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The Armenian Apostolic Church and the ecumenical movement

Abstract

This article examines the participation of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the modern ecumenical movement at various levels (national and international). In particular, it focuses on the question of the understanding of ecclesial unity and its attitude to the question of intercommunion or eucharistic communion. It shows a traditional openness to the ecumenical movement and especially to Eucharistic hospitality.

1. Note

When studying the involvement of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the Ecumenical Movement, this church appears mainly as part of the Oriental Orthodox church family. In other words: The Armenians seem to act ecumenically mainly in cooperation with the other Oriental churches. This cooperation with other churches is in itself already an ecumenical involvement, because the Oriental churches are in many respects quite different from each other, and thus it is not self-understood that they can act together in all issues. Therefore, the Armenian scholar Gregory Shokhikyan recently pointed to the problematic aspect of placing the Armenian Apostolic Church within the family of Oriental Orthodox churches, because – as he says – the main bond between those churches is the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon, thus a negative, delimiting idea, but not a positive common issue. He also points to the different liturgical traditions as well as the different biblical canons and christological nuances between these churches.¹

So, my interest in this short presentation is to understand the Armenian Apostolic Church as a Christian tradition with its own specificity. Therefore, I am interested to find out its specific and unique contribution to the ecumenical endeavour. Unfortunately, there are not many sources in English, French or German – the languages I can manage. Thus, my contribution here is limited, but may be a starting point for further research.

¹ Gregory Shokhikyan, *The Church of Armenia*, 104f.

2. Introduction

The ecumenical movement is a complex phenomenon and in order to study the involvement of any church, different levels and areas have to be considered: The international level, the regional level, and the local level. At the same time, it needs to be considered that the ecumenical movement has different branches or areas of involvement: Bilateral and multilateral theological dialogues or common action in practical work. I will not be able to shed light on all these levels, but I will provide 1) a few historical facts of the Armenian Apostolic Church's involvement on the international and the national ecumenical movement, and 2) I will try to find some tracks of Armenian theological ecumenical thinking. Or in other words: I will try to find the specific Armenian approach to ecumenism.

3. Some historical facts

3.1 International level

The beginning of the ecumenical movement is normally seen in the early 20th century with the appearance of the two movements for Life and Work and Faith and Order. Especially in Faith & Order (F&O), the Armenian Apostolic Church was involved from the beginning: At all three first world conferences of F&O (1927, 1937 and 1952), the Holy See of Etchmiadzin was represented by consultants.² At the founding assembly of the WCC in 1948 in Amsterdam, the Armenian Church was present with two observers (Archbishop Artavazd Sürmeyan and Achimandrite Schnorhk Kalustian). At the second assembly of the WCC in Evanston, Armenian observers were also present.³ However, only in 1962 the Armenian Apostolic Church became a member of WCC, or precisely: The two catholicosates Etchmiadzin and Cilica became members. In 1964, Catholicos Vasgen I. appointed a representative of the Holy See in Etchmiadzin to the World Council of Churches in Geneva. These few examples show a lively interest in the ecumenical movement on the international level already in the early stage and – it seems – there was a special interest in the theological discourse as it is conducted in the F&O movement.

3.2 National level

As I said before, the national level also needs to be considered. But for reasons of time, I will only acknowledge the example of Germany: Since 1996, the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church is a member of the ›Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland‹ (ACK), which is the equivalent to national councils of churches in other countries.

2 Vgl. Mesrob K. Krikorian, Die Geschichte der Armenisch-Apostolischen Kirche, 52.

3 Ibid.

In this context, the Armenian Diocese in Germany co-signed a declaration on the mutual recognition of baptism, the so-called Magdeburg Declaration from 2007, which is considered an important step for the ecumenical relations between Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox.

