naregatsi on the works of Areopagite is exaggerated on the expense of the common shared exegetical and literary traditions epitomised in exegetical and patristic literature of the early church. Sergio La Porte in his study on the extent of Naregatsi's dependence on Dionysius maintains, 'Grigor never explicitly cites Dionysius, lacks vocabulary particular to Dionysius and in contrast to Areopagite's epistolary style to instruct his readers, Grigor employs penitential poetry seeking forgiveness for his sin'<sup>19</sup>.

Naregatsi's masterpiece is his Book of Lamentations, popularly known as Nareg or Girk' Aghot'its' [Book of Prayers] [plate II title page]. In the 'memorial' [Hishatakaran] the author attached to his work he informs that it was completed in 1002, a year before his death. Most of the work is in verse, except elegies 34, 75, 92 and 93 which are in prose, which have Christological and interpretative content. The work has survived in over 200 manuscripts--the most copied text after the Gospels--and 60 printed versions, the first being by Voskan Erewantsi in Marseille in 1673<sup>20</sup>. Naregatsi is the high point of Armenian spiritual literature. Armenian literature has come to associate with this book a veneration normally reserved for a shrine or almost equal to that of an icon. Pious people for long centuries have put it and still do put it under their pillows as a guard against the power of evil. Extracts of his prayers have permanent

Artsruni, History of the House of the Artsrunik, translation and commentary by T. W. Thomson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> P. M. Khatchaturyan, A. A. Ghazaryan, Գրիգոր Նարեկացիի Մատենան Ողբերգութեան [Grigor Naregats', Matean Oghbergut'ean] (Erevan: AAS., 1985), p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> Nersessian, Vrej, The Tondrakian Movement. Religious movements in the Armenian church from the fourth to the tenth centuries (London: Kahn & Averill, 1987), pp. 56-58. For a full English translation of this letter see F.C. Conybeare, The Key of Truth. A manual of the Paulician Church in Armenia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), pp. 127-128; Leon Arpee, A history of Armenian Christianity from the beginning to our time (New York: The Armenian Missionary Association of America, 1946), Appendix I, pp. 319-324.

<sup>17</sup> K'yoshkeryan Armine, Տաղեր Գանձեր [Odes and canticles], (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1981); Abraham Terian, The Festal works of St Gregory of Nareg. Annotated translation of the Odes, Litanies, and Encomia (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> H.H. T'amrazyan, Գրիգոր Նարեկացին և Նոր պլատոնականությունը [Grigor Naregatsi and Neoplatonism] (Erevan: Nayiri, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Porta La Sergio, 'Two versions of Mysticism: The corpus Dionysiacum and the Book of Lamentation', Revue Théologique de Kaslik, 3-4 (2009-2010), p.253.

<sup>20</sup> Khatchaturyan, P.M. and Ghazinyan, Մատենան Ողբերգութեան, ibid. pp. 2428.



place in Armenian Prayer scrolls [Hmayil] copied for personal piety<sup>21</sup>. In a recent publication Seta B. Dadoyan repeating the view of Arshak Chobanian says that ‘appreciating this giant as a “saint” or a “mystic” will only impoverish his legacy and otherwise betray a deep ignorance about the work and position’ and instead maintains that ‘one aspect of his personality was religious; otherwise he was identified as a philosopher, a poet, and a vigilant’<sup>22</sup>. Why is the company of, St Ephrem the Syrian, St. Augustine of Hippo, Simeon the New Theologian, and Thomas a Kempis less honourable than Homer? The epithets Dadoyan quotes are the designations Naregatsi uses in his seventy-second elegy to describe himself and are also employed by the artist in his portraits of the author. The author uses the word ‘lament’, lamentation «այսր ողբերգութեան», «սկզբնաւոր ողբերգութեան» (2b, 102b) throughout to describe his work which in the English translation has been variously rendered by the terms, ‘prayers’, ‘elegies’, ‘soliloquy’ and ‘supplication’.

Grigor Naregatsi defines his work as a ‘will and ‘Testament’ [«Կտակ»] with these words:

And since I leave readers this testament [«Կտակ»]  
recording my misdeeds along the path of no return,  
that they might pray to God through my words day by day,  
may this book remain as a guide for repentance  
continuously lifted in voice to you, Almighty Lord (54e).

According to the author the work is testament for clergy and monks, which in turn is a personalized dialogue with God in which his sinfulness, pitifulness and nothingness are revealed to him in and through his own person which he laments and deplores. The presence of God within him reveals him to himself in the truest condition of human frailty and misery. Thus, he sees himself unworthy and incapable – on his own merits – of that blissful enjoyment of God’s presence in him. He as a teacher presents himself to his readers as a representative of all humanity taking upon himself their entire frailty from Adam till his last generation.

Now to you, monastic brothers,  
communities of disciples  
you who bared-handed, have enlisted  
as the Lords ’s brothers, in expectation  
and hope of infinite good gifts,  
for you I set this table with  
my burnt sacrifice of words.  
Accept this testament of confession,  
for the edification and salvation of your souls,  
Know through it the frailty of the body.  
Remember the warning words of the prophet  
and the apostle: “No flesh should exult before God”.  
And, “No one, not a single person, is just”...  
For even I, who nourish you with these meagre fruits,

<sup>21</sup> Karekin, Sarkissian, A brief introduction to Armenian Christian Literature (London: A Michael Barbour Publication, 1974), 2nd printing, p.42.

<sup>22</sup> Seta, B. Dadoyan, The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World. Paradigms of Interaction. Seventh to Fourteenth centuries (London: Transaction Publishers, 2013), vol. II, pp. 200-02. Arshak Chobanian, in Դիմիկեր [Literary figures](Paris: Gegharvestakan Tparan, 1924), p. 27 says: Հանենք զանիկա աղօթք գրողի կրօնական գոյնէն ուր սահմանափակուած էր, եւ դնենք իր տեղը, գրական մեծ հանճարներուն օղակարկաւ բարձունքին մէջ; Cf. Hayk Gasparian, Գրիգոր Նարեկացիին Ֆրանսական գրական մտքի գնահատմամբ [The appreciation of Grigor Naregatsi in French literature], Sovetakan Grakanut’iwn, 6 (1966).

willingly blame myself (72a).

Naregatsi regards himself as a symbol and representative of entire humanity and sets himself before the throne of judgment:

‘A new book of psalms sings with urgency through me,  
for all thinking people the world over,  
expressing all human passions  
and serving with its images  
as an encyclopaedic companion to our human condition,  
for the entire, mixed congregation of the Church universal (3).

