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Author(s): Boghos Levon Zekiyan

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Iran & the Caucasus*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2005), pp. 231-256

Published by: [BRILL](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4030955>

Accessed: 22/12/2011 15:16

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## THE IRANIAN OIKUMENE AND ARMENIA\*

BOGHOS LEVON ZEKIYAN

Università Ca' Foscari, Venice—Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome

The very fact that we can speak, and rightfully indeed, of an Iranian 'oikumene' is itself a sign that we are dealing with an inexhaustible crossroad of peoples, nations, religions, cultures, and civilisations meeting one another in a fascinating dialectics of contraposition and composition, of conflict and reconciliation, of confrontation and synthesis. As to the Armenian partner of this vast oikumene, owing to a large extent to the geopolitical position of their homeland, the Armenians who also are the actors of a millennia-long history, felt themselves almost constantly challenged to face a great diversity of peoples, cultures, and religions: Achaemenids and Hellens, Romans and Parthians, Sasanians and Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuks, Italians, Franks and other Europeans, Mongolians, Slavonians, both Ottomans and Turks, Safavids, and in modern times, Russians and Western Europeans, to mention only the main political formations around Armenia or in close political and cultural relationship with it. To those we must add minor political entities as, for instance, Georgia, and in recent times Azerbaijan Republic, and some prevalently ethnic or religious-confessional groups, such as the Caucasian Albanians or the Syriac. In most of those cases Armenians found themselves almost crushed between two superpowers of the moment, as it was the case with Parthians and Romans, Byzantines and Sasanians, Ottomans and Safavids, Ottomans and Russians.

Such multifarious relationships with neighbouring peoples, states, and cultures, caused, of course, to Armenians numerous problems of very different nature, problems often extremely hard to resolve going as far as to touch the limits of survival. But survival itself has different aspects. Not every time when peoples survive, we see them in a full

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\* This article is a re-elaboration of a keynote speech presented at the inaugural session of the Second Biennial Convention on Iranian Studies ("Society, History, and Culture of the Persianate World"), organised by the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies, held in Yerevan, Department of Iranian Studies, Yerevan State University; Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies, Yerevan (April 2-5, 2004).

possession of their linguistic, cultural, religious, and anthropological heritage. There often happens a drastic change of religion, of language, of ancestral customs, so that in most cases survival is really a very partial maintenance of what a given community was and had earlier. Indeed, there does not exist any unchangeable ethno-cultural standard. Living people are no mummies. But this is not the question. The question is, on the contrary, in recognising a given ethnic community in a continuity of language, traditions, religion, basic values and worldview, and so on. The more we have a dynamic continuity in those various dimensions of human life, so that we may recognise a permanent motive power under changing forms and structures, the more we may speak of survival in a fuller sense of the word. I think, Armenians represent one of those cases, in which we meet a great number of permanent factors in the everlasting dialectics between continuity and change, tradition and innovation.

### *East-West Dialectics*

It is almost a common place the idea that Armenia and its culture stay between East and West, form a bridge between them. No doubt, there is a remarkable part of truth in this affirmation at a first, even superficial glance. Some inevitable questions rise, however, immediately as soon as one starts thinking about the real and deeper meaning of that affirmation. What is East? What is West? What does it mean: to form a bridge between cultures and civilisations? What kind of relationship does there exist between those two terms of reference, between which a function of bridge is at work? And what kind of relationship the bridge itself has with the terms, which it is supposed to link? Does it either belong to the influence area of rather the one or of the other, or is it equidistant at all, or still is there some other hypothesis to be taken into consideration for a more adequate approach?

My first observation refers to the excessive use in today's current language of the 'East-West' couple in such a way to confuse rather than to clear up notions and concepts. As to Armenia's position and function as a bridge between East and West, this is not certainly an exclusive peculiarity of Armenia. The same can be said of the cultures flourished either in cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, Isfahan, or Alexandria, or among peoples like the Arabs, Turks, or Russians, and in most recent times, certainly of all those situations, in which there is an emulation of Western models by peoples of a different and, in the

given case, of an Oriental extraction, as Chinese, Japanese, Indians, and others. It is a matter of fact, however, that in all these cases there is something different and specific, according to the various latitudes, historical contexts, and many other factors, in their being 'in-frontier', in their being 'between'.

Since we are in front of a huge geographic area, and of extremely extensive concepts in dealing with East and West, the first question to put, for a healthy methodological procedure, is the following: what is meant by East and what by West? No doubt, we have to do, to a large extent, with most conventional notions. But we can assume, I think, at least as a working hypothesis, that the concept of 'West', in a cultural-anthropological sense, links its appearance in history to ancient Greece, to the birth of *Logos* as a completely autonomous reality. It is this West, which lays at the grounds of what will later develop as Europe, of which we see one of the first representations, following the Greek triumph at Salamina, and already on a markedly ideological<sup>1</sup> level, in the legend of the two sisters, *Asia and Europē*, referred to by Eschilus in his tragedy *The Persians*. The two sisters are symbolised by the two horses, dreamed by the Mother Queen Atossa who is linked to the greatest rulers of Persia being Cyrus' daughter and Darius' widow. The horses are yoked by Xerxes to a car in order to break in their *stasis*, their conflict. But, while Asia accepts to be tamed, Europe rebels. She embodies *Eleutheria*, liberty, freedom, and will never accept subjugation.

Such a vision seems, at a first glance, to be strongly pro-European oriented with a clearly affirmed self-consciousness of Western superiority. Nevertheless, a more careful and contextual lecture will probably convince us that things are not exactly like this, as already pointed out by various searchers, and more recently, with reference to current developments in Europe and in the world, by the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari.<sup>2</sup> First the sisters are not simply in *polemos*, in war,

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'ideology' may have different uses according to different levels and registers of thought: political, sociological, etc. In this paper I use it in a meaning that we can define as 'anthropological-philosophical': as a whole of ideas, concepts, images, myths, in a word a whole of whatever kind of mental and imagery representation that may determine and orientate concrete options concerning the general statement of life of a community or of a person. This is, obviously, a very wide definition that embraces the whole range of mental and psychic factors, capable to play some real role and impress their own seal in the manifold manifestations of human society and man's individuality. Thus intended, 'ideology' is very close to German *Weltanschauung*. This is the basic meaning, in which the term has been used by the authors of *Histoire des idéologies*, sous la direction de François Châtelet, voll. 1-3, Hachette, cf. vol. 1, 'Introduction générale', Paris, 1978: 9-13.

<sup>2</sup> Massimo Cacciari, *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa*, Adelphi, Milano, 1994: 18-19.

but in *stasis*, that is in a conflicting situation, which opens to a dialectical confrontation. Secondly, they are both “beautiful and divine”, “of the same blood and of the same extraction”, “they dwell different lands, but one is their origin”.<sup>3</sup> And last, not least, Darius’ wisdom is exalted by the choir in magnificent verses while Xerxes, deprived of wisdom, because he attempts to the other’s freedom, comes back home from the awful defeat, lacerated and gloomy. It has been rightly observed that the expression ‘land of barbarians’ indicates, without any pointedly negative acceptance, the land of those who do not speak Greek: as if he were an archaic poet like Homer, Eschilus shows here that he does not know the ‘barbaros’ of the ‘nationalistic’ propaganda, of the rhetoric, and of the historiography. The clash between Achaeans and Trojans, Hellenes and Persians (between *us* and *the others*) works, in epic and in tragedy, in a dimension of relations, which are much more complex and difficult. There lacks here the easy polarisation of the *enemy*’s figure”.<sup>4</sup>

At this point we can establish a parallel with the epical history of the Armenian historian Ehišē who tells the Vardananc’ battle of 451, in the field of Awarayr, during the Armenians’ revolt against the Sasanian Empire to maintain their religion and identity, the ‘congenital law of the fathers’ as another historian of the same events, Łazar of P’arpi, will call it.<sup>5</sup> Describing the end of the battle at sunset, Ehišē (VI:

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 18.

<sup>4</sup> Monica Centanni, “Note di commento” to Eschilo, *I Persiani*, traduzione a cura di M. Centanni, Testo originale a fronte, Feltrinelli, Milano, n. 186: 106.

