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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE FATE OF THE ARMENIAN PEOPLE

Rola religii w historii Ormian

Słowa kluczowe: religia, chrześcijaństwo, Apostolski Kościół Ormiański, kościół narodowy, państwo, naród

Key words: religion, Christianity, Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC), National Church, state, nation

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia rolę i znaczenie chrześcijaństwa jako religii narodowej oraz Apostolskiego Kościoła Ormiańskiego jako narodowego kościoła w dziejach Armenii i narodu ormiańskiego. Biorąc pod uwagę fakty historyczne, zwraca się uwagę na nieoceniony wkład kościoła ormiańskiego w zachowanie ormiańskiej tożsamości i wzmocnienie państwowości ormiańskiej. Dokonuje się w nim historyczno-chronologicznej analizy relacji państwo-Kościół, biorąc pod uwagę w okresie nowożytnym globalizację i bezpieczeństwo narodowe.

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki serii badań socjologicznych ujawniających religijną tożsamość ormiańskiej młodzieży, próbując w ten sposób ukazać znaczenie chrześcijaństwa oraz Apostolskiego Kościoła Ormiańskiego dla współczesnej młodzieży ormiańskiej.

Abstract

This article presents the role and significance of Christianity as a national religion and the Armenian Apostolic Church as a national church in the life of Armenia and the Armenian people. Taking into account historical facts, the invaluable contribution of the Armenian Church to the preservation of the Armenian identity and the strengthening of the Armenian statehood are pointed out. An historical-chronological analysis of state-church relations is carried out, considering these relations in the framework of the modern period as one of the priority issues of globalization concerning the national security of the republic.

The article presents the results of a series of sociological studies revealing the religious perceptions of young Armenians, thus showing the role and significance of Christianity and the Armenian Apostolic Church among contemporary young Armenians.

Introduction

Religion, as a social phenomenon, has always accompanied the the history of manikind in the different stages of its development. For millennia, as a dominant element in the system of spiritual values, religion has often merged with other forms of spiritual activity, has involved all aspects of social life, and has directly influenced people's psychology and consciousness, determining their behaviour and actions, relationships and mentality.

Religion is a complex, unique phenomenon, and for its perception and understanding the various existing theoretical-scientific approaches and explanations are limited and insufficient.

The word 'religion' originated from the Latin word *religio*, which can be translated as 'faith', 'piety', 'godliness', 'sympathy'. Religion is a form of social conscience, an outlook which is based on faith in supernatural powers, deities. It can be defined as a science which unites Man and God (according to the Christian author and oracle, Lactantios) (Yablokov 2000) or as an organized worship of higher or supernatural powers (according to the *Oxford Dictionary*). It should be noted that religion is not only based on superstition, but it also defines a particular attitude and behavior towards superstition.

Christianity (Greek Χριστός – "anointed") is the most widely spread among the world religions . It has followers from the East to the West, and in some regions it is dominant, as, for example, in America, Europe and Africa.

Christianity is more than just a religion, it is a reality where an individual lives under God's protection, in communion with Him and with the hope of an everlasting life to come. It helps the individual not to fear death, to value life and its beauties, to experience full joy, to love with all the heart, to sympathize sincerely, to help disinterestedly, to make friends and to find peace of mind.

In the countries of the 21st century Christianity is being gradually threatened for various reasons, and hostility towards Christians is escalating; Christianity is being denied to the life of society, sometimes with such «prominent» slogans as humanism, freedom, liberty, modern, conscious, educated, which make the individual and society more inhuman, slavish, unconscious and ignorant. In the context of a rapidly changing and evolving world outlook, Christianity has lost its uniqueness and importance for many people, remaining unexplained, unassailable and inappropriate. Modern freedom leads us to pre-Christian paganism.

According to the study conducted by the Center for Global Christian Studies under the Gordon-Conwy Seminary (USA), Christians will continue to be the world's dominant religious community by the mid-21st century. Nowadays they comprise 2.479 billion, in second place are the Muslims, who comprise 1.784 billion. Projections indicate that by 2025 the number of the Christians will comprise 2.732 billion, and the Muslims will comprise 2.044 billion. In 2050 the Christians will remain the religious majority (3.443 billion), whereas the Islam will be practised by 2.766 billion. Today, the greatest number of Christians (591 million) live in Latin America, and 582 million live in Africa. However, eight years from now, Africa will become the center of Christianity. The number of followers of Christ on the Continent will be over 721 million, and in 2050 it will be 1.253 billion. In 2025, the number of Christians in Latin America will be 633 million, and in 2050, 704 million. The number of Christians by 2050 will increase by 200 million in other regions, especially in Asia. And only in Europe will the number of Christians decrease from 554 million in 2017 down to to 494.9 million in 2050 (Center issledovanyi hristianstva v teologicheskoy seminarii Gordon-Conwella 2016).