### *The Christocentric character of Naregatsi's spirituality*

Rarely in Christian literature is the sense of sin – the awareness of the alienation of man from God and the drama that follows upon this awareness - felt so acutely and so deeply as it is in Nareg. This awareness is not only in regard to his own sinful nature but also that of the entire universe. In a book of 8,500 lines three sentiments dominate: ‘I have sinned’, ‘I am doomed’, and ‘have mercy’ [մեղայ, կորեալ, Ողորմեա]<sup>23</sup>. The book is meant to guide the reader through three stages of contemplative prayer<sup>24</sup>. To demonstrate the greatness of God Naregatsi does not enumerate or allude to God's actions on earth but sings the praises of what God can do rather than what He has achieved. Rare are those instances, where he refers to actual events in history brought about by God:

Who transformed the liquidity of the sea  
into a wall of stone[Ex.14:21-22]  
who caused a stream to spring and flow  
like a waterfall from the hard rocks of the desert (Ex.17:6)  
and fortified the walls of Jericho  
symbolising the destruction of Satan's tyranny  
demolished by you as if it were a straw (Jos.6:20)  
who shake the earth and its pillars from their foundation (Job 9:6)  
You train the inanimate dawning sun as if in a bridle  
Showing you can, if you wish, tame  
the evil impulses of nature' (63a,b).

This homiletic or heroic style is not very suitable to his poetic style. Naregatsi always prefers eulogistic, lyrical style by which instead of searching for God's greatness in history he searches his soul and imagination for all the adjectives and predicates that he can ascribe to God. In such instances the long unending chain of adjectives resemble psalmic benedictions or creedal statements. Such for instance is the beginning of Prayer 91 which is an outburst of uncontrollable admiration:

<sup>23</sup> He uses 51 words to describe various forms of sins (Prayer 7); 104 words to describe his sinfulness (Prayer 56) and 40 images to describe the destruction death brings. He makes 1368 allusions and references to the Bible.

<sup>24</sup> In a colophon of a manuscript copied in 1266 (Mat.Ms.4965, fol.330a), The Book of Lamentations is described as ‘the gate of the entry into the vestibules of God, which with penitence and through the prayers of the holy father Grigor recited in tearful, imploring petition renews men compounded in sin [and they become] of spirit, even as the angels’. A.S.Matevosyan, Հայ ձեռագրերի հիշատակարաններ ժԳ դարի, [Colophons of 13th century Armenian manuscripts], (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1984), pp. 338-9. Colophons of Armenian manuscript describe the book as: լապտեր անշիջանելի [lantern inextinguishable], մատեան Աստուածային սուրբ [divine holy book], Զի սա է խաւսք ընդ Աստուծոյ եւ կշտմբանմն մեղուցեալ անձին, եւ աղերս առ ամենայն սուրբս [For this is the word (ban-logoi) and reproach to the sinful, and supplication to all saints].

Lord, Lord filled with compassion, God of mercies (2 Cor. 1:3)  
 majestic name, awe-inspiring voice,  
 severe summons, unbroken silence,  
 thundering speech, shocking sound (91a; cf.3).

Grigor Naregatsi is not just glorifying God but more important he finds himself so 'unworthy, 'insignificant' and 'defiled' that he implies he is defiling the purity of the Lord. In a section of Prayer 83, isolated and lonely in his cell, he makes this crushing comparison between himself and his creator

Especially since you are light and hope  
 and I am darkness and foolishness  
 You are true good, praiseworthy Lord  
 And I am thoroughly evil and helpless.  
 You are the Lord of everything on earth and in the heavens  
 (83a cf. 67, 72, 22).

Prayer 20 contains eight sections, gushing out in one breath of self-condemnation:

I, breathing dust, have grown haughty,  
 I, talking clay, have become presumptuous,  
 I, filthy dirt, have grown proud,  
 I disgusting ashes, have risen up,  
 raising my hands with my broken cup,  
 strutting like a swaggering peacock' (20d).

The fear of sin brings with it the sources of sin, the price of sin. Nothing so real and vigorous expresses the fear of a monk locked up in his cell than the Prayer 12 called 'Accept with sweetness' [«Ընկալ քաղցրութեամբ»] which has become part of the 'Service of the Night Office'.

Dispel all- bestowing God, my shameful sadness,  
 Lift, merciful God, my unbearable burden,  
 Cast off, potent God, my mortal habits,  
 Spoil, triumphant God, my wayward pleasures,  
 Dissipate, exalted God, my wanton fog.  
 Block, life giving God, my destructive ways,  
 Undo, secret-seeing God, my evil entrapments,  
 Fend off, inscrutable God, my assailants  
 Inscribe your name on the skylight of my abode,  
 Cover the roof of my temple with your hand,  
 Mark the threshold of my cell with your blood,  
 Imprint the outside of my door with your sign.  
 Protect the mat where I rest with your right hand.  
 Keep my cot pure from all seductions.  
 Preserve my suffering soul by your will  
 Steady the breath of life you have given my flesh  
 Surround me with your heavenly host.  
 Post them on watch against the battalion of demons' (12c).

The poet has expressed the torturous sentiments of celibacy and through prayer seeks 'blissful rest like the slumber of death in the depth of this night through the intercession of the



Holy Mother of God'. Dante's Hymn to the Virgin Mary with all its theological insight is not as heartfelt as Naregatsi's eulogy:

Herald to mankind, angel in bodily form, heavenly queen, pure as air, clean as light, clear as the image of the sun at its height, higher than the forbidden dwelling place of the holy of holies (Heb. 9:7), place of the blessed covenant, a breathing Eden (Gen. 12:7, Gen. 2:8) (80a).

This type of prayer is totally eastern. Grigor even describes his posture at the time of prayer in these words:

I lift my hands, stretching my forearms  
with the participation of my kidneys  
sobering of my heart  
tongue and lips exclaiming. (93x)

In another prayer his description is even more physical:

I fall at your feet and kiss the traces of your footsteps  
I confess my sin and publish my wrongdoing.  
I beat myself up and entomb my heart in sighs.  
I am wounded by pangs of conscience and smolder with fiery breath  
I burn with the salty dew of tears and my insides are on fire with grief  
I am weak with words of grief and shaking with wretched cries  
I suffer with sorrowful afflictions  
and my soul shakes in alarm' (66g).

He could not be more explicit. The opening lines of the poem immediately reveal the tragedy that is being played in the monk's mind when he declares:

The voice of a sighing heart, its sobs and mournful cries  
I offer up to you, O Seer of Secrets,  
placing the fruits of my wavering mind  
as a savoury sacrifice on the fire of my grieving soul  
to be delivered to you in the censer of my will (1a).

These sentiments are about a troubled man and his relationship with God. This is not a man of gestures - he does not strike a pose. Even in the most unhappy and tragic of situations he is convinced that God would tell him what to do and how to be right. As of his legacy, it is very simple: he shifted the perspective for everyone.

### ***Gazing upon God, to become God***

One of the abiding tasks of Grigor has been to keep alive the patristic doctrine of deification (theosis). The idea of a man/woman becoming God for Grigor is far more than just a theological locus of his work, it is an over searching principle which permeates his entire being. The two cardinal texts the Bible offers about this idea of human participation in God as an image of salvation is 2 Peter 1:4 and Psalm 82:6 (cited in John 10:34-5). As a theological theme theosis refers to the mystery of the Incarnation. We have discovered from Romans 5:20-6:23 that peace with God—a continuing relationship of grace now and of glory in the world to come—is the first privilege of the believer. The second—unfolded in Romans 6—is his union with Christ, state which leads to holiness. The assertion that Christ 'became what we are in order to make us what he is himself goes back to Irenaeus of Lyons and Athanasius. Irenaeus says, 'The word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who because of his limitless love

became what we are in order to make us what even he himself is'<sup>25</sup>. St Athanasius gives this concept its most memorable expression in the saying: 'The Word of God became man that we might be made God' or, better translated, 'He became incarnate that we might be engodded' [Աստուածընկալ].