<sup>5</sup> For a historical introduction to the War of Awarayr or of Vardanank’ (= Vardan and his companions; in Armenian it is called *Vardananc’*, the genitive form of *Vardanank’*), see René Grousset, *Histoire de l’Arménie des origines à 1071*, Paris, 1947: 187-232; *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. by Richard G. Hovannisian, vol. I, New York, 1997: 95-103; Claudio Gugerotti, “Vardan Mamikonian e l’ideologia martiriale”, Claude Moutafian (ed), *Roma-Armenia*, Salone Sistino, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 25 marzo-15 luglio 1999, Roma, 1999: 90-92, the same in French, in the French version of the catalogue: 89-92; more concisely Boghos L. Zekiyān, “A Historical Outline of the Armenian People”, Adriano Alpago-Novello (ed.), *The Armenians*, New York, 1986: 52-53 (simultaneous editions in Italian, French, German); idem, *L’Arménie e gli armeni. Polis lacerata e patria spirituale: la sfida di una sopravvivenza*, Milano, 2000: 22-23; George A. Bournoutian, *A History of the Armenian People*, I, Costa Mesa, CA, 1993: 77-79. Even if it may appear obvious enough by the context, it would by no means be superfluous, I think, to draw special attention to one point: the Vardananc’ War was not, on the part of the Armenians, a religious war in the generally accepted sense of the term. They fought it with no intention whatever of imposing a belief, nor was it motivated by any desire to implement religious discrimination or intolerance: it was no more than a revolt against forced imposition in defence of the religious freedom and identity of a people. An English version of Ehišē’s History is available in Ehišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, 5), Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson, Harvard University Press, 1982. For a critical survey of the various philological questions on Ehišē and its relationship to Łazar, see B. L. Zekiyān, “Quelques observations critiques sur le *Corpus Elisaeanu*”, *The Armenian Christian Tradition. Scholarly Symposium in*

92) makes the following consideration: "Then both sides admitted their defeat... Since it was a spring season, the blooming fields became torrents of streaming blood. At sight of the amassed bodies of the fallen, one's heart was broken... Because there was no part that triumphed, and no part that was defeated, but bolds fighting with bolds, both sides suffered defeat".

### *Zoroastrian Iran and pre-Christian Armenia*

The first great defiance to Armenia in its relationship between East and West was shouted by the meeting and the clash of the classical Hellenistic Roman world on one side and the Irano-Parthian world on the other. It is even superfluous to remind here how strongly and how deeply Armenia received the Iranian influence from the Achaemenian age onwards. It is already witnessed by Xenophon (*Anabasis*, IV, 4, 34.), and comparative linguistics shows us the very high percentage, in the Armenian vocabulary, of Iranian loanwords, dating especially from the Partho-Arsacid era.<sup>6</sup>

As to the Zoroastrian influence, there can be no doubt at all of its capillary penetration extending till the simplest strata of the Armenian population. The subject has been studied since the 19th century, even if it is still far from being thoroughly investigated. I see, however, no objection, at our present stage of research, to what one of today's best specialists in the matter, James Russell, affirms speaking of the Artaxiad philhellenism: "yet it must not be thought that their religious beliefs ceased to be what they had been of old: staunchly Zoroastrian".<sup>7</sup>

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*Honor of the Visit to the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome of His Holiness Karekin I Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians*, December 12, 1996, ed. by Robert F. Taft S. J. (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 254), Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma, 1997: 71-123.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Giancarlo Bolognesi, *Le fonti dialettali degli prestiti iranici in armeno*, (Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, serie terza, Scienze filologiche e letteratura, vol. 1), Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1969; idem, *Studi glottologici filologici orientali*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia, 1990: 161-396. In relation to Zoroastrian and Sasanian Iran, see James Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987; Nina G. Garsoïan, "Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians", *Variorum Reprints. Collected Studies Series*, London, 1985, and especially "Prolegomena to a Study of Iranian Aspects in Arsacid Armenia", *Handes Amsorya*, XC (1976), coll. 177-234; eadem, "The Locus of the Death of Kings: Iranian Armenia—The Inverted Image", *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*, Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), Undena Publications, Malibu, CA, 1981: 27-64.

<sup>7</sup> James Russell, *op. cit.*: 85.

However this may be true, the point should be made at once that this enormous Iranian impact did not dim some very original and archaic features of the Armenian pantheon. Here the analogy of the Armenian language, in its relationship to the Iranian family on one hand and to its direct Indo-European roots on the other hand, can offer us a valuable help: in its typological structure, this analogy functions as a key of lecture for a deeper understanding of many traits of Armenian culture and identity in their multifarious relationship with cultures in contact among which, there is no doubt, the Iranian world has a very special place. I do not think it would be excessive to speak of a kind of primacy from many a point of view.

We know that Armenian has been considered for a long time, during the whole period of the early developments of the 19th century comparative historical linguistics, as an Iranian dialect for the countless amount of its Iranian loanwords. It was Heinrich Hübschmann, the founder of specifically Armenian linguistics, who, in his memorable study of 1875,<sup>8</sup> demonstrated in a conclusive way, although preceded he was by some intuitions of earlier brilliant linguists as Johann Joachim Schröder and Paul Anton Lagarde,<sup>9</sup> that Armenian, notwithstanding its innumerable affinities with the Iranian language group could not absolutely be considered as an Iranian dialect, since it possessed a lot of basic trends irreducible to Iranian, rather diametrically opposed to the behaviour of the Iranian dialects vis-à-vis early Indo-European. On the wake of Hübschmann's theory, and making fresh research on very different traits of the Armenian language, from vocabulary to morphology, from phonology to syntax, the prominent Italian linguist, Giancarlo Bolognesi, arrived at the following conclusion: "In the dynamics of the Armenian language, more than in other languages, the combination of two opposite tendencies, tradition and innovation, have resulted in the existence of numerous archaisms side by side with many radical changes".<sup>10</sup> Hence "the Armenian language, for the complex stratification of its vocabulary and for having kept remarkable archaisms (which are matched by the most radical innova-

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<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Hübschmann, "Über die Stellung des Armenischen im Kreise der indogermanischen Sprachen", *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung*, 23, 1875: 5-49.

<sup>9</sup> Giancarlo Bolognesi, "Contributi dell'armeno agli studi di linguistica storica e comparata indoeuropea", *Rassegna Armenisti Italiani*, IV, 2001: 1.

<sup>10</sup> G. Bolognesi, "Tradition and Innovation in the Armenian Language", *Studi glottologici filologici orientali*, cit. in n. 6: 366.

tions), forms a privileged observatory and an ideal test bed for scholars of Indo-European historical and comparative linguistics".<sup>11</sup>

We can find a similar behaviour, combining both most conservative archaism and most daring innovation, also in other expressions of Armenian culture as, for instance, in the Armenian Christian liturgy, with regard to some of its most archaic cores, common with the Palaeo-Palestinian, Palaeo-Syriac and Palaeo-Greek Christian areas, which have been kept at best by the Armenians, notwithstanding a major flow of innovations, than in the respective original areas.<sup>12</sup>

Let us go back now to the earliest pre-Christian times and the Zoroastrian heritage among Armenians. The Armenian divinity Vahagn has its corresponding pairs in the Iranian pantheon, in the *yazata* Vərəthraghna, and in the Indian pantheon, in Vrtrahán, all going back to a very old Indo-European cult. While one of the main functions both of the Armenian Vahagn and of the Indian Vrtrahán was that of killing the primordial dragon, the Iranian Vərəthraghna had no such functionality. This was due, obviously to later evolution in the Iranian area. Alessandro Bausani gave of it a plausible explanation, I think, as the result of a process that he called "demythologisation from above".<sup>13</sup> That is a process deriving from a reluctance to ascribe to divinity such an activity as fighting and killing the dragon: this seemed to be unworthy of god. In any case, whatever the most suitable explanation of the noted diversity between the Armenian and the Iranian conceptions, respectively, of Vahagn and of Vərəthraghna may be, this difference is there to witness the persistence of a typically Armenian behaviour in pre-Christian mythology, notwithstanding a strong penetration of Zoroastrianism; this typically Armenian feature claims a primordial Indo-European background, prior to the splitting of East Indo-Europeans into the Indian, Iranian, and Armenian groups, in parallel with the analogous persistence of the myth in the Indian area. We have here, in pre-Christian Armenia, a structural behaviour be-

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<sup>11</sup> G. Bolognesi, "Contributi dell'armeno agli studi di linguistica storica e comparata indoeuropea", *Rassegna Armenisti Italiani*, IV, 2001: 1.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gabriele Winkler, *Das armenische Initiationsritual* (OCA, 217), Roma, 1982; Claudio Gugerotti, *La liturgia armena delle ordinazioni e l'epoca ciliciana: esiti rituali di una teologia di comunione tra Chiese* (OCA, 264), Roma, 2001; Daniel (Michael) Findikyan, *The Commentary of the Armenian Daily Office by Bishop Step'anos Siunec'i: Critical Edition and Translation with Textual and Liturgical Analysis* (OCA, 270), Roma, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Apud: Giuliano Boccali, "Influenze della religione iranica sulla cultura armena", *Atti del Primo Simposio Internazionale di Arte Armena, (Bergamo, 28-30 giugno 1975)*, San Lazzaro-Venezia, 1978: 26-27.

tween archaism and innovation very similar to the one we have seen with regard to the language, and to the Armenian Christian liturgy.