In addition to the above-mentioned statistical predictions, it is worth mentioning that 9 million of the 2.479 billion Christians currently living in the world are followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Ibidem).

The Role and Significance of Christianity in Armenia

Like many other post-Soviet countries, the countries of the South Caucasus are still in a transition period. Being the smallest regional republic, Armenia is still trying to orient itself between Europe and Russia, as well as among the values, integration models and security factors relating to them. According to the population census data of Armenia in 2011, 98% of the Armenian population lives in Armenia, 92% of whom are members of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) (*Rezultati perepisi 2011 goda v Respublike Armenia* 2013).

Among modern challenges and important issues in the context of globalization in modern Armenia are issues of religion-society and state-church relations, the religious factor in public life, the role of religion and issues that require coherent research and analysis. The realities mentioned below may serve as factors supporting the actuality of the issues discussed above:

The activation of the existing and emerging religious communities in Armenia during the years of independence, as well as destructive and dangerous sectarian movements, are a serious threat to national security.

The increasing role of religious factors at national and international levels which, in the first case, is conditioned by the need to preserve national-spiritual identity and, in the second case, is conditioned by the principle importance of international norms of conscience and religion on the way to integration into the European family. In international relations, religious freedom is under the control of powerful states and is a lever of intervention into the domestic affairs of states (Astsatryan 2005).

Therefore, considering the above-mentioned observations, we find it important to activate the function of the Armenian Apostolic Church, to restore its role, and to expand the scope of the relations between the Armenian Church and the Republic of Armenia in the domain of state control.

The Armenian Apostolic Church (also, the Holy Apostolic Church of Armenia Armenian Church) (*Armyanskaya apostolskaya cerkov* 2010), is one of the oldest in the world, belonging to the group of Eastern Orthodox non-Chalcedonian churches. The spiritual leader is the Catholicos of All Armenians, whose residence is The Holy Mother Throne of the Apostolic Church of Etchmiadzin in Vagharshapat, Armavir province of the Republic of Armenia (*Christian Armenia Encyclopedia* 2002). The Armenian Church has four hierarchical chairs or centers – *The Holy Mother Throne of the Apostolic Church of Etchmiadzin, the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople*. The Catholicosate of The Holy Mother Throne of the Apostolic Church of Etchmiadzin, which is known as the Catholicosate of All Armenians, is the head and the leader of the common heritage. It is dominant and authoritative over the other three chairs. Besides the aforementioned Four Hierarchical Churches, a number of countries around the world have church organizations called dioceses, which have their diocesan leaders. The great majority of the Dioceses, such as the United States, France, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Argentina, Brazil, and Australia, are under the spiritual authority of the Catholicosate of All Armenians. The Armenian Dioceses of Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria and Iran are under the aegis of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (with its seat in Antilia).

Throughout its existence, the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has been an inseparable part of Jesus Christ's «One, Holy, Universal, and Apostolic» Church. Traditionally, the Armenian Church is called Apostolic, as the first preachers of Christianity in Armenia were Thaddeus and Bartholomew – two of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ (I cen-

tury BC), who were named “The First Enlighteners of Armenia”. Armenia was the first country where Christianity was declared as a state religion. This crucial point in the history of Armenia occurred in 301 A.D., during the reign of the Great Armenian King Trdat the 3rd (287–330) and was consolidated by the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator (302–326).

This historic act had a decisive significance for further development of the Armenian nation, its social and political life and spiritual culture. Since then, our people and their faith have become indivisible. Christian faith became crystallized, turned into black blood, so that our self-sacrificing ancestors converted their faith into their skin, boldly confessing that “Neither angels, nor humans or fire and sword can break us from this faith”. And the dictators of other religions and other nations have had to put up with this fact over the centuries.

The role of the Armenian Church in the creation and preservation of the national identity of the Armenian people is invaluable, with the definition of the national church given to it by the Armenian people. The fact that the Armenian Church is a national church is more telling and significant when we look at the definitions given to the church within the framework of complex words with the word “mother” as a root. Our people say Motherland, Mother Armenia, Mother tongue, Mother Church, Mother Throne: Being a reliable support for the Armenian statehood, and during the period of absence, the organizer of national life, the Armenian Church and the clergy (M. Mashtots, St. Partev, Yeghishe, M. Khorenatsi, Garegin Narekatsi, Hovhannes Imastaser, Nerses Mets, N. Shnorhali, S. Yerevantsi, H. Jalalyan, N. Ashtaraketsi, Gevorg the IVth, Khrimyan Hayrik, G. Hovsepian Catholicos and numerous bibliographers) contributed to the consolidation of the people’s unity and the development of Armenian culture.