To most the idea of being 'engodded' is extravagant. To avoid drawing a too sharp distinction between the divine and the human in Christ, to the point of where we might speak of a split personality, it was no heresy in maintaining as St Cyril did, of 'the one nature of the incarnate Word'. Christ enables believers to share in the divine life which he made incarnate. Through baptism and the Eucharist we participate in the new humanity which Christ created and as a result of his passion and resurrection exalted to the highest heaven. Grigor's understanding of deification was firmly incarnational and sacramental. Through Christ human nature is refashioned in accordance with the divine likeness, a refashioned human nature that can be appropriated by us through Baptism and the Eucharist<sup>26</sup>. Grigor goes through the entire length and breathe of the Old and New Testament to evaluate human nature and its destiny expressed through the Church's story of creation, fall, redemption, a community validated by the Bible and sacraments, and final consummation beyond this world of suffering.

The principle theme of the poem is the destiny of man, the question of his salvation. Man is at birth sinless, but during his life through temptation is corrupted and falls into sin. But man has the awareness of sin and the fear of damnation, thus to escape eternal loss, he seeks God's mercy. The hope of salvation is repentance. In order to regain his original purity and to save humankind, Naregatsi condemns his sins and bearing out his soul stands before God. The entire work has no narrative contents but has inner unity as each of the chapters (in Armenian Ban, Բան i.e. Word or Logos, the Johannine term) begins with the same plea: 'Speaking with God from the depths of my heart' («Ի խորոց սրտից խաւաք ընդ Աստուծոյ»). The fact that everything is permeated and actualised through the logoi of God means that creation is a dialogue: God does not engage in a monologue through these logoi. God's creative action through the logoi means that God converses with the human person and, as such, the interaction and participation in this dialogue is a primary characteristic of existence. The fact that God's logoi does not constitute a monologue but call for a dialogue discloses existence as a dialogical experience, between creation and the uncreated God through the human person.

The scale of the work is large 95 chapters, each containing over seven thousand words. In it the author bewails the evils both of the times and of the human society in general and pays homage to purity of spirit and the beauty of lofty sentiments. Being a monk and under the influence of the Bible, the idea of vanity and the anticipation of the last judgment weighs heavy on his shoulders. This propels the poem forward determining its length and in all its intensity puts forward the question of man's salvation. The purpose of Naregatsi is to produce completeness in the expression of grief and to bring a cleansing of the conscience of sin. 'A visionary and a mystic, yet as an acute observer Naregatsi writes in a precise, masculine style and attains rhapsodic heights in which divine intoxication is never without a homey common touch'<sup>27</sup>.

### ***The religious and literary background of his poetry***

The tenth century in which Naregatsi lived and worked was the most brilliant period in the history of Armenia, documented by the Histories of Catholicos V Draskhanakertsi (898-929), Tovma Artsruni (840-906) for the early period of the ninth and tenth centuries, and those of Stepanos Asoghik (935-1015) and Aristakes Lastivertsi (1000-1073) for the later

<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus, 'Against All Heresies', 5, Preface. 22. Athanasius, 'On the Incarnation', 54.

<sup>26</sup> John Meyendorff, Christ in Eastern Christian Thought (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, USA, 1975), pp. 193-7.

<sup>27</sup> Ara Baliozian, The Armenians: their history and culture (New York: Ararat, 1980), pp. 52-3.

period of the eleventh century. Prince Ashot II (913- 928) assumed the title of ‘king of kings’ which marked his authority over the local Muslim emirates as well as the Christian princes. His son Ashot III the ‘merciful’ (951- 977) became totally independent of the Caliphate. During the reign of Byzantine Emperor Basil II (976-1025) Gagik I (989-1017) became supreme leader of the Armenian Bagradit kingdom. The apex of the Bagradit period is when Ani became the capital of the kingdom, ‘by far the wealthiest and most distinguished city, considerably larger than any contemporary urban centres in Western Europe’<sup>28</sup>. Large monastic complexes which were also academies were founded, for example in Tatev (839), Nareg (935), Sanahin (966), Haghpat (976). The historian Asoghik writes: ‘at this period the order of the clergy increased and flourished. In many locations monasteries were built in which communities assembled for the love of God. ...At the same period the monastery of Nareg was established in Rshtunik operating by the same rules, populated by singers and writers’<sup>29</sup>. The monastery of Nareg was populated by Armenian monks fleeing from the religious persecution in Cappadocia under emperor Romanus Lecapenus (919-944). Resistance to Byzantine attempts at enforced union with the Greek Church figures prominently in this period. Political and economic stability encouraged religious ferment. After five centuries, the Chalcedonian controversy still dominated and hindered the realisation of oikonomia. The military campaign against the Paulicians to drive them out of the imperial provinces whose majority of adherents were Armenians took refuge in the Balkans and in Armenia<sup>30</sup>. The followers of the Paulician movement who took refuge in Armenia founded the Tondrakian movement, with the same social and political overtones, and characterised by the same physical and ideological attacks against the established church. A third group identified by Adontz under the contemptuous name of tsayt’ (Gk tzatoi, Arm ծայթ)<sup>31</sup> were ethnic Armenians who had adhered to the Orthodox confession, although they continued to use Armenian as a liturgical language. The Armenian author Poghos Taronatsi (d.1123) says ‘...so now you are tsayt, that is to say, you call yourselves Greeks although with an Armenian tongue’ («ումանք ի յունաց եւ ումանք ի հայոց,որք կոչին կիսատ յոյնք եւ ծայթ հայք»)<sup>32</sup>. As late as 1410 Mkhitar Aparantsi identifies the followers of the heresy he met in Caesarea of Cappadocia defines as ‘half, insufficient or inadequate Armenians’<sup>33</sup>.

In a Life of Grigor Naregatsi we find this passage ‘the holy saint was concerned and worried regarding the unity of the church on account of the fact that the order of the church had been corrupted and neglected by idle and carnal loving prelates which he desired to

<sup>28</sup> N. G. Garsoian, ‘The History of Armenia’ in *Treasures in Heaven. Armenian illuminated manuscripts*, ed. Thomas F. Matthews and Roger S. Wieck (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Step’anos Asoghik, *Patmut’iwn Tiezerakan [Universal History]* (St. Petersburg, 1885), pp. 173-4; K. Kostaneants, *Հայոց վանքերը. Համառոտ տեսութիւն [Armenian monastic establishments. A brief survey]* (Moscow: 1886); Erwand Shahaziz, *Հայոց վանքերը եւ նրանց դերը հայոց կեանքում [Armenian monasteries and their impact on Armenian life]*, (Vtak/Tiflis) 1901), pp. 254-302.