*The Shaping of a New Armenian Christian Weltanschauung and Sasanian Antagonism*

Subsequently to Armenia's conversion to Christianity we enter in a privileged historical period, in which the relationship of the Armenians with the Iranian, now Sasanian, world becomes for many a reason a typologically emblematic paradigm for future developments. A partially new Armenian identity with a partially new corresponding ideology, or *Weltanschauung*, is forged then: the one we can call the Armenian Christian identity/ideology. Christianity became for the Armenians an essential, unavoidable part of their identity, as reflected in the whole sequence of the Battle of Awarayr till the Treaty of Nuarsak of 485. The words of Vardan Mamikonian, the commander-in-chief of the Armenian forces at the battle of Awarayr, on the night of the 2nd of June, 451, the eve of Pentecost, against the huge Sasanian army invading Armenia to impose Mazdeism, resume the quintessence of what will be in the course of the following centuries the backbone of this Armenian ideology. Vardan Mamikonian said: "He who supposed that we put on Christianity like a garment, now [realises] that he cannot change it as the colour of our skin, and from this moment he will never be able to do so".<sup>14</sup> I think, the 5th century, and especially the years from the forties through the seventies, figure among the most troubled periods of Armenian-Iranian relations, due to this newly developed Armenian self-awareness, which cannot be understood and evaluated solely in the light of the conversion to Christianity in the early 4th century. I think, that Armeno-Persian conflicts of the 4th century are still in continuity with the earlier general political context of those relations, with only a new factor: Arsacid Armenia, now Christian, is as a rule besides the Romans against the new Sasanian Iran, which is anti-Parthian, anti-Arsacid, and, of course, anti-Roman.

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<sup>14</sup> Elišē, *History*, V: 154-155. I have slightly retouched Thomson's translation which reads so: 'He who supposed that we put on Christianity like a garment, now [realises] that as he cannot change the colour of his skin, so he will perhaps never be able to accomplish his designs'. It is misleading, I think, to translate 'perhaps', in the given context, the Armenian *t'ereus*, which can also mean 'certainly, indeed', especially in negative clauses. In fact the sentence continues as follows (in Thomson's translation): 'For the foundations of our [Christianity] are set on the unshakable rock, not on earth but above in heaven where no rains fall, no winds blow, and no floods rise'.

The anti-Christian attitude, especially as far as Armenia is concerned, was rather, even if not exclusively indeed, in function of the just mentioned trends.

To explain, however, the rooting in depth of the new religion in the Armenian soil and soul, we must consider another crucial fact. In the 5th century there happens something radically new in Armenia's intellectual and spiritual life: the invention of the Armenian alphabet and the quick, extraordinary blossom of a literary culture. As I have tried to demonstrate in prior writings,<sup>15</sup> the alphabet's invention by Mesrop Maštoc' was not simply the creation of an instrument to translate the Bible, to proclaim the word in a much accessible and understandable way to the people, and to catechise it better and quicker. All this was, without any doubt, included in Mesrop's idea, but this went far beyond those concerns in that Mesrop Mashtots (Maštoc') seems certainly to have thought at the same time about the political and imminent destiny of his people endowing him of a new kind of ethno-cultural identity that might be capable to survive to the fluctuant destiny of Armenia and of its Kingdom. In this Armenians were alone, though initially somehow supported by the Byzantines, but abandoned later to their own forces, to their own destiny in front of the powerful Sasanian Empire. In my view, it is this more profound aspect of Mesrop's initiative that distinguishes it from similar initiatives of the Christian oikumene of those times as, for instance, the ones promoted by the Gothic Bishop Wulfila, by Daniel the Syriac in Armenia itself, prior to Mesrop, and slightly after his initiative in Armenia those promoted in Georgia and in Caucasian Albania. These two latter cases, although have had, very probably, an initial inspiration by Mesrop's work working as a model or pattern, were however moved by prevalently kerygmatic and catechetical concerns. This feature can explain, I think, why Georgia's great literary season came rather later, following the taking up of an increasing awareness of an own cultural and ecclesiological identity from the 7th century onwards. It seems, on

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<sup>15</sup> "Die Christianisierung und die Alphabetisierung Armeniens als Vorbilder kultureller Incarnation, besonders im subkaukasischen Gebiet", *Die Christianisierung des Kaukasus/The Christianisation of Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Albania). Referate des Internationalen Symposions, Wien, 9.-12. Dezember 1999*, hersg. von Werner Seibt, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 2002: 189-198; "I processi di cristianizzazione e di alfabetizzazione dell'Armenia in funzione di 'modelli'. Verso una teologia dell'etnia e della 'Chiesa etnica'", *The Formation of a Millennial Tradition. 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Witness (301-2001), Scholarly Symposium in Honor of the Visit to the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, of His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, November 11, 2000*, edited by Robert F. Taft, S. J., Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma 2004: 161-181.

the contrary, that such a strong self-consciousness to give birth to a monumental literary culture, as happened in Armenia, and later in Georgia, never was formed in Caucasian Albania except perhaps the case of some single, rare figures.<sup>16</sup>

We cannot go at present deeper in details concerning the main traits, which defined this new Armenian ideology. It was something generally new, also with regard to our Mediterranean, Hellenistic-Iranian oikumene. It consisted indeed of an unedited, original synthesis of elements inspired to the Greek ideals of *polis* and *politeia*, to the Philonian Hebrew conception of *ethnos*, combined with ancestral elements of the Armeno-Iranian genealogical and territorial traditions. The Father of Armenian historiography, Movses Khorenatsi (Movsēs Khorenac'i), is, I believe, the foremost interpreter, the deepest re-reader of Mesrop Maštoc' work. Since Mesrop wrote nothing concerning his work, it was Khorenatsi who gave it its theoretical expression through his *History*. This has been the first attempt, in whatever hypothesis of Khorenatsian chronology, to outline a history of the Armenians from the origins up to the end of the Arsacid Kingdom. To realise how one can develop a theoretical approach in a historical work, we must remind that Armenian historiography has been at the same time a philosophy and a theology of history in an intensive sense of these words. Thus has been Armenian historiography since its very beginnings, since Koriwn, the first Armenian hagiographer-theolo-

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<sup>16</sup> For a general approach, see *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur auf Grund des ersten Bandes der georgischen Literaturgeschichte von K. Kekelidze*, bearbeitet von P. Michael Tarchnišvili mit Dr. Julius Abfalg (Studi e Testi, 185), Città del Vaticano, 1955; Vahan Inglisian, "Die armenische Literatur", *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, 1963: 167, 171-172, 183-184; Serge Mouraviev, "La forme interne de l'alphabet albanais caucasien et la phonologie de l'oudien", *Le Muséon*, XCIII (1980): 345-374; idem, "Tri etyudy o kavkavsko-albanskoj pis'mennosti", *Ežegodnik iberijsko-kavkazskogo yazykoznanija*, VIII (1981): 222-320; Robert Hewsens, "Ethno-History and the Influence of the Armenians upon the Caucasian Albanians", *Classical Armenian Culture, Influences and Creativity. Proceedings of the First Dr. H. Markarian Conference on Armenian Culture*, ed. by Thomas J. Samuelian (University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies, 4), Scholars Press, Delmar, 1982: 27-40; Aleksan A. Akopyan (Hakobyan), *Albaniya-Aluank v greko-latinskix i drevnearmyanskix istočnikax*, Erevan, 1987; Patrick Donabédian, "Une nouvelle mise au point sur l'Albanie du Caucase", *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, XXI (1988-1989): 485-49 5 (a review-study on Akopyan's book with further bibliography by Armenians and by the authors in Baku); B. L. Zekiyán, "Lo studio delle interazioni politiche e culturali tra le popolazioni della Subcaucasia: alcuni problemi di metodologia e di fondo in prospettiva sincronica e diacronica", *Il Caucaso: cerniera fra culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia (secoli IV-XI). Atti della Quarantatreesima Settimana di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo (aprile 1995)*, Bd. I, Spoleto, 1996: 427-482. In any case the possibility remains that in the future, after the newly discovered Palimpsests of Sinai, other new documents in Albanian may come to light, as Fr. P. Ananian had already, many years ago expressly proposed as a hypothesis (Połos Ananean (Ananian), *Vark' Maštoc'i* (The Life of Maštoc'), San Lazzaro, Venice, 1962: 208).

gian, and continued to be so through its best representatives till the early modern ages, as is, for instance, the case, in the 17th century, with Arak'el of Baḡēš, the last of the great Armenian historians on the model of the Medieval classical Armenian historiography.<sup>17</sup>

The primary issue, the basic principle that animated the Armenian resistance from Awarayr to Nuarsak, and succeeded, at the end, in firmly affirming and letting accepted itself was the faithfulness to their own religion that Armenians considered as absolutely unquestionable and inviolable. This was practically the only issue at discussion in the initial phase, which led to Awarayr, and it is this unique issue reflected in Elišē's *History*: once again a sign, among so many others, of its major archaism in comparison with the *History* of Łazar.<sup>18</sup> Later with the progressive growth of the Armenian movement and the parallel temporary weakening of Sasanian power, due to turbulences in the Eastern parts of the Empire, the Armenians added two other principles they considered impossible to give up: a) no one should be judged on the basis of one's social condition, but according to one's deeds; b) no action based on hearsay was to be taken by the authorities against anyone. To the prior, and most essential, religious-intellectual guideline, they added now something regarding the social order. They gave all these three principles, taken together, the meaningful qualification of 'congenital law of the fathers' (*hayreni ew bnik ōrenk'*) as we mentioned above; the term *ōrenk'*, law, meaning in this context a whole way of thought and life, according also to the term's oldest uses, attested in literature.<sup>19</sup> The Armenian history and identity of the subsequent centuries, till the great oblation of *Mets Yeghern*, the awful Catastrophe of the Genocide, can be understood and given a reason only in the light of the whole historical and ideological background from Awarayr to Nuarsak. That is, I believe, the most permanently epical act in all Armenian history.