Valuing the role of Christianity in the development of medieval Armenian culture, Catholicos Vazgen I said that thanks to the Christian religion, the Armenian people “united and constituted a nation with its psychology, consciousness and became people of culture. The same Christian spirit also formed the collective consciousness of the Armenian people, the consciousness of the homeland. The real and national Armenian history began” (Armenian Patriarch Vazgen 1st 1959).

In order to properly understand the notion of the National Church, we must once again look back to our history of the 4th and 5th centuries, the political upheaval in the East, the inner instability of Armenia and the fragmentation between Byzantium and Persia, as well as the Arabian Crusades in the 7th century, as a result of which even

Sassanid Persia was rebuffed and could not even maintain its Zoroastrian worship. Under the circumstances of opposing political interests, diverse cultures, ancient paganism and Zoroastrianism, the Armenian people would not have been able to maintain any form of national unity, if they had not created a spiritual union in the Armenian world by adopting Christianity, and then that union would not have drowned by Sahak-Mesropian school (405).

Thus, the aggrieved Armenian people who passed through the hardships of history, thanks to their faith, tremendous will and unhesitant striving, preserved their national identity. In the absence of statehood, the Armenian Church, by exercising unusual secular-state functions, objectively contributed to the survival of the nation, the ethnos, and has played an ethnically significant role in coexistence with other nations.

Since the independence of Armenia (1991), the Armenian Apostolic Church has tried to play a greater role in the life of the state and society, which is characteristic of the other post-Soviet Union republics. This is explained by the fact that during the Soviet era (1920), the communist regime, officially proclaiming the ideology of atheism, initiated persecution against church and religion. The authorities in various ways settled accounts with the clergy (Archimandrite Arsen Ghetchyan, archimandrite Daniel Zadoyan, pastor Grigor Hayrapetyan, archimandrite Yeznik Vardanyan and others).

Results of Researches Revealing the Religious Perceptions of the Contemporary Armenian Society

In the post-Soviet era, political pressure on religious institutions was abolished, and the number of acting churches increased dramatically. Religious holidays are celebrated at the state level, and all this cannot but have an impact on the formation of young people's mentality. Referring to religion in more detail, it should be mentioned that in Soviet Armenia in 1970 the number of followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church was only 33.9%, whereas after the declaration of independence in 1995 it reached 73.4%, and in 2000 it reached 78.2%.

The «national» character of the Armenian Church attributes the latter not only with religious privileges, but also with the privileges of entering the spheres of finance, taxation, schools, army and so on. Which infers the Church's:

involvement in public affairs, responsibility for them and adoption of some kind of a position, with the purpose of the solution of a number of basic issues such as poverty, friendship injustice, discrimination, money-worshiping, as well as the problems of ecology, technical progress and others (Guaita 1999: 212).

The status of the Armenian Church as a National Church is also established by the RA Constitution. In the RA Law on Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church we read:

The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church as a national church in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of its national culture and preservation of national identity (Sarkisyan 2007).

Today, the Armenian Church is trying to spread its influence, especially in the areas where public opinion is shaped – schools, science, and the media.

In 2007, February 22, the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia adopted a law “On Relations between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the RA”, in which the Church was entitled to play a role in state schools. It gave the AAC an opportunity to deepen relations with various state bodies, as a result of which the “history of religions” was replaced by “The history of the Armenian Church” in comprehensive schools. In addition, authorities began to appear more often alongside clergymen in public, the Church acquired a more weighty role in government affairs, and new laws started being introduced regularly to settle the issues in the religious sphere.

Highly appreciating the role of Christian education in the overall upbringing of the new generation, the Armenian Apostolic Church helps Armenian children and adolescents to integrate into different Christian education groups in all areas of life – intellectual, social and spiritual and to become worthy sons and daughters of our nation. By including children in educational and artistic spheres, the Church does everything for the children to be able to discover and develop their abilities, receive Christian truths by studying the Bible, and to transform their views of life and their attitude towards Christian values. One can say that the church has ceased to be “emptyreal” and has concentrated its attention on everyday issues, seeking to find answers in the scriptures.

Thus, it can be stated that the Armenian Apostolic Church, as a social institute, has so far remained faithful to its mission and continues its patriotic activity, considering itself as a part of the state and people. In this regard, it is interesting to discover the role and signifi-

cance of Christianity as a national religion among young people in Armenia, and their religious perceptions. Analysts have already shown that religiousness is linked among young people to concrete, socially acceptable and pro-social ethical behavior and attitudes (Donahue, Benson 1995: 153, 155). Empirical research shows that a relatively higher level of social capital is recorded among young people in a religiously active environment (Furrow, King, White 2004). Both the academic and social capacities of young people are associated with religious participation and the perception of relevant values. Young people who attach importance to religion are more likely to be able to deal with stressful situations than those who do not care about it. Recent research also shows that religious socialization of younger adults from relatively more traditional families is more effective than the younger generation of non-traditional families (Petts 2014).