<sup>30</sup> Step’annos T. Melik’-Bakhshyan., *Պավլիկեան շարժումը Հայաստանում [The Paulician Movement in Armenia]* (Erevan University Press, 1953); N. Garsoian, *The Paulician heresy: A study of the origin and development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967); D. Obolensky, *The Bogomils: a study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge University Press, 1948).

<sup>31</sup> Nikoghos Adontz Nikoghos, *Երկեր հինգ հատորով*, Collected works in five volumes (Erevan University Press, 2006), vol. I, pp. 535-46.

<sup>32</sup> Taronats’i Poghos, *Պատասխան իմաստասիրի Տարանագոյ վարդապետի խառն ընդդէմ չարաբար երկարնակացն Հորմոնց Թիդին պատասխան [The reply of Poghos vardapet Taronats’i ‘the philosopher against the evil letter of the Roman dyophysites], or simply Ընդդէմ Ժողովոյն Քաղկեդոնի [Against the Council of Chalcedon]*, Mat. MS. no. 1324, fol. 314 & MS. no. 573, fol. 119b; Nikoghos, Ya. Marr. ‘Tsati paleontologicheskii’ in *Մաղը եվ Հայագիտության հարցերը [Marr and problems in Armenian Studies]* (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1968), pp. 195-202. The author’s thesis is that the name Tsayt or Tsat was applied to Chalcedonian Armenians.

<sup>33</sup> H. G. Manuch’aryan, *Պողոս Տարնագի [Poghos of Taron]* (Erevan University Press, 1982), esp. pp. 96-112; F. C. Conybeare, *The Armenian Church. Heritage and Identity*. Compiled with Introduction by Revd Nerses Vrej Nerses-

restore and renew'. The opponents of Grigor Naregatsi whom he calls 'cruel and brute' [«բիւրս եւ սուպո»] accused him of being a tsayt' and disapproved his attempts to reform the church. Other prominent members of the Monastery of Nareg among them Khosrov Andzevatsi Naregatsi's father and Anania Narekatsi the abbot of the monastery, were obliged to defend their doctrinal position. Khosrov Andzevatsi wrote a Commentary on the Divine Liturgy and the Armenian Breviary, Anania Naregatsi composed his Book of Confessions and Grigor Naregatsi is the author of 'Letter to the Abbot of the Monastery of Ktchway' and added chapters 75 and 93 in prose to his Book of Lamentations defending the use of 'Holy Chrism' (miwron) and the sacredness of the 'visible Church'<sup>34</sup>. These three very prominent figures from the Monastery of Nareg were suspected of being sympathetic with the views of the T'ondrakean movement.

Abraham Terian in an article and in the introduction of his translation of the festal works of St Gregory has come up with the unexpected view, contrary to all the contemporary sources available to us, that the 'Tondrakeans were most likely Monothelite Eutychians, having received their name from their understanding of "Theandrikos" in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.' He concludes that the appellation 'Tondraketsi in the Armenian is simply a transliteration of the Greek word "Theandrikos"'; and that it 'it would be strange for a heretical movement to derive its name from a toponym.' This conclusion is not supported by any of the primary Armenian sources nor by the extensive literature on the subject<sup>35</sup>. It has been a passing fashion to challenge the veracity of the Armenian sources and is in this instance totally misplaced. The fact that they were given a name after a locality firmly confirms their ethnic origins<sup>36</sup>. Naregatsi whose Letter to the abbot of the monastery of Ktchway is the most reliable source on the movement listing the fourteen tenants of the Tondrakeans associates their name with Tondrak [Թոնդրակ, Թոնդրուկ, Թոնդուրակ, Թոնդուրեկ], a village in the province of Turuberan in Great Armenia<sup>37</sup>. Grigor Magistros the most active and ardent persecutor of the sect says 'the holy spirit guided me and the prayers of my ancestor and spiritual father saint Grigor (reference to St. Grigory the Illuminator) came to Mesopotamia and from there went and reached the place where the 'viper, aspic, serpent of evil' had made his home that is called Tondrak [«Թոնդրակ»], which he raised to the ground like his ancestor had done to Ashtishat (i.e. St Gregory the Illuminator who had destroyed the prime pagan centre in Armenia)<sup>38</sup>. A manual known as the Key of Truth copied in 1782 and believed to have

sian (New York: St Vartan Press, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Khosrov Anjewac'i Commentary on the Divine Liturgy. Translated with an introduction by S. Peter Cowe (New York: St.Vartan Press, 1991); Vrej Nersessian, The Tondrakian movement. Religious movements in the Armenian church from the fourth to the tenth centuries (London: Kahn & Averill, 1987), pp. 56-60. Reprinted in Princeton Theological Monograph series, Allison Park, Pennsylvania, Pickwick Publications, 1988. For an analysis of the sources on the Paulicians and Tondrakians, see Janet & Bernard Hamilton, Christian dualist heresies in the Byzantine world c. 650-c.1450. Selected sources translated and annotated (Manchester University Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Abraham Terian, 'Gregory of Nareg' in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Patristics, K. Parry, ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 13-14 repeated in The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Nareg. Annotated Translation of the Odes, Litanies, and Encomia (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2016), p. xxi, n.11. The author has wrongly attributed the quotations he makes from my study on the Tondrakians to Der Nersessian [Sirarpie]. He does not cite my work in his bibliography.

<sup>36</sup> Ovhanne Draskhanakerttsi (850-929), Khosrov Andzewatsi (900-963), Anania Naregatsi (910-985), Bishop Ukhtanes (940-1000), Step'nos Asoghik (935-1015), Grigor Magistros (990-1059), Aristakes Lastivertsi (1000-1073), Nerses Shnorhali (1102-1173), Poghos Taronatsi (d.1123) and fifteen catholicoses from Davit II Kakaghetsi (806-833) to Dioskoros Sanahentsi (1036-1037) took stern action against them.

<sup>37</sup> T'. Kh Hakobyan, Հայաստանի եւ Յարակից Շրջանների Տեղանունների Բառարան [Dictionary of toponymy of Armenia and adjacent territories] (Erevan University Press, 1968), vol. II, p. 469. The inhabitants of the village were called T'ondrkatsik or T'ondrakets'ik' [Թոնդրկացիք, Թոնդրակեցիք]. Cf. H. S. Ep'rikan, Պատկերազարդ Բնաշխարհիկ Բառարան [Illustrated topographical dictionary](Venice: St.Lazar, 1903-05), vol. II, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Գրիգոր Մագիստրոսի Թղթերը: Բնագիրն Յառաջաբանով եւ Ծանոթագրություններով առաջին անգամ ի լոյս ընծայեց Կ.Կոստանեանց [Letters of Grigor Magistros, text, introduction and notes by Karapet Kostaneants] Aghek'sandrapol, Georg Sanoyeants, 1910), pp. 148-164.

been in use by the followers of the Tondrakean sect as late as the first half of the nineteenth century was discovered in the library of Holy Ejmiatsin 1891 and was translated into English by F. C. Conybeare who accepted the Key of Truth as an authentic work originally composed in the period between the seventh and the ninth centuries<sup>39</sup>.