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<sup>17</sup> See also for further bibliography, B. L. Zekiyān, "L'Armenia tra Bisanzio e l'Iran dei Sasanidi e momenti della fondazione dell'ideologia dell'Armenia cristiana (secc. V-VII). Preliminari per una sintesi", *Crossroad of Cultures. Studies in Liturgy and Patristics in Honor of Gabriele Winkler*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Feulner, Elena Velkovska, and Robert F. Taft, S. J., (OCA, 260), PIO, Roma 2000: 717-744.

<sup>18</sup> See Zekiyān, "Quelques observations critiques sur le *Corpus Elisiaeanum*": 73-83.

<sup>19</sup> See Zekiyān, "L'Armenia tra Bisanzio e l'Iran dei Sasanidi...": 732-736.

*Between the Sasanians and the Byzantines*

I would like to add some further consideration on the relations with Sasanian Iran through a comparison with what happened simultaneously on the shore of the relations with Byzantium. However cruel the struggle with the Sasanid may have been, I think that Byzantine imperialism, even if Byzantines shared with the Armenians the same Christian belief, has been for Armenia more tragic in its consequences than the Sasanian one. I shall give only two, but utmost significant examples, to explain this affirmation. The first example refers to what happened after the division of Armenia's Kingdom, that happened in the years 384 through 387 on an easy agreement of both Empires with a borderline running from Theodosiopolis/Karin, nearly today's Erzurum, in north to Martiropolis (Majferqat/Mayyāfāriqīn) in the south. As soon as the King of Western Armenia, Arshak III, died, the Byzantines hurried to declare in their dominion the end of the Armenian Kingdom. On the contrary the Eastern Kingdom will continue still for many years. It will end in 428 only upon high treason, when the Armenian *nakharars* will apply themselves to King Vahram V of Iran asking the destitution of their ruling King Artashes, the last Artasid dynast on Armenia, against the expressed will of Catholicos Sahak and notwithstanding his insistent supplications to let them desist from their purpose. The second example refers to the dismantlement by Justinian of Armenia's centuries-old power structure, based on *nakharars*, the traditional feudal dynasties, which formed the backbone of Armenia's politico-administrative system. If the *nakhararian* families were, to a larger extent, physically destroyed by the Arabs as a result of their successive revolts, they had already lost, before the arrival of Arabs, most of their effective power. This will be, from the viewpoint of Armenia's later destinies, probably the first greater structural disaster, during the first millennium, followed by the extinction of a great number of those families and of the demographic shift to the detriment of Armenian population under Arabic dominion.

*The Reverse Road: from Armenia to Iran*

Up to this moment, in our bilateral consideration of the Armenian-Iranian relationship, we rather took into consideration some elements and characteristics that entered Armenia upon Iranian influence. We tried, at the same time, to find and single out some of the basic trends,

following which those elements were assimilated by the Armenians and which revealed, witnessed altogether some of the most archaic features of the Armenian identity and culture, prior to Iranian influences. The question arises however: has not Armenia, in its turn, given anything to the Iranian world except its brave, famous warriors in situations of mutual alliance? The question was put years ago, even in a provocative way, by Henri Focillon with reference to Byzantium: "What has ever taken Armenia from Byzantium? Rather, has not given it, in any case, an Imperial dynasty with Basil I? Other Armenian Emperors occupied all the same the Byzantine throne: Romanus Lecapenus, Nicephorus Phocas, John Tzimisces. The Armenian culture spread all through the Empire by the painters, the architects, without speaking of jurists".<sup>20</sup> Probably, there is some emphasis in Focillon's words. This does not change, however, the terms of the question, which remains a real question. And there remains true, in general, for almost all aspects of the Armenian culture what Giancarlo Bolognesi said of Armenian words: "While the tremendous contribution of foreign words to the establishment of the Armenian lexical inheritance has been thoroughly discussed, the studies of the presence of Armenian words in other languages (not only in Georgian and other neighbouring languages, but in Western languages as well) are rare and more isolated".<sup>21</sup> As I said, this statement is equally valid almost for all aspects of the Armenian culture.

Having made this preliminary statement, I would say that as far as the Iranian-Armenian relations are in question, we should consider as one of Armenia's most elementary contributions to Iran, its valuable, often unique linguistic testimonies on the most archaic forms of the Iranian words. For instance, Armenian *vard* (rose) reflects perfectly the Middle Iranian form of what later becomes in modern Persian *gul*. I think, however, that we can speak of a much more important and vital contribution of Armenia to the Iranian oikumene: its rich historiographical heritage. We know that Sasanian Iran had almost no historiography of its own. The rich Armenian historiography, which both in quantity and quality can compete with the Byzantine and Arabic ones, starting from the 5th century, is a very valuable source, difficult to over-estimate indeed, for Sasanian history.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Henri Focillon, "Introduction" to Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Études sur l'Art medieval en Géorgie et en Arménie*, Librairie Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1929: 9.

<sup>21</sup> Bolognesi, "Tradition and Innovation...": 381.

<sup>22</sup> Western criticism often lacked of a balanced approach of this historiography falling short of understanding its inner logics and its peculiar perspectives (cf. Giusto Traina, *Il complesso di*

### *The Impact of the Islamic Religion*

Let us now come to consider the impact of the Islamic religion both on Iran and on Armenia, as well as on their mutual relationship. If the religious destinies of both Armenia and Iran, so closely linked to each other during a long portion of the pre-Christian era, were decidedly divided with Armenia's official conversion to Christianity, the same situation continued with Iran's conversion to Islam. Nonetheless, the grip of the new religion was not less decisive on Armenia's destinies than on those of Iran.

What we said of the Armenians' deep identification with their new Christian religion is simply true also of the Iranian self-perception in relation to their new religion: they thought of themselves as of the true keepers, of the champions, of the main defenders of Islamic Orthodoxy, mainly in its Shi'ite form.

A first contextual remark to make in the frame of this comparison is a strong *caveat* against a banally superficial commonplace: to consider the Armenian option for Christianity as a pro-Western option by itself, and to consider Islam as an Eastern entity. Such a misleading attitude is not only frequent among non-experts or in semi-scholarly circles, but it is not rare even among scholars. I repeat once again: it is not possible here to go deeper into this topic nor to enter into a thoroughly discussion on what such notions as East and West may mean as

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*Trimalcione. Mouvres Xorenac'i e le origini del pensiero storico armeno*, (Eurasistica, 27), Casa Editrice Armena, Venezia, 1991).

