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THE FORMS AND MECHANISMS  
OF CONSOLIDATION (COOPERATION)  
OF THE ARMENIANCY'S CONFESSIONAL SEGMENTS

*Arestakes Simavoryan<sup>1</sup>, Vahram Hovyan<sup>2</sup>*

One of the main objectives for studying the confessional strata of the Armeni-  
nancy is to develop effective mechanisms for consolidation of the national  
potential. This is a particularly urgent matter for Diaspora, as facing its chal-  
lenges implies combination of all-national efforts. Hence, creating an envi-  
ronment of effective cooperation between Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and  
Evangelical Armenian communities abroad is an imperative for survival and  
development of these communities.

The problem of finding pathways to inter-confessional solidarity in Di-  
aspora has both theoretical and practical dimensions. Therefore, consolidation  
of the national potential implies unification of different confessional segments  
of the Armeniancy, as well as development and implementation of effective  
theoretical and practical means for bringing them to a single unified national  
ground. There are two aspects in this problem.

1. *Refuting the fragmentation.* This means rejecting or at least pushing to  
the backburner any ideas and factors that by some criteria (in this case,  
by religious and confessional ones) divide the Armeniancy or set Arme-  
nians against each other.

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2. *Development and application of unifying ideas and practical means.* This implies developing and implementing theoretical and practical mechanisms for consolidation of various confessional segments of the Armeniacy (Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians), based on an integrated national foundation. If such unifying mechanisms exist, or even better, are prevalent, then the factors and ideological/worldview concepts undermining the national potential are at least pushed backwards, which is a serious basis for creating an atmosphere of national solidarity and effective collaboration between different confessional segments of the Armeniacy. Both theoretical generalizations based on past experiences and innovative approaches could be useful in this matter.

It is expected that development and application of unifying ideas and practical means should be methodologically based on development of theoretical, visionary and practical footings that ensure integration of various confessional strata of the Armenians living outside Armenia. Therefore, it is worth to view this issue in its theoretical/worldview and practical dimensions.

### *Theoretical/Worldview Basis of Consolidation*

The theoretical/worldview dimension of the issue entails proposing and developing ideological/worldview bases that secure mutual accord between various confessional segments of the Armeniacy. Observations indicate that such unifying theoretical/worldview cornerstones are:

- High national self-consciousness
- Common Christian faith
- Secularity

*Strengthening the national self-consciousness.* One of the important positive mechanisms for creating an environment of religious tolerance in the modern world is raising national self-consciousness among the different reli-

gious/confessional strata of the same ethnic community (see more details in [1, p. 29]). This means strengthening the consciousness about one's ethnic (national) background, or in other words, bringing forward the sense of being first of all an Armenian, rather than an Apostolic, Catholic or Evangelical in the consciousness of the Armenians from Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical denominations. To ensure this, two steps are needed:

1. *Separation of religion (confession) and ethnicity, i.e. the notions of religion (faith) and nation.* Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century S. Nazariants, a prominent Armenian intellectual and publicist, brought forward the idea of separating the concepts of nation and religion: "Religion and ethnicity are different things... Ethnicity has a secular essence, whereas religion has to do with one's conscience and with God. Hence, Apostolic, Catholic and Protestant Armenians always remain blood brothers, sons of the same nation, speakers of the same language, successors of one national history... Armenians may differ by religion, but there is no harm in that for the nation... The nation equally belongs to the Apostolic, Catholic and Protestant" [2, p. 172]. Thus, it stems from separation of religion (faith) and ethnicity that religious (confessional) background ceases to be a criterion for one's national identity.
2. *Prevalence of the national in the interrelation of the religious (confessional) and national.* This idea emerged among the Armenians already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Catholic and Protestant confessions began surfacing among Armenians. It was aimed at mitigating the Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical division among the Armenians and conflicts in mutual perceptions arising on that ground.

The principle of prevalence of the national dimension over the religious one has been reflected in the Armenian reality both in scientific and publicistic works, as well as in the fine art. Raffi, a renowned Armenian intellectual of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote with regards to the issue of interrelation between

the national and the religious aspects: "... Diversity of faiths does not destroy the national unity. Unity should be sought in harmony of these segments, with the main motive being the devotion to the nation in its most exalted meaning" [3. p. 292]. As far as the fine arts are concerned, the verses of Rev. G. M. Shmavonian, a prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century Evangelical Armenian luminary are a noteworthy example. In his poem "Love the Armenian", the author calls upon his people for mutual love and tolerance, regardless of wealth, social background or status and religious-confessional worldview. The poem urges:

Love the Armenians,  
Whether Protestant or other faith,  
Or maybe superstitious in your view,  
Heretic and faithless.

If called Armenian, then  
Ought to be loved as Armenian [2, p.369]

Nowadays, in the theoretical/worldview dimension, the activities of mass media and other means of outreach must be based on the national, rather than religious emphasis. Promoting the sense of belonging to a common nation and pushing back the sense of confessional affiliation in a person's self-identification would be a solid basis for mitigating sectarian discords and tensions in the relations between Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians. This would significantly contribute to unifying the segments of Armenians divided along the confessional lines into a nation-based single entirety.

*Strengthening the common religious, Christian self-consciousness.* Another mechanism of religious tolerance in the modern society is promoting the sense of belonging to a