C.J. Yarnley in his article 'The Armenian Philhellenes' expresses the view that in the monastery of Nareg, 'home of the poet and mystic, Gregory of Nareg' the literary orientation was essentially Greek and men like Grigor had good opportunities for learning Greek and access to Greek authors.

For a long time Gregory of Nareg was presumed to be, as it were, entirely indigenous; to have known either Greek or Syriac and to have demonstrated what a splendid medium for mystical poetry is the classical Armenian language in an unadulterated form. Here unfortunately can be seen more national pride than scholarship. While it is unlikely that he knew any Semitic language, at least in a literary form, it now seems however, very likely that Grigor read Greek. His Panegyric to the Theotokos, like so much else in Armenian literature, appears to be based upon a Greek model, the famous Akathistos Hymn of the Byzantine liturgy. In form and in content the similarities of the two are so strong as to compel the belief that he was familiar with the Greek original<sup>40</sup>.

This is a false assumption and it is not true to say that Armenian 'scholarship' has not investigated the 'Greek orientation' of Grigor Naregatsi<sup>41</sup>. It must be remembered that the first Hellenophile School of translations extends from c. 450 to 710 in four chronological sequences and then in the eleventh century a short period of Hellenophile interest reemerges with the translations produced by Grigor Magistros, who rendered Euclid's Geometry and Plato's Phaedo and Timaeus and his son Catholicos Grigor called Vkeyaser (Martyrophile) enriched Armenian hagiographical literature with translations of lives of saints from Greek and Syriac originals<sup>42</sup>. The movement was a mixed blessing for Armenian culture in general and the Armenian language in particular. In its worst form, it resulted in an 'Armenian' that the reader had to have the Greek original of the given work before him in order to understand the translation. It is apparent that once the original need was satisfied, and the language

<sup>39</sup> Karapet Ter-Mkrtych'ean, 'Die Thondrakier in unseren Tagen' [The new T'ondrakians], Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte, xv/2(1896), pp. 253-78; F. C. Conybeare, The Key of Truth: a manual of the Paulician church of Armenia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898); S. Runciman in The medieval Manichee. A study of the Christian dualist heresy (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), has this comment on Conybeare's evaluation of the document: 'As an Armenianist Conybeare was excellent, and careful as a theologian. But his use of historical evidence sometimes betrays more hasty enthusiasm than judgment.' (note 2 p.56); Vrej Nersessian, 'New evidence on Yovhannes the priest: Author of the Key of Truth' in The Tondrakian Movement, pp. 89-96.

<sup>40</sup> C. J. Yarnley, 'The Armenian Philhellenes. A Study in the spread of Byzantine religious and cultural ideas among Armenians in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD', Eastern Churches Review, viii, 1(1976), p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> Hakob Manandyan, Յունաբան դպրոցը և նրա զարգացման շրջանները [the Hellenistic School and the stages of its development] (Vienna: Mkhitarist Press, 1928); R.Grigoryan, 'Յունա-հայկական գրական կապերի պատմությունից' [From the history of Greek-Armenian literary relations], Patma Banasirakan Handes, 3 (1963), pp. 191-297; Paruyr Muradyan, Յունաբան դպրոցը և նրա դերը հայերենի և հայկական գրականության, տերմինաբանության ստեղծման գործում [The Hellenistic School and its role in the creation of Armenian Grammar and terminology] (Erevan: 1971); 'The Greek or Hellenistic School', in James Etmekjian, History of Armenian Literature. Fifth to thirteenth centuries (New York City: St Vartan Press, 1985), pp. 176-181.

<sup>42</sup> Levon Ter Petrosyan, Հայ հին գրականություն [Ancient Armenian translations] (New York City: St.Vartan, 1992); Agop J. Hacıyaya, The Heritage of Armenian Literature (Wayne State University Press, 2000), vol. I, pp. 100-4. Among the Greek authors to which Grigor Naregatsi had access without needing Greek were Aristotle, Athanasius of Alexandria, Aristides the Apologist, Basil the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Denys the Areopagite, Dionysius of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Epiphanius of Salamis, Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Theologian, Homer, Hippolytus of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, John Chrysostom, Plato, Philo, Pindar Porphyry, and Timothy Aelurus.



was once again able to stand once again on its own feet, the excess baggage was dropped. Armenian scholars among them Gushakian (1931), Tchobanian (1924) K'asouni (1959), Garegin Trapizoni (1922) hold the view that Grigor knew not only Greek but also Syriac and Arabic<sup>43</sup>. The similarities between his hymns and prayers with those of St Ephrem are so similar that many editions of his Prayer books also contain the Prayers of St Ephraim the Syrian<sup>44</sup>. Patriarch Torkom Gushakian is convinced that 'a careful and exhaustive study of his literary output will reveal his mastery of the philosophical, theological, doctrinal, rhetorical, exegetic and even folk traditions skilfully woven together on a golden canvas of a pre-eminent poet'<sup>45</sup>. Grigor had been educated and as Rector of the Monastery of Nareg guided the monks in the seven liberal arts (septem artes liberales) divided into two categories (trivium and quadrivium) as part of the curriculum<sup>46</sup>. Fully versed in the literature of the Hellenophile school and the Cappadocian Fathers, it is expected that he would have been influenced by Greek literature. It is providential that his use of the classical Armenian is not infiltrated by the 'un-Armenian ponderous, artificial, and obscure language of the Hellenophile style' of David the Invincible and Grigor Magistros<sup>47</sup>. However, aside any foreign influences, it is the style that 'defines the author'. There is nothing like the *Book of Lamentations* in Greek or any other language before him or after him.

### ***Naregatsi's spirituality: a holistic world-view***

The conflict between the soul and the body caused a storm in the soul of Naregatsi whose severity and consequences are vividly described thus:

Look with mercy O Lord, on my anguish  
on the many symptoms of dread afflictions.  
I set out before you .  
Treat me like a physician, rather than examining me like a judge  
Indeed I am overwhelmed by anxieties  
caused by vacillation and doubt.  
When the body is weakened by malady,  
When the soul is not fortified against evil (23b).

Man is God's beloved, because of which he has given man free will, but that has also driven man towards sinning, from which to cleanse by God's commandment men must confess and repent. Being conscious and alert to this Naregatsi finds himself abandoned:

<sup>43</sup> Eghia Kasouni, Ver. Պատմություն Հին Հայ Դաստիարակության [History of Armenian education] (Beirut: Se-wan, 1959), pp. 196-98.

<sup>44</sup> In several editions of St Ephrem the Syrian's Book of Prayers [Գիրք Աղօթից] there are also prayers attributed to Grigor Naregatsi and vice versa. See Հայ Գիրք 1512-1800 [Armenian books printed between 1512-1800] (Erevan: State National Library, 1988), editions of 1736, 1741, 1779, 1793, etc.