As a concrete example of a similar attitude, directly related to Armenian-Iranian relations, we can mention C. Sanspeurs' strong critics to Armenian historiography, and especially to Ehiš. I would like to refer here to what I was writing in an earlier study: "Dans une note sur la politique byzantine à la veille de la guerre *Vardananc'* C.L. Sanspeur écrit: «C'est à tort qu'Ehiš, emporté par son parti pris contre Marciens, le taxe de *pusillanime*. Son but fondamental qui lui valut l'éloge 'd'excellent empereur' fut de restaurer les finances et de rétablir de bons rapports avec l'extérieur» ("La neutralité de Byzance face à l'insurrection arménienne contre la Perse (450)", *RÉArm.*, n.s., XVI, 1982: 153). Il est, peut être, tout à fait vrai que les intérêts vitaux de Byzance exigeassent, en ce moment-là, un comportement tel que Marciens adopta. C'est pas là le problème! Le problème c'est que les intérêts des pays peuvent diverger et même se contredire. Et l'on sait bien que presque l'entier cortège des historiens anciens et médiévaux regardes les choses et l'histoire elle-même de leur point de vue. Qu'il s'uffise de se souvenir des *barbaroi* des Grecs, les plus fins et les plus civilisés de toute l'antiquité! Nous croyons que nous 'modernes' (ou 'post-modernes?'), nous pourrions avoir une approche plus équitable des historiographies du passé, de celles, en particulier, des peuples 'marginiaux', si nous considérions dans leur juste mesure les différences de perspectives qu'elles présentent, au lieu de les taxer hâtivement comme des "emportements" de parti pris contre quelqu'un. Au fond, pour nous, les modernes, que nous soyons occidentaux ou orientaux, c'est même une fortune, de trouver dans l'historiographie du passé des perspectives autres que celles centrées sur la Grèce, sur Rome ou sur Byzance!" ("Quelques observations critiquessur le *Corpus Elisiaeanum*).

cultural paradigms. To what said above I would like to add now the following considerations:

a) Not only Christianity itself has deeply Oriental roots, but the Armenian Christianity too, especially in its earlier phases, derived so much from the Jerusalemite and proto-Syriac Christian traditions, which certainly represent the most prominently and genuinely Oriental faces of early Christianity. Furthermore Christian Armenia kept a deal of its pre-Christian traditions somehow re-baptising them; most of those traditions derived from the Old Iranian world or were shared in common with it. Moreover, considerable part of the Armenian Christian religious terminology is Iranian by origin.

b) Islam, in its turn, even though originated in a remarkably Oriental context, has come very soon, especially in its culturally more refined currents, into an intimate contact with the Western civilisation and, in a very special way, with Greek thought, science and philosophy.

Obviously, these statements do not mean anyway ignoring all those elements in the early Armenian Church, which derive from a Western source, or do evidence for a pro-Western tendency. It would be misleading not to perceive the complexity and especially the multidimensional openness of the Armenian attitude; but it would also be a fatal error to oppose those dimensions as irreconcilable, as mutually excluding one the other. Such an approach would lead us, no doubt, into a blind alley. Having made due proportions, the same is also valid for the Iranian oikumene in its multifarious entities and dimensions.

### *Armenians and Safavids*

I omit considering the Arabic, il-Khanid and the Mongolian eras in Persia to direct a peculiar attention to the Safavid age when the Armeno-Iranian relations acquired a profoundly new consistency and quality. May it be enough to quote here Pietro della Valle's impression: "They [the Armenians] are, in one word, for Persia's King like the Genuese for Spain's King: neither the King can live without them, nor they can without the King".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Viaggi* di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino, descritti da lui medesimo in Lettere familiari all'erudito suo Amico Mario Schipano, *La Persia*, parte II/vol. II, Roma, 1658, Lettera 14 da Sphahan de' 24 di settembre 1621, par. VIII: 244.

This is also the period when Armenians start facing European modernity with remarkable achievements, especially in the fields of print and international commerce. In all those processes, through which Armenians led their way to Modernity, they have shown the capability to transform into a factor of progress even such events, which could apparently be a factor of disease or really were. It is emblematic, from this point of view, the emigration imposed by Shāh ‘Abbās I to hundreds of thousands of Armenians. Of course, what we are saying is not a matter of a general statement to be applied to the whole extension of the historical event in question. Most of those Armenians either perished during the hardly painful deportation or were progressively assimilated by the local Muslim population. It is a matter of fact, however, that some of them, under the protection of the Shāh himself, but also in virtue of some ‘natural selection’, or simply of luck, could survive and succeeded in founding a new city, the New Julfa, which became much more than a symbol. As I said, in a prior work, “With its Holy Saviour monastery, theological Academy, library, its active printing press, and its legendary merchants New Julfa was to a greater extent the reality itself of exploding Armenian capital and of its cultural engagement. The city functioned all along the 17th century and somewhat further as a control and shunting point of world-wide Armenian commerce”.<sup>24</sup>

Edmund Herzig’s well balanced analysis and evaluation of the historical sources on the forced, even violent, deportation/emigration of Armenians, offers a secure landmark to overwhelm the too ingenuous myth of Shāh ‘Abbās as a ‘benevolent father’ for the Armenians, a myth, however, which has been largely diffused in Europe.<sup>25</sup> Further-

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<sup>24</sup> B. L. Zekiyān, *The Armenian Way to Modernity. Armenian Identity Between Tradition and Innovation, Specificity and Universality* (Eurasistica. Quaderni del Dipartimento di Studi Eurasiatici, Università degli Studi Ca’ Foscari di Venezia, 49), Supernova Editrice, Venezia, 1997: 46-47.

<sup>25</sup> Edmund Herzig, “The Deportation of the Armenians in 1604-1605 and Europe’s Myth of Shāh ‘Abbās I”, *Pembroke Papers*, 1 (1990): 59-71. For the whole historical context with regard specially to the Armenian commerce, see idem, *The Armenian Merchants of New Julfa, Isfahan. A Study in Pre-Modern Asian Trade*, Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Oriental Studies, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford, St. Antony’s College, 1991; idem, “Venice and the Julfa Armenian Merchants”, *Venezia e gli Armeni. Dagli Sceriman a Mechitar. Il momento culminante di una consuetudine millenaria*, ed. by Aldo Ferrari and B. L. Zekiyān, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, in print. See also H. [Hambarjūm] Arak’elian, *Parskastani Hayero, nranč’ anc’eala, nerkan ew apagan* [The Armenians of Persia. Their Past, Present, and Future], part I, Azgayin Matenadaran, 64 (Vienna, 1911); François Tournebiz, “Shah Abbas et l’émigration forcée des Arméniens de l’Ararat”, *Imprimerie des PP. Méchitaristes*, (Vienna, 1911, offprint from *Huschardzan, Festschrift aus Anlass des 100jährigen Bestandes der Mechitaristen-Kongregation in Wien (1811-1911) und des 25. Jahrganges der philologischen Monatschrift “Handes Amsorya” (1887-1911)*, Vienna, 1911); V. A. Bayburtyan, *Armjanskaya koloniya Novoj Diul’fy v XVII veke (Rol’ Novoj Diul’fy v irano-ev-*

more, the historian cannot forget the disastrous results of that awful deportation as to the “permanent shift in the ethnic balance in the region” to the detriment of the Armenian population. A region that extended “from Julfa to Nakhichavān to Erevan to Erzerum to Van”.<sup>26</sup> Certainly the deportation decided by Shāh ‘Abbās was not the only factor to determine that “shift in the ethnic balance” of the early Armenian regions. There have also been other decisive factors as the state of terror and anarchy caused by the Jelali movement, the almost permanent vexations of Kurdish landlords, and a long chain of similar situations. It remains, however, true that the Shāh ‘Abbāsian policy worked as a strong factor in reducing the Armenian population in its ancestral homeland.<sup>27</sup>

Having made these necessary specifications, we cannot however ignore that it was under the Shah’s protection, with his complicity, and in virtue of the privileges given by him—privileges sometimes

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*ropejskix političeskix i ekonomičeskix svyazyax*), Academy of Sciences of ASSR, Yerevan, 1969; J. Carswell, *New Julfa. The Armenians and Other Buildings*, Oxford, 1968: 3-15; Karapet Karapetian, *Isfahan, New Julfa: Le case degli Armeni. Una raccolta di rilevamenti architettonici—The Houses of the Armenians. A Collection of Architectural Surveys*, IsMEO, Roma, 1974, ‘Notizie storiche’: 5-26, ‘Historical Notices’: 29-50; Vartan Gregorian, “Minorities of Isfahan: The Armenian Community of Isfahan, 1587-1722”, *Iranian Studies. Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies*, VII (1974), N° 3-4: ‘Studies on Isfahan’, Part II: 652-680; Levon B. Zekiyan, “Xoğa Safar ambasciatore di Shāh ‘Abbās a Venezia”, *Oriente Moderno*, LVIII/7-8, 1978: 357-367; George Bournoutian, “The Armenian Community of Isfahan in the Seventeenth Century”, *The Armenian Review*, 24 (1971), 25 (1972); *Nor Djulfa*, Documents of Armenian Architecture/Documenti di Architettura Armena, 21, OEMME Edizioni (Venezia, 1992); Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, “The Socio-Economic Condition in New Julfa post-1650: the Impact of Conversions to Islam on International Trade”, *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, n.s. 26, 1996-97: 367-396; Vazken Goughassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1998; Arda Djelalian, *Armeni in Iran: Nuova Giulfa da una emigrazione forzata alla fioritura di una città simbolo*, ‘tesi di laurea’ presented at Dipartimento di Studi Eurasiatici, Facoltà di Lingue e letterature straniere of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, 2002. On *gholāms*, with special reference to those of Georgian origin, see Giorgio Rota, “Caucasians in Safavid Service in the 17th Century”, *Caucasia Between the Ottoman Empire and Iran, 1555-1914*, ed. by Raoul Motika and Michael Ursinus, Wiesbaden 2000: 107-120. The author’s affirmation “Briefly, Georgian *gholāms* could not share a national feeling, which was unknown even to their fellow countrymen in Georgia, and this is even truer in the case of Armenians and Northern Caucasian” (p. 110) deserves some specification, at least as far as Armenians are concerned. The statement may eventually have some consistency in the perspective of a concept of ‘nation’ in line with the Nation-State ideology. In fact, the author refers, in his note (n. 21), to the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. But the very question is that the Armenian idea of ‘nation’ is not the one implied in the Nation-State ideology, and not exactly even the one implied in the Ottoman idea of ‘millet’. But even in the context of a Nation-State conception of national identity, infighting conflicts are not consequently excluded.