3.3 Bilateral dialogues

Another important feature in the ecumenical movement are bilateral dialogues. The Armenian Apostolic Church is involved in a number of such bilateral theological dialogues. But it is in this context that the Armenian Church is acting within the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches and not on its own, as I mentioned in the beginning. Therefore, I will only briefly mention the most important of these dialogues: First of all, the dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. It resulted in the discovery that

»their differences are mostly semantic, and that the first three ecumenical councils, which they both accept, form their ›common heritage‹, and affirm ›the apostolic faith of the undivided Church of the first centuries‹ [...]«⁴

To be mentioned is also the dialogue between Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, which was formally established in 2003. There is also a bilateral dialogue with the Anglican Communion, officially started in 2002, and there was a dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (since 1993). In all these dialogues the main issue was the christological questions related to the separation in the 5th century, as this is the issue that unites all the Oriental Churches in their relationship with the other churches.

Direct contacts between the Armenian Apostolic Church with other churches can be observed on the level of church leadership. There seem to be closest relations with the Roman Catholic Church as can be seen in a series of common statements between different catholicos and the respective popes. They expressed their willingness for cooperation and close relationship but did not regard theological issues. The latest such statement (2016), for example, raises the issue of persecution of ethnic minorities and the promotion of ›Christian values‹, which are especially related to the common understanding of family and marriage as a bond between a man and a woman.⁵ Such common statements have also been issued between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Catholicos of all Armenians, Karekin I.

4 Aram I. Catholicos of Cilicia, *The Armenian Church*, 181f. Cf. also: Mesrob K. Krikorian, *Die Armenische Kirche*, 153

5 *Gemeinsame Erklärung von Papst Franziskus und Katholikos-Patriarch Karekin II.*, Etschmiadzin, 26. Juni 2016, 1167f.

4. Basic ecumenical theological position of the Armenian Apostolic Church

4.1 The understanding of Christian unity

The ecumenical key question nowadays, though, is how Christian unity is understood and envisaged and how it can be achieved. Karekin I. describes unity in relational terms first of all as an

»attitude of the spirit, a force with three poles: the unity is a relationship with God, existing of fidelity; it is a relationship with the others, with those who confess the same Christ; thirdly it is a fidelity to one self.«⁶

A more technical description of unity is given by Mesrob Krikorian who considers the Salamanca declaration of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission in 1973 as an exact expression of the conviction and practice of the Armenian Church. He quotes from this document especially the following sentences:

»The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same spirit.«⁷

According to Mesrob Krikorian, the model of ecclesial unity, which the Armenian Church is pleading for, entails the idea of »unity in diversity«,⁸ which he explains more detailed as living as »sister churches, which confess the one faith of the first three ecumenical councils and act in a harmonious community of life and witness.«⁹ He finds the principle of diversity already in the works of Nerses Shnorhali:

»In the same way as the colour – black or white – does not do harm to the body, as long as the nature is healthy, the diversity of feasts and other ecclesial traditions do not harm the souls of those, who keep their faith safe and healthy.«¹⁰

6 Giovanni Guaïta, Karékin 1er, 244 (engl. translation DH).

7 What Kind of Unity?, 121.

8 Mesrob K. Krikorian, Die Armenische Kirche, 154.

9 Ibid., 155: »Schwesterkirchen [...], die den einen Glauben der ersten drei ökumenischen Konzilien bekennen und in einer harmonischen Gemeinschaft des Lebens und des Zeugnisses wirken.«

10 Ibid., 158.

Diversity as an integral part of unity is also the subject of the reflections of the aforementioned Catholicos Karekin I., who points to the fact that »diversity, even conflicts, divergences and controversies belonged to the life of the earliest Christians.«¹¹ Unity is not uniformity. But important for him is the consciousness to belong to »one« Christ, to »one« Church.¹² In this sense, the Catholicos advocates for a sort of ecumenism of mutual exchange when he says:

»Our holy church needs, through narrow connections with other churches, to understand the positive aspects of the experiences of other churches as a new challenge for its own motivation and action.«¹³

Both Karekin I. and Mesrob K. Krikorian use the term »sister churches«¹⁴ in this context in the sense of the basic relationship between the different churches which understand themselves as being in unity.