<sup>45</sup> Torgom episkopos [Gushakian], Նարեկ Աղօթամատենան Ս. Գրիգորի Նարեկացու [Nareg Prayer book of Saint Grigor Naregatsi. Modern [western] Armenian translation], 2nd printing, (Jerusalem: St James' Press, 1931), p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> L.G. Khacherian, Հայագիր դպրության ուսումնագիտական կենտրոնները... Միջնդարեան Հայաստանում եւ Կիլիկիայում (V-XVI դդ) [Educational centres of Armenian learning Schools, Seminaries, Monasteries, Lyceums, Academies and Universities in the Middle ages of Armenia and Cilicia, V-XVI centuries] (Lisbon, 1998), part 1, pp. 210-231, on Grigor Naregatsi see pp. 553-9; cf. L. G. Khacherian, Գլաձորի համալսարանը հայ մանկավարժական մտքի զարգացման մեջ (XIII-XIV դդ) [The influence of Gladzor University on the educational thought of Armenia, XIII-XIV centuries] (Erevan: 1973), pp. 106-131; Ashot Abrahamyan, Գլաձորի Համալսարանը [The University of Gladzor] (Erevan University Press, 1983); on 'Quadrivium' in The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan (Oxford: 1991), vol.3, p. 1765.

<sup>47</sup> Prayer 93, Աղայք բարգմանարէն վասն սրբալոյս իւղոյն միտունի [A prayer of explanation on Holy Chrism] (pp. 682-726) is the only extract that could be a translation from the Greek, although a Greek original has yet to discovered.

No one is so sinful as I,  
 so unruly, so impious.  
 so unjust, so evil,  
 so feeble, so misguided,  
 so foolish, so crafty,  
 so mired, so embarrassed, so blameworthy,  
 I alone, and no one else,  
 I in all, and all in me (Ban 72c).

This is the very source of the tragedy, since Naregatsi with his powerful spirit is striving to meet God by condemning himself for sins committed and not committed and seeks forgiveness. The sense of sin born from the conflict between the spirit and the body, compels him to investigate his inner being feeling ‘bitter’ and ‘tormented’:

Now, tormented by bitter grief I pray  
 to you keeper of imperilled souls.  
 Do not add to the pain of my sighs.  
 Do not wound me, I am already injured.  
 Do not condemn me, I am already punished.  
 Do not torture me, I am already tormented.  
 Do not cudgel me, I am already beaten (17a).

The sense of sin and eternal damnation has shaken the poet, destroyed his essence, mind, existence. He then is forced to list ‘innumerable’ transgressions, stubbornly trying to be worthy of the Lord Almighty’s pardon. Naregatsi’s sinful soul feels and sees his mortal weaknesses, and contrasts the Creator’s righteousness and benevolence. He has no doubt on his sinfulness, but is doubtful whether God will save him. Naregatsi appeals to God in these words:

You clothed yourself in righteousness,  
 O doer of good, and prepared  
 shame and humiliation for me.  
 For you, fitting glory,  
 for me, deserving insult.  
 For you, sweetness immemorial,  
 for me vinegary bile.  
 For you, praise, that cannot be silenced (20c).

God is merciful, forgiving and kind - this is the author’s comforting conclusion and hope of salvation, and to be worthy of God’s benevolence he opens to him his stormy, turbulent and blooded door of his soul. The author’s torment, which is caused by his deep desire to renounce the world and embrace eternity, creates deep emotions, from which also springs his kindness towards the humankind, causing him further agitation, which he does not hide from God:

I am impatient and my nature is sceptical,  
 my legs shaky and my mind reeling,  
 my passions are unruly and my habits intemperate.  
 My body is laced with sin and my inclinations towards the worldly,  
 my rebelliousness innate and my character contradictory  
 (55e; cf. 56a).

However, much his life is intolerable, man by exercising his free will, abandon the world and seek immediacy with God. This is where the tragedy lies: the inevitability of death, which stalks man, blackmail's man to love life more and embrace it totally. Naregatsi finds man's unquenchable desire for life and his many weaknesses, natural. This is also the other deeply felt tragedy, for which the poet with intense pathos expresses his anguish and pain. In the words of the French poet Luc Andre Marcel Naregatsi demands from God 'the right to live'<sup>48</sup>.

What is the relationship with eternity-and is the soul of man able to unite with eternity?

Two cups in two hands,  
one filled with blood, the other with milk,  
two censers flickering,  
one with incense, the other with crisp fat.  
two platters piled with savouries,  
one sweet, the other tart,  
two goblets overflowing,  
one with tears, the other with brimstone,  
two bowls at the finger tips,  
one with wine, the other with bile (30c).

So great is Naregatsi's love for humanity that his lament is not understood as that of an individual but as belonging to all humankind: for the pain carried by the author, emerges as a literary device. Drawing a comparison between Naregatsi and Dante, the Armenian literary critic Mkrtitch Mkryan writes: 'By making the inner emotions of man a subject of literary creation Naregatsi is ahead of Dante and is closer to Shakespeare. In Dante's work the tragic aspect of human life are portrayed in the form of tortures while with Naregatsi it is expressed by inner conflicting emotions'<sup>49</sup>.

The constant meditations upon and recitations of sacred writings informed the minds of the monks with a biblical and liturgical imagination that made the sacred word present in the mundane. It transformed the abstract and intellectual realm of the text into a physical, sensory, even sensual encounter between man and God. As the narrative develops it becomes clear that this mystic's aim is union with Jesus and ultimately with God the Father, since God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit form the Trinity. Therefore he asks Jesus:

And by the work of your incorruptible divinity  
you extended your hand to raise  
the man condemned to death by his mortal sins  
raising him along with his generation(14c).

The Eucharistic offering, is naturally the place where this is most immediately and clearly felt. The overwhelming experience of seeing, touching, tasting and ingesting the divine, of the communion between man and God, is profoundly expressed by Grigor Naregatsi. In prayer five he is astonished at God's reaching out to him to bring him near:

Nourished me with heavenly bread  
quenched my thirst with your blood,  
acquainted with the impalpable and is unreachable,  
emboldened my earthly eyes to seek you,  
embraced me your glorious light (5b)

But even more astounding for Naregatsi is that God does not punish him for daring to

<sup>48</sup> Luc André Marcel, Grégoire de Narek et l'ancienne Poésie Arménienne, (Paris: 1953), p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Mkrtitch Mkryan, Գրիգոր Նարեկացի [Grigor Narekatsi] (Erevan: 1955), p.213.

reciprocate by coming into contact with the Eucharistic offering:

You did not reprimand me for arrogantly associating with you  
 You did not darken the sight of my eyes for gazing upon you  
 You did not crack the digits of my fingers for touching the word of life  
 You did not crush the rows of my teeth for chewing your communion  
 did not dishonour me at your wedding party(5c).

To approach the altar is to follow in the footsteps of Christ, and to receive the Eucharist, the vehicle of our salvation, is to come face to face with Christ. The correlation between the procession from the narthex to the altar with that of the soul from impurity to salvation is not new to Armenian monastic theology. Grigor Naregatsi employed the image in a grand scale:

merely entering the vessel of the virgin womb purely  
 and coming out joined with body  
 inseparable in essence,  
 without any flaw in his humanity and lacking  
 nothing in divinity  
 one and only Son of the only Father and  
 the first born of the Mother of God, Virgin Bearer  
 of the Lord (34e).

Naregatsi firmly believes in the Incarnation and clearly accepts the notion that God is not the creator of evil, for evil proceeds from Satan, and he rejects the idea that God can rejoice in the perdition of man. All this creates the impression that Naregatsi wished to reassure himself and that he lives in constant fear that it is just and vengeful God who will have the final say about him.

### ***The Concept of God***

It is all too clear that his conversation is with God. It is plain the author is unable to paint the portrait of God, for the latter is invisible, immaterial and unapproachable. He is a spirit, the ineffable creative power. Despite that the poem is an endless, ardent conversation with the creator. Around the theme of the Last judgment and the supernatural life he paints a series of pictures, but in close scrutiny he is mainly concerned with events occurring in this life. He remains firmly rooted in this world. He is convinced that the world is the creation of the Almighty- but if that is the case why is he endlessly beseeching, sighing, pleading, intervening, protesting 'from the depth of his heart'? It seems that God soon after the creation left the universe imperfect, unfinished and chaotic. God has abandoned the world. Here it is not important as to what his relation with God is, but he implores the gaze of God on man. And it is in this context that God and the Trinity and Satan assume new meaning. It may seem that such an approach is burdening the poem with Trinitarian schema. But in reality his conception and understanding of these elements is so profound that he feels he does not need the traditional, abstract, dry, unemotional concepts of the church. The tormented hero instead find himself between the good and the evil, between the forces of creation and those of destruction, between Christ and Satan. Christ has offered man his Blood, his Body and united him to Himself. Despite that, man is still inclined towards Satan, falling into the net of sin, burning between two fires. Naregatsi writes with wonder that Christ's greatness as evidenced not only by heaven with all his glories but also the earth with all its humanity. Christ is great particularly because of the mercy and compassion he has shown towards man:

For my impious tongue is not worthy to utter your name  
 praised by all creation,

but you, who are capable of everything,  
grant me the spirit of salvation,  
the sheltering right hand, the helping hand,  
the command of goodness, the light of mercy,  
the word of renewal, the cause of pardon (59c).

The poet brings back to earth to humanity the compassion of the divine through Christ. God has honoured man by driving the Satan away through Christ's Crucifixion; man is still inclined towards evil. God has created man with opposite elements, spiritual and material, harmonious; but man has abandoned his spiritual flight and descended into hell:

Following our earthly nature, strayed like animals  
we were laid low and bound to the earth  
in some instances by disease, and others by cruelty,  
some by gluttony and passions,  
as if a ravenous beast is joined to our nature ( 86a).

Naregatsi likens his life to waves of the sea, 'my soul tossing in this world upon countless, endless swells' (25b). His description of the storm is extremely realistic as observed in these lines:

Wrecked by the blows of the wild waves of the sea,  
like a ship whose rudder has become unhinged,  
whose tall mast has been ripped from the deck,  
whose flapping sails are in shreds (25b).

However, it is his conviction that he will merit divine benevolence, for faith, love and hope are his allies in this eternal struggle:

Will I ever see the wrecked ark of my body restored?  
Will I ever see my ship wrecked soul healthy again (25d).

The crucial thing for the poet is that Christ suffered for humanity among men .For this reason he devotes a splendid chapter to the Virgin Mary, in which one still hears the poet's plea. He begins a beguiling conversation with the Mother of God, very delicately praising her beauty but also her pure motherhood. He pleads that God, because of her boundless purity, will hear her intercession on behalf of man's salvation. The poet's majestic portraiture of the Virgin Mary has a very human touch:

Lend me a hand, for I have fallen, heavenly temple.  
Glorify your Son,  
by performing upon me the divine miracle of mercy and pardon  
handmaid and Mother of God' (80b).

Astonishingly in every instance he finds the correct emotional language, the corresponding style and the matching naturalistic feeling:

Assist me in your wings of prayer,  
You, proclaimed Mother of all the living  
so that my departure from this earthly valley  
may be without torment,  
leading to life in the lodgings you have prepared,  
that my death may be light,  
though I am weighed down by iniquity (80b).



With the intercession of the Mother-of-God (Astuadsadsin) Grigor constructs a biography of God, from birth to betrayal. He paints the dramatic picture of Christ in the final hour of His life.

You stood, with my nature, before a tribunal of your creatures  
and did not speak, giver of speech,  
You did not utter a word, creator of tongues.  
You did not release your voice, shaker of the world.  
You did not make a sound, trumpet of majesty.  
You did not answer back with accounts of your good deeds.  
You did not silence them with their wrongs.  
You did not deliver your betrayer to death.  
You did not struggle when bound.  
You did not squirm when whipped.  
You did not fight back when spat upon.  
You did not resist when beaten.  
You did not take affront when mocked.  
You did not frown when ridiculed.  
And put a crown of disdain upon his head,  
They nailed him like a common criminal.  
They persecuted You, like an outlaw, treating  
You in your serenity, like a bandit (77b,c).

He begs God, to protect him from becoming ‘the cohort of Satan [«տմակից ինձ Բեխաբայ»], the prey of Satan, instead he says ‘May the venerated, life giving relics of your passion stay with me... as stones of a slingshot made of the spirit to ward off the legions of evil’ (66d). He accepts that God has given him advantage over the Satan. But Satan wants to take revenge and for that reason man is also to a degree made to suffer for God.

What good is it to be brave as a lion among the weak  
and then be devoured by wasps?...  
Impudent fleas swarm around me  
like flecks of flaming ash from a fire.  
If I escape being impaled on the horn of a unicorn,  
my flesh will crawl with the chewing of little worms.  
And even when huddled in the darkest corners of my closet,  
I could be accosted by the foulness,  
like heaps of dead frogs, to disgust me (68e).

The final desired destination of Grigor is to ‘unite’ [«միանալ աստծո հետ»], ‘commix in him’ [«ձուլվել նրա հետ»]. The terminology makes the theological point that God is in man and man is in God but also the thesis that God is everywhere and in everything. We see this quasi-panteistic conception of the world:

For you alone are in heaven beyond words,  
and on earth beyond understanding,  
in the substance of existence unto the ends of the earth,  
the beginning of everything  
and the completion of everything in all ways,  
blessed in the highest (41b).

Naregatsi’s ultimate goal is ‘union with God’, to ‘melt in him’. He cries out ‘I am coming

to you, Lord, in the words of your parable, uniting with you completely, inseparably' ( 85b). He backs up his desire by this extremely powerful but simple theological reasoning: 'who alone became human like us for our sakes, so that you might make us like you for your sake ( 19a). We often notice that this type of mysticism develops into a sort of pantheism. Such progress is natural, is also present in Naregatsi but not to its fullest extent. In Grigor Naregatsi's 'pantheism' - in contrast to the Christian doctrine-God, created nature and everything in it, but he himself was not above nature or transcendental to it, but in union with it. The evidence of this is not only what we have alluded to in his concept of the union of God and man, in which he stresses the existence of God in man and of man in God, but also his conviction that God is present in everything and therefore everything is in God. We detect such conviction in the previous prayer (41, above). In another instance he speaks of God 'uniting his essence and our nature in a manner beyond human understanding' (80c).