<sup>26</sup> E. Herzog, *op. cit.*: 67-68.

<sup>27</sup> On turbulences and the overpower of local landlords in the Ottoman Empire, see among others, Halil İnalcık, *Studies in Ottoman Social and Economic History*, Variorum Reprints (London 1985); idem, (ed.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol. I (1300-1600), II (1600-1914), Cambridge University Press, 1977.

wider than even those conceded to Muslims—that Armenians having survived to the hard conditions of the deportation could found a city of their own, let rescue and flourish their culture, and develop one of the most prosperous phases in their long dated tradition of worldwide commerce. It would not be excessive to consider their economical achievements during this period as a kind of ‘commercial empire’. Armenian capital was acting along all the routes of the old world from Novgorod to Heydarabad, from Isfahan to Cracow, from Bassorah to Astrakhan, from Sining to Amsterdam and London, and even to various points of Africa. To give an approximate idea of this capital power, it may be enough to say that the well-known family Shehrimanian (Sheriman, Sceriman, Seriman), which settled in Venice from New Julfa, is estimated to have been one of the richest families in Europe in the first half of the 18th century. The fact itself that this commercial power was reduced and overwhelmed by nothing less than an imperial organisation as was the East India Company is eloquent enough to realise its dimensions and strength.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> On Armenian commerce, see also J. Artignan, “Le commerce des Arméniens au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle” (Nancy, 1901), extrait de la *Revue de Géographie de l’Est*, 4<sup>e</sup> trimestre, 1900; Charles-Dikran Tékiéian, *Marseille, la Provence et les Arméniens*, Institut Historique de Provence, Marseille, 1929: 12-67; Mesrobov J. Seth, *History of the Armenians in India*, Calcutta, 1937; Roberto Gulbenkian, “Philippe de Zagly, marchand arménien de Julfa, et l’établissement du commerce persan en Courland en 1696”, *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, VII, 1970: 361-399; R. W. Ferrier, “The Agreement of the East India Company with the Armenian Nation, 22nd June 1688”, *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, n.s., VII, 1970: 427-443; idem, “The Armenians and the East India Company in Persia in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries”, *Economic History Review*, 26, 1973: 38-62; Hay Zolordi patmut’iwn, Academy of Sciences of ASSR, vol. IV, part II, Yerevan, 1972: 297-432; Jean Dauvillier, “Les Arméniens en Chine et en Asie Centrale au Moyen Age”, *Mélanges de sinologie offerts à M. Paul Demiéville*, Bibliothèque de l’Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, XX, II, Paris, 1974: 1-17; Kegham Kévonian, “Marchands arméniens au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle—A propos d’un livre arménien publié à Amsterdam en 1699”, *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, XVI (1975), N° 2: 199-244; Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XV-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1980, t. 2, *Les jeux de l’échange*: 131-133; Philippe D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Studies in Comparative World History, Cambridge, 1984, ch. 9: “Overland Trade of the Seventeenth Century: Armenian Carriers between Europe and East Asia”: 179-206; Michel Aghassian, Kegham Kévonian, “Le commerce arménien dans l’Océan indien aux 17<sup>e</sup> et 18<sup>e</sup> siècles”, *Marchands et hommes d’affaires asiatiques*, Paris, 1987; Raymond H. Kévorkian, Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Arménie: 3000 ans d’histoire*, Maison Arménienne de la Jeunesse et de la Culture, Marseille, 1988: 223-250; Shushanik Khachikyan, *Nor Julayi hay vačarakanut’iwno ew nra arewtratnitesakan kapero Rusastani het XVII-XVIII darentum* [The Armenian commerce of New Julfa and its economical ties with Russia in the 17th through 18th centuries], Academy of Sciences of ASSR, Yerevan, 1988; Vahan H. P’ap’azyan, *Hayastani arewtrakan utinero mijazgayin arewtri olortum XVI-XVII dd.* [The ways of the Armenian commerce in the context of international commerce in the 16th through 17th centuries], Academy of Sciences of ASSR, Yerevan, 1990. For further bibliography, see P’ap’azyan, *op. cit.*: 181-189.

On the Shehrimanian family, in particular, see Guglielmo Berchet, “Del commercio dei Veneti nell’Asia” (Venezia, 1864): estratto dagli *Atti dell’Ateneo Veneto*, serie II, vol. I (1864); D. Maxwell White, *Zaccaria Seriman, 1704-1784, and The Viaggi di Enrico Wanton. A Contribution to the*

If Armenians received real profits and even privileges in Iran, especially from Shāh ‘Abbās, the point must be also made with emphasis that they repaid what they received, widely contributing in a very singular, almost exceptional way to the welfare and progress of the Iranian society and Empire in almost every field of life, from economy to policy, from crafts to arts, to music, theatre, literature, and so on.

### *Islamic Dhimma/Ottoman Millet*

As we know, the Islamic society was basically formed by the *umma*, that is by the people of Muslim faithful, while the followers of the great Biblical religions, Jews and Christians, called the people of the Book (*ahl al-Kitāb*), which is the Bible, were considered as *dhimma* (the community) or *dhimmīs* (the persons), that means ‘protected’. The Ottoman socio-political concept and the corresponding juridical system of *millet* was based on the Islamic ethno-religious conception of *dhimma*, which is brought by the former to its fuller formulation as a basic element in the composition of the Islamic political society.<sup>29</sup> This system recognised, according to established criteria, the communitarian identity of

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*Study of the Enlightenment in Italy*, Manchester University Press (1961), ch. 1: 3-20; Claudio Gugerotti, “Una famiglia emblematica: gli Sceriman tra Isfahan e Venezia”, *Gli Armeni in Italia*, ed. by Boghos L. Zekiyān, Roma, 1990: 108-109; Claudia Bonardi, “Il commercio dei preziosi”, *ibid.*: 110-114. Besides the many interest-free or low-interest loans that the Shehrimans granted to the Serenissima, they still contributed to her finances on different occasions by sunk capital gifts, whose total amount was nearly two million golden ducats. If we consider that the Shehrimans expended four thousand ducats to buy their palace in the neighbourhood of Santi Apostoli in Venice, the amount of two million ducats should be evaluated, very approximately, of course, as something around 12,5 milliard of Euros.

<sup>29</sup> Among a great variety of titles, see Pierre Rondot, *L’Islam et les Musulmans d’aujourd’hui. La communauté musulmane: ses bases, son état présent, son évolution*, (“Lumières et Nations”), Éditions de l’Orante (Paris, 1958): 159-166; Mario Grignaschi, “L’Impero ottomano e le minoranze religiose”, *Studi in onore di Francesco Gabrieli nel suo ottantesimo compleanno*, a cura di Renato Traini, 2 vols., Studium Urbis, vol I, Roma, 1984: 413-422; Christian W. Troll, “Der Blick des Koran auf andere Religionen. Gründen für eine gemeinsame Zukunft”, Walter Kerber (Hrsg.), *Wie tolerant ist der Islam? Islamwissenschaftler nehmen Stellung* (Fragen einer neuen Weltkultur, Bd. 6), Peter Kindt Verlag, München, 1991: 47-69, in part. 51-53; Bat Ye’or, *Les chrétientés d’Orient entre Djihad et Dhimmitude. VIIe-XXe siècle*, Les Éditions du Cerf (Paris, 1991)—English translation: *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude: Seventh-Twentieth Century*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press (Madison-Teaneck), Associated University Presses, London, 1996; *Der Islam in der Gegenwart, Entwicklung und Ausbreitung Staat, Politik und Recht, Kultur und Religion*, ed. by Werner Ende and Udo Steinbach in collaboration with Michael Ursinus, C. H. Bech’sche Verlags Buchhandlung, München, 1984 (3rd ed. 1991), etc.