The role of religion in the process of transmitting social values to young people and the preservation and development of culture is particularly high. According to the recent Caucasus Barometer research, 2015, the younger the respondents' age (younger than 35) the more they have confidence in religious institutions, which indirectly indicates that the post-Soviet generation is more religious. This can also be confirmed by the discoveries made within the framework of this study.

This study explores the interests of young Armenians, their aspirations, values and behaviors. Today's young people aged from 14 to 29 have grown up since the collapse the Soviet Union, in independent Armenia; they are "the generation of independence". In this respect, this generation represents Soviet heritage on the one hand and further development of Armenian society on the other. The survey is based on a panarmenian representative poll, which was carried out by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in February-March, 2016, among 1200 young people from 14 to 29 years old. The guideline to it was Shell youth research, periodically held in Germany since 1953, which is a reliable and valuable indicator of mid-term social development (*Nezavisimoe pokolenie: Issledovanie sredi molodej* 2016: 232).

According to the results of the survey, young Armenians youth emphasize particularly that they are Armenians (29.1%), Christians (24.4%) and children of their parents (22.1%). As we see, parallel to considering themselves Armenians, young people also highly consider themselves to be Christians, which makes religion and Christianity an essential element of their national identity. Thus, the close relationship between religion and ethics has not lost its traditional significance for today's young Armenians. Christianity is a fundamental

driving force of Armenian history for young people and an important part of Armenian identity, not only in Armenian society, but also in terms of self-reflection in the international context. Thus, Christianity is perceived in the context of history as a phenomenon symbolizing Armenian identity.

94.7% of young people consider themselves to be Christian followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church, 1.8% are Catholic Christians, and 1.0% are atheists. Overall, 91.9% of respondents believe in God, 85.4% believe that God created the world, God is a source of morality (83.9%) and that hell and paradise exist (64.1%).

For some young people, religion is purely a ritual. 77.3% of the respondents regularly or frequently pray, 76% celebrate religious holidays, and 25.8% attend liturgy. Confession and pilgrimage are not, however, widespread among young people – 80.3% and 70.1% respectively have never done it, and 33.1% do not trust religious leaders at all. Additionally, 72.9% of respondents do not watch religious programs.

Interestingly, according to young people participating in focus groups, in today's Armenia young people highlight religion in their lives, go to church more often and follow church councils more than their parents. Many have explained this by the fact that their parents lived in the Soviet Union where atheism was officially preached and that it was not encouraged to be a believer. In addition to this, young people in the Christian congregation attach great importance to family upbringing, which conveys Christian values and norms to them.

As to Armenian young people's confidence in the religious structure, we have the following picture: 50.3% of young respondents have a deep trust in it, and 31.2% trust it to some extent. This is a useful indicator since the problem of confidence in various institutions is quite acute in today's Armenian society. Deeper trust in religious structures among unemployed young people from rural areas and of low age groups, compared to those young people who work, live in urban conditions and are older (aged 25 to 29), should also be noted.

Thus, based on the results of the above studies, one can conclude that:

In the process of self-identification of young Armenians, civic belonging is almost of no importance as an element characteristic of the nation, whereas, as far as self-definition is concerned, ethno-symbolic elements, particularly ethnicity and religion, according to which being Armenian means to be a Christian, are of central importance.

Modern young Armenians who live and work in urban conditions and are older (aged 25 to 29) have more confidence in the religious organization (church) than unemployed, rural and lower-aged young

people, indirectly indicating that the post-Soviet community is more religious.

The majority of modern Armenian young people (94.7%) are followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church, believe in God (91.9%), the existence of hell and paradise (64.1%), and the fact that God created the world (85.4%); they pray regularly or often (77.3%), celebrate religious holidays (76%), and attend liturgy (25.8%).

Conclusions

Thus, by looking at the glorious pages of our history, we can reaffirm the indisputable role of the Armenian Church in the life of the Armenian people. In the absence of state, in the conditions of political division, the Armenian Church, besides its own spiritual leaders, has acted as a unifying and leading force, as a National Church.

And today, in this complicated and transitional phase, as a necessary component of national security, it is important to be concerned with the issues of preserving national identity and developing national culture: that is, to free the national consciousness from foreign value systems, and to return it to its original roots and reaffirm national identity. Thus, the stabilization and targeted cooperation of state-church relations in the current situation are considered to be of primary importance. Especially in view of the Armenian Diaspora, the role of the church is particularly significant in keeping Armenians the way they are, by faith, language, culture and history.

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