The torment and the anguish the author experiences in his present life is his desire to 'ascend to God', for communion with God. Typically, Naregatsi took the doctrinal explanation and likened the relationship between the human and divine in the incarnate Christ 'to the wick in the candle':

You gave the oil, and in this oil you placed a wick,  
which exemplifies your union, without imperfection,  
with our condition  
formed and woven with your love of mankind,  
so that we, who find ourselves banished, in the shadow of death,  
because of the first transgressions against the tree.

...

And also by being spread upon the tree of death  
you spread us upon it as well,  
and thanks to this great mystery  
united us with the tree of life ( 93c).

The persistent idea of grace in Naregatsi drew the attention of the Armenian Protestant author who claimed 'our writer is a Calvinist before Calvin'<sup>50</sup>. But he is a victim of hasty conclusion, because the doctrine of grace in Naregatsi is neither scriptural nor rational, but, rather experimental, mystical, as being revealed to him through his own personal touch with the divine and through the taste of its essence and power<sup>51</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Today at inter-faith gatherings it is customary for representatives of various faiths -Christian-Jew-Islam to offer a prayer from their own tradition. Grigor Naregatsi's Prayer 89 could not be more appropriate:

God and Lord, life and creator and creator,  
merciful, compassionate, light,  
long-suffering, God who bears no grudges,  
all-merciful, generous God who loves mankind,  
saviour, blessed, praised, glorified  
storehouse of steadfastness, bulwark of faith,  
good without guile,  
radiance without darkness,

<sup>50</sup> Leon Arpee, A History of Armenian Christianity from the beginning to our time (New York: The Armenian Missionary Association of America, 1946), p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> Karekin Sarkissian, vardapet, A Brief introduction to Armenian Christian Literature (London: A Michael Barbour Publication, 1974), 2nd printing, p. 43.

pardoner of sins,  
 healer of wounds,  
 creator of unknowable mysteries,  
 most approachable of the unreachable,  
 refuge for the despair,  
 your name is proclaimed, God the Son,  
 and your Father's with you  
 mighty and awesome,  
 and your almighty Holy Spirit  
 worshiped with you,  
 glory and thanksgiving for ever  
 Amen.

Naregatsi wants everyone to hear his sorrow, his pleas, his laments, his songs, his psalms, and join in reciting these words:

Expressed in practical words born of much grief  
 on repentance  
 on counsel for the benefit of the soul,  
 on self-discipline,  
 on the rules of contrite living  
 on dedication and commitment  
 on exposing the unseen  
 on confession of sins  
 on disclosure of secrets,  
 on laying open of the covered up,  
 on reproach for the hidden,  
 powerful salves for incurable wounds,  
 effective medicines for invisible pains  
 multifaceted remedies for the pangs of turmoil,  
 for the passions of all temperaments,  
 occasions for tears ,impulses to prayers (Tenets of Prayer).

In the memorial (hishatakaran or place of memory) of his work he addresses his readers with these words:

In the tranquil period,  
 when the enemies of the church were restrained,  
 I undertook the writing of this work.  
 I planned, arranged, compiled, took notes,  
 gathered together, composed, and set it forth,  
 bringing together in one comprehensive work,  
 in a single style, passages from many different sources  
 to produce this sacred book.  
 I, Grigor, priest of the faith  
 the last in rank among the poets and the least of the teachers,  
 a member of the noble brotherhood of Nareg Monastery<sup>52</sup>.

In a sense, he strives to become an intercessor on earth for those who are less articulate than himself. He speaks to and speaks for humanity.

<sup>52</sup> Յիշատակարան Մատենիս Գրուքեան (Memorial on the writing of this work), pp. 736-7.

And now, accept these prayers of sighs and,  
As you inhale the scent of this bloodless sacrifice of words,  
King of heaven.

Bless and sanctify the letters of this book of lamentation,  
And fix your seal upon it, as an eternal monument...  
May it be preached to all peoples.

May it be inscribed on the doors of the mind  
and imprinted on the threshold of the senses...

And although I shall die in the way of all mortals,  
may I be deemed to live  
through the continued existence of his book (88b).



Ն. Ա. ՔՇՆՅ. Վ. ՆԵՐՍԷՍԵԱՆ

**ԳՐԻԳՈՐ ՆԱՐԵԿԱՅԻՆ ԻԲՐԵԻ ԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՊԱՇՏ ԵՒ ՊՈԵՏ.  
ՀՈԳԻՆ՝ ԱՍՏԾՈՅ ՀԵՏ ՄԵՐՁԵՅՈՒՄ ՓՆՏՈՒԵԼԻՍ**

**Ամփոփում**

2015 թվականին Հռոմի Ֆրանսիս Պապն հայ եկեղեցու սուրբ բանաստեղծ և աստուածաբան՝ Գրիգոր Նարեկացուն քրիստոնեական եկեղեցու մէջ արժանացրեց «Տիեզերական վարդապետ»-ի կոչմանը: Հռչակումից անմիջապէս յետոյ, բազմաթիւ անկիւններից քննադատական ձայներ հնչեցին ի դէմ այս որորշման: Գրիգոր Նարեկացին ներկայացուցիչն է հակաքաղկեդոնական «Միաբնակ» հայ եկեղեցու, և հետեւաբար հարկ կար փաստել նրա ուղղափառութիւնն ու քրիստոնեական եկեղեցու «տիեզերական վարդապետ»-ի կոչման արժանաւորութիւնը:

Գրիգոր Նարեկացու արժանաւորութիւնը՝ «տիեզերական վարդապետ» կոչւելու, արդարացում է իր «Մատեան Ողբերգութեան» ստեղծագործութեամբ, որը Սուրբ Աւգուստինոսի «Խոստովանութիւնների» և Թովմաս Ա Քեմպիսի «Յաղագս նմանօղ լինելոյ Քրիստոսի» երկերի հետ կազմում է միջնադարեան քրիստոնեական խորհրդապաշտական գրականութեան երեք ամենաինքնատիպ ստեղծագործութիւններից մէկը:

REVD. DR. N. V. NERSESSIAN

**GRIGOR NAREGATSI, MYSTIC AND POET:  
THE SOUL'S SEARCH FOR IMMEDIACY WITH GOD**

**Summary**

On April 12th 2015 Pope Francis officially pronounced St Gregory of Narek 'Doctor of the Universal Church'. Immediately the electronic media were jammed by accusations, questioning the wisdom of the Pope for declaring a monk of an Armenian 'Monophysite' Church doctor universalis. A member of the Armenian Catholic Congregation was called upon to prepare a position (official report) proofing that the Gregory of Narek has enough 'ecumenical' standing and worthy of the esteem bestowed upon him by the Catholic Church.

The belated recognition is for one of the outstanding figures in medieval Christian literature. Gregory of Narek ranks with St. Augustine (354-430) and Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) as one of the three greatest mystic writers in medieval Christendom, his monumental Lamentations joins the former's Confessions, and the latter's Imitation of Christ to form a natural trilogy. In this brief survey the author provides a glimpse into the mind and milieu that shaped his work.