In Persian the term *mellat*, from Arabic *milla*, will not have the same peculiar juridical development as the concept of *millet* by the Ottomans. It will rather be used to designate a group bound by ethno-religious and linguistic ties in a meaning near to that of ‘nation’ and in more recent times it will be used as corresponding to the term *umma* in expressions like *umma ‘arabiyya*.

the various ethnic groups, even if not territorial, with a limit, however: that of being somehow subjects of the State of a second degree, with mutilated rights in comparison with the Muslim *umma*, in so far the members of the various non Muslim *millets* did not fully enjoy the same rights owned by the Muslim subjects.<sup>30</sup> Although similar to some extent to the imperial law system of ancient Rome where non territorial ethnic elements were also recognised—this is known, for instance, with regard at least to the Jews—the Ottoman *millet* system, as in general the Muslim law systems, differed from it for discriminations between Muslim and non Muslim subjects. In ancient Rome citizenship was though acquired, all citizens were however equal at all in front of law.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> On the legal restrictions suffered by the non Muslim subjects, see Rondot, *op. cit.*: 163-166; a much more detailed description of such restrictions, as well as repressive measures is to be seen in Surèn S. Markosyan, *Areumtahayut'yan viçaka XLIX d. verjerin* [The situation of the Western Armenians towards the end of the 19th century], Hayastan Editions, Yerevan, 1968: 119-153. There is, however, I think, some unilateral emphasis in latter exposition in that the reverse of the coin is not taken into consideration.

<sup>31</sup> We have an illustrious example of what we can define as a 'multidimensional/polyvalent identity' in the case of St. Paul. His Hebrew identity is beyond any doubt: "Circumsised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, ... a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (*Phil.*, 3, 5). But he is at the same time equally convinced and proud of being a Roman citizen enjoying absolutely all the same rights as any Roman citizen without any discrimination (cf. *Acts*, 22, 25-29).

I tried to elaborate the notion of 'multidimensional identity' in the following works: "Prémises pour une méthodologie critique dans les études arméno-géorgiennes", *Bazmavep*, CXXXIX, 1981: 460-469; "Le croisement des cultures dans les régions limitrophes de Géorgie, d'Arménie et de Byzance", *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, (Serie Orientale 17), XXV, 3, 1986: 81-96; "Da Konstantiniye a Venezia", *Studi Eurasiatici in onore di Mario Grignaschi*, a cura di Giampiero Bellingeri e Giorgio Vercellin (Eurasistica 5, Quaderni del Dipartimento di Studi Eurasiatici, Università degli Studi di Venezia), Libreria Universitaria Editrice, Venezia, 1988: 17-35; "L'«idéologie» nationale de Movses Xorenac'i et sa conception de l'histoire", *Handes Amsorya*, CI (1987), coll. 471-485; "Ellenismo, ebraismo e cristianesimo in Mosè di Corene (Movses Xorenac'i). Elementi per una teologia dell'etnia", *Augustinianum*, XXVIII (1988): XVI. *Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana. Cristianesimo e giudaismo: eredità e confronti*, 7-9 maggio 1987, Roma, 1988: 381-390; "Hrand Nazariantz, gli Armeni e l'Italia. Da una vicenda interculturale verso una nuova tipologia di confronto etnoculturale", *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, XXIX, 3 (Serie Orientale 21), 1990: 135-150; "Les identités polyvalentes et Sergueï Paradžanov. La situation emblématique de l'artiste et le problème de la polyvalence ethnique et culturelle", *Filosofia Oggi*, XVI, 1993: 217-231; "In margine alla storia. Dal fenomeno dell'emigrazione verso un nuovo concetto dell'identità e dell'integrazione etnoculturale", *Ad limina Italiae*, I druns Italioy. *In viaggio per l'Italia con mercanti e monaci armeni*, a cura di B. L. Zekiyan, Editoriale Programma, Padova, 1996: 267-286; "Das Verhältnis zwischen Sprache und Identität in der Entwicklung des armenischen Nationalbewusstseins. Versuch einer begrifflicher Formulierung aus geschichtlicher Erfahrung", *Über Muttersprachen und Vaterländer. Zur Entwicklung von Standardsprachen und Nationen in Europa*, Gerd Hentschel (Hrsg.), Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1997: 277-297; *The Armenian Way to Modernity. Armenian Identity between Tradition and Innovation, Specificity and Universality* (Eurasistica 49, Quaderni del Dipartimento di Studi Eurasiatici, Università degli Studi Ca' Foscari di Venezia), Supernova, Venezia, 1997: 15-26, 83-96.

This deprivation of rights, in Islamic societies, led to periodic persecutions, which often ended in martyrdom. Apart this extreme case, which prevailed rather in times of turbulence, war and invasions, we must remind, however, not to evaluate all those restrictions neither according to contemporary European standards that would be a heavy anachronism, nor with unique criteria and one-sidedly, mainly for the following reasons to which others eventually could be added: a) the prohibition, for instance, to bring arms and to become soldiers or warriors pushed both Christians and Jews to develop mercantile skills, which guaranteed many of them a highly well-off standard of life even in a larger percentage vis-à-vis the Muslim population; b) exception to the restrictive rules were sometimes made by Shahs or Sultans, if not theoretically, certainly on a practical ground. For instance, some privileges conceded to the Armenians by Shāh ‘Abbās; c) a very special status of exception was represented by the *Khojas* in Persia and the *Amiras* in the Ottoman State some of whom were at top positions as counsellors and administrators of Shahs and Sultans.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding the now stressed limits of both the general Islamic and the Ottoman systems—limits that cannot absolutely be ignored or minimised, however conceptualised they must be in their epochal *Sitz im Leben*, it is only fair to admit that the Western system of the Nation-State as such, in its rigorous and coherent formulation, is capable but to realise two kinds of identity: either the one consisting in citizenship, or the one that derives from belonging to a territorial minority, and even in this last case the ethnic identity of those minorities is certainly recognised, in public life and institutions, at a lesser or much lesser degree, according to circumstances, than in the traditional Islamic systems. In these, being an Armenian or a Greek or a Jew, in the unity of the Ottoman State, was not a kind of hobby, expressible at best in

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<sup>32</sup> On one of such periodic persecutions that brought to the collapse of the Shehrimanians and dimmed a lot the Armenian presence and commerce of New Julfa, see the recent article of Giampiero bellingeri, “Sugli sceriman rimasti a giulfa: devozione agli ultimi safavidi?”, *Venezia e gli Armeni. Dagli Sceriman a Mechitar: il momento culminante di una consuetudine millenaria*, Venezia, 2004.

*Khoja* (Persian: xvāja, lord, master) was, among Armenians, a title given to high class merchants, both in the Persian and Ottoman Empires, who soon acquired a top aristocratic status; they live their ‘golden age’ in prestige and authority during the 17th century and in the first decades of the 18th. In Constantinople they had to face a hard struggle against the somewhat earlier aristocracy of the *Chelebis* (Turkish *çelebi*). *Amira* (from Arabic *amīr*, superior, commander, governor) was a title that became distinctive of top Armenian aristocracy in the Ottoman Empire since the mid-18th century, following the decline of the *chelebis* and *khojas*.

The decline of the *amiras* began by the mid-19th century. They left their place to a new ascending bourgeois class, the *aghas*. Erukhan’s famous novel *Amirayin aghijūka* [Amira’s daughter], a masterpiece of its kind, offers a vivid picture of this decline.

forms of associationism; such identities were realised in and expressed through institutions, which were linked to the very existence of the community itself, independently from any contingent personal or group initiative.<sup>33</sup>

The traditional Islamic systems put moreover in light another and very important reality, of topic interest for our time: fundamentalism was alien to the traditional, classic Islam. This is clear in so far *dhimmi*s and *millet*s had their own law and procedures, which did not coincide with the Islamic rule or *Shari'a*. This does not mean at all that there was no fanaticism in traditional Islam as there was everywhere else. The fact is that fundamentalism is not simply fanaticism. Neither is fundamentalism synonymous of integralism, which also is an attitude of a literal and most rigorous interpretation of religious law but remaining in the inner sphere of a given religion and of its community of faithful without conditioning the others; nor is fundamentalism synonymous of classical medieval theocracy, which occurred both in the Muslim and Christian worlds and is rather a peculiar theological view of society, state, power, sovereignty, law and related concepts.

Fundamentalism is a modern and technical concept to denote those cases, in which some religious law must be applied to all the members of a given political community whatever their religion may be.<sup>34</sup> In this technical sense, fundamentalism supposes a conception of law as a pure form, which is a typically Western conception, and has known its most remarkable developments in modern era, especially in the culture of Enlightenment and of Kantian philosophy. No Ottoman Sultan or Savafid Shah ever imposed Islamic *Shari'a* to their Christian

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<sup>33</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, the situation was likely also in the former Soviet Union. One of the great losses for the international law system, due to the end of the Soviet Union, is, I believe, the disappearance of a 'modern' political system with deeply Western roots, which distinguished in a very clear way between citizenship and ethnic identity and recognised this distinction as a constitutive element of its own. Moreover, ethnic identity was conceived rather according to personal than to territorial parameters. Despotism and dictatorship that ruled for decades the Soviet Union must not darken the positive, sometimes highly positive aspects of its socio-political, educational and legal system, from which there is something to learn for whomever. It is to hope that once absorbed the euphoric exhilaration, caused by its fall in its own citizens and in the 'free world', we shall be able dig out from its underground remains all or some, at least, of its positive teachings.

<sup>34</sup> On fundamentalism, as a category and structure of religious thought and action, see Jürgen Moltmann, "Die Politik der Nachfolge Christi gegen christliche Millenniumspolitik", *Mystik und Politik. Theologie im Ringen um Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Johann Baptist Metz zu Ehren, ed. by Edward Schillebeeckx, Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, Mainz 1988: 19-31; Hansjörg Hemminger (ed.), *Fundamentalismus in der verweltlichen Kultur*, Stuttgart, 1991; *Oecuménisme. Le fondamentalisme, défi œcuménique*, ed. by Hans Küng & Jürgen Moltmann: *Concilium*, Revue Internationale de Théologie, N° 241, 1992.

subjects. Sometimes fanaticism led them or their representatives, their high officials to attempt converting those subjects by force or simply to persecute them, as we have already mentioned. But it is evident that this did not happen neither universally nor constantly. Hence fundamentalism, injected into modern Islam by Western models, seems to be both historically and ideologically one of the most crushing betrayals of traditional, classic Islam.

What I am saying is not denied even by the Armenian Genocide. In fact, its conception and execution were due mainly to the Pan-turkic/Panturanic nationalistic ideology of the Westernising movement of the so-called *Jeunes Turcs*; an ideology inspired and clumsily copied from Western models. Very difficultly indeed the theocratic Islamic ideology would conceive such a universal action, unless in its more primitive form of 'not leaving stone upon stone'. But this latter form of action was typical, traditionally, of intense contexts of war or invasion; moreover, it happened in history, normally on regional dimensions, in concurrence with the advancement of the invading or devastating armies. Such was not the historical context at all in Anatolian Turkey towards the end of the 19th century. Nevertheless the Westernising Young Turks have been able, on the contrary, to project and execute a mass murder, the murder of a *millet*, in an exemplary way.<sup>35</sup> We also know that the Sheikh-ul-Islam of the time, himself, opposed the decision of 'deportation' of all the Armenians.<sup>36</sup>

### *Some Conclusions*

We can resume in the following points what has been said above drawing some conclusions, which are, I think, of topic interest for our times:

1. Armenians and Iranians have a very long common history going back to remote periods. It represents certainly one of the rare cases in human history of two peoples having lived continuously and for such a long period side by side in such a variety of multifarious relationship.
2. This community of history and especially the extremely numerous common traits in the culture of both peoples did not dim the respective identities, which are very clearly expressed in thousand ways,

<sup>35</sup> *Un genocide exemplaire* is the title of a book by Jean-Marie Carzou, Flammarion, Paris, 1975.

<sup>36</sup> See Johannes Lepsius, *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes*, Potsdam, 1919: 234; cf. also B. L. Zekiyani, "«Questione armena»? Per puntualizzare la situazione attuale: schizzo di una sintesi storica", *Oriente moderno*, LI, 1981: 29.

nor did the diversity of religion since the 4th century prevent or stop this communion.

3. The Armenian adhesion to Christian faith is certainly one of the firmest witnesses to Christianity given by a nation or by an ethnic group that we can ever see in history. This firmness goes as far as not to consider any more as members of the community those Armenians who have denied their Christian faith. It is self-evident that such an attitude could have a sense exclusively in the frame of an ethnic-communitarian identity, and not in relation with citizenship and the system of rights and duties included by it.

4. This firmness, in any case, does not comport as such a radical incompatibility for a peaceful coexistence with other religions, and with Islam in particular, within an Islamic society, even under Islamic dominion. On the contrary, Armenians are distinguished for their sense of loyalty contributing all out to the enrichment and progress respectively of the non Christian societies, in which they used to live. This attitude was clearly formulated by the Armenians since the 5th century, the period of the *Vardananc*' struggle, while the Treaty of Narsak can be considered as almost its legal codification in the self-consciousness of the Armenians and in the perception of their relationship to the others.

5. The inner trends that we perceive in the structure of the Armenian culture of both a very strong fidelity to archaic roots on one hand and of a great flexibility for innovation on the other hand offer a model of topic interest for many a problem of our days rising, for instance, from the huge volume of migratory movements and from the multifarious and often conflicting confrontations of cultures and religions. The Armenian experience is a demonstration that a strong awareness of an ethnic, cultural, and religious identity is not absolutely incompatible with a wide openness to accept the other. The following witness of a Turkish senator and historian, Sadi Koçaş, who certainly cannot be suspected at all of pro-Armenian faction, is worth being mentioned in this regard. He textually says: "They [the Armenians] are hard-working people, persistent in love, loyal, open to friendship. They have a superior capacity of adaptation to the ambiance. They are not fanatic of their language and religion, but they are attached and faithful to their beliefs and convictions as to their friendships. For this reason, even if it was at a price of great privations and sufferance,

the great majority of them did not change their religion and confession notwithstanding pressures that lasted for centuries".<sup>37</sup>

6. The Islamic *dhimma*, and later the Ottoman *millet* systems, although limited in their conception of human rights, so that non-Muslim subjects are somehow considered as 'subjects' of a secondary degree, balances, however, this limitation by its explicit recognition of an ethno-cultural group identity, different from that of the dominant Islamic majority. In the ancient classical West the Roman Empire offered a similar prototype, in which, however, all those who had got Roman citizenship enjoyed equal rights regardless of their ethnical origin, which was, all the same, recognized, even independently from an immediate territorial bond. This we can state with sufficient evidence as far as at least Jewish communities were concerned. A synthesis between the best of the classical imperial cosmopolitan systems and the modern conception of the nation-, respectively national, State,<sup>38</sup> which gave us a rather great chart of human rights, and especially of the rights of human person, regardless of any eventual factor of discrimination, seems not only theoretically possible, but also actually suitable.

7. Religious fundamentalism, which is to be accurately distinguished from simple fanaticism and even from religious integralism, and which forms one of the major and most awful concerns of our days, does not derive from the inner nature of Islam as such. It certainly did not exist, in its current theoretical, universalistic forms of our days, neither in the Safavid nor in the Ottoman Empires, which were, without any doubt, theocratic Islamic entities based on *Shari'a*. As a

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<sup>37</sup> Sadi Koçaş, Senatör, *Tarih boyunca Ermeniler ve Türk-Ermeni ilişkileri* [Armenians and Turkish-Armenian relations along history], Altınok Matbaası, Ankara, 1967, 2nd ed. 1967: 45, under the title 'Ermenilerin hususiyetleri' (Characteristic traits of the Armenians).

<sup>38</sup> I tried to develop an initial distinction between the concept of the classical nation-State and the one of simply a national state in 'An attempt for a restatement of interethnic questions', in *The Journal of the BBW* [Bibliothèque World Wide Society], *The Journal of Global Issues and Solutions*, LAPGS:jb9sc2pf@www.bbw-society.org/journal/peace.htm, and in a paper presented to the XXIst World Congress of Philosophy "«Polis» vs. Community: An Irreducible Antagonism?", of which an abstract has been published in *XXI World Congress of Philosophy. Abstracts*, August 10-17, Istanbul, 2003: 438-439. The terms 'nation-State' and 'national State' are normally used as synonyms, while a distinction between them is possible and would be suitable. Apart historical experiences and patterns we have been widely speaking of, also Western reflection of the last four decades and especially the developments of the theory of ethnicity, whose first elaborations came from the USA, offer some theoretical bases, even if yet at an initial level, for an adequate distinction between the two concepts. While the first cannot realise any other identity but the one identified with the nation that forms the State, the second on the contrary may remain open to accept the existence of different ethnic identities in the frame of the State's national identity whose culture functions then as a vehicular link between the various ethnicities living together.

rule, except in cases of violent persecution to impose Islamic faith, neither Shahs nor Sultans thought to impose this latter to their non-Muslim subjects.

I would like to close underlying and offering to further reflection a point, which is already implied in the above drawn conclusions: both the Armenian and the Iranian historical experiences present valuable aspects of their own to be integrated in and brought into a new synthesis with the Western view and experiences in order to build up a wider frame for today's cohabitation of different, and often conflicting cultures and religions. A necessary, and indeed not easy, cohabitation, which may open to excellent results and mutual enrichment, if duly orientated and developed; otherwise it will create new problems, worst complications, and even total disasters. Both the Armenian and Iranian experiences have something to teach all of us: both Westerners and Easterners, believers and non believers, Christians and Muslims, as well as people of any other religion. Our histories, notwithstanding human frailty and all possible limits, are bearers of teachings, patterns, and paradigms of a humanly universal value going far beyond the single religious-communitarian boundaries.