Karekin is convinced that the only way for ecumenism is dialogue.¹⁵ And the basic attitude and important precondition for such dialogue is love: »[...] if God is love [...] we also need to be love, [...] and, let us never forget – love does not know division [...]«.¹⁶ Therefore – in his mind – it is not the process of exchange and reflection in the ecumenical debate that is the most important element, but the manifestation of this love.

4.2 The question of intercommunion/eucharistic sharing

One of the key issues when talking about unity is the question of eucharistic communion, since the separation between churches becomes always most visible at the eucharistic table. As the Armenian scholar Gregory Shokhikyan observes,

»The Church of Armenia, unlike the Western Churches, does not have an official and comprehensive document on the intercommunion between the Churches.«¹⁷

11 Karekin I, *Konfrontiert mit uns selbst. Eröffnungsvortrag bei der Zweiten Europäischen Ökumenischen Versammlung Graz, 126* (»Die Vielfalt, ja sogar die Streitigkeiten, Divergenzen und Kontroversen gehörten zum Leben der frühesten Christen.« Engl. transl. DH). Cf. also: Guaïta, 255.

12 Karekin I., *ibid.*

13 Karekin I., *Antritts-Enzyklika*, 96. (»Unsere heilige Kirche muss durch enge Verbindung zu anderen Kirchen die positiven Aspekte der Erfahrungen anderer Kirchen als eine neue Herausforderung für ihre eigene Motivation und Handlung verstehen.« Engl. transl. DH).

14 Mesrob K. Krikorian, *Die Armenische Kirche*, 155; Karekin I., *Antritts-Enzyklika*, 91.

15 Giovanni Guaïta, *Karékín 1er*, 256 (»Je pense que la seule voie pour résoudre ces problèmes est et reste toujours le dialogue [...] je suis convaincu que justement là où il y a de fortes divergences, il n'existe pas d'autre moyen chrétien que le dialogue, fait de respect mutuel et de la patience que Jésus a manifestée avec nous.« Engl. transl. DH).

16 Giovanni Guaïta, *Karékín 1er*, 244.

17 Gregory Shokhikyan, *The Church of Armenia*, 106.

This is probably due to the fact that

»intercommunion de facto is not regarded as a canonical or a dogmatic position but a pastoral issue, a matter of *economia*.«¹⁸

This means that the practice differs in the different dioceses. These different positions can be grouped into two, according to Shokhikyan: a) the conviction that Eucharistic sharing can happen only between the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox family. b) Eucharistic hospitality to every baptized Christian is possible as long as s/he confesses the Nicene/Apostles Creed and lives according to Christian moral ideals.

It is probably in this spirit of the second group that

«Armenian bishops at the CEC Assembly in Trondheim, Norway, in 2003 invited all participants, Orthodox and Protestant, to receive communion during the Armenian Liturgy which they celebrated.»¹⁹

In this context of the wider ecumenical movement, this was a surprising gesture for many Protestants, but from my own experience I know that it is a practice that is common in some specific contexts in which the Armenian Church is existing. Thus, as Shokhikyan writes:

»[...] the Church of Armenia is a rare Eastern Church that locally practices Eucharistic hospitality towards all baptized and faithful Christians as long as they are good standing members of their churches.«²⁰

5. Conclusion

The Armenian Apostolic Church has a certain tradition of openness and an interest in ecumenical engagement. It shows some starting points for an individual approach to ecumenism which obviously cannot be developed easily in the traditional combination with the other Oriental Orthodox Churches. »Forming friendship and mutual recognition of holy living«²¹ can be understood as perspective that the Armenian Church could contribute to the progress of ecumenical thought.

18 Ibid., 106f.

19 Country Profile Armenia, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/country-profile-armenia>.

20 Gregory Shokhikyan, *The Church of Armenia*, 122.

21 This is also what Shokhikyan means when he claims that the reservations of Armenian Christians to receive Eucharist in other churches would need to be overcome. *Op.cit.*, 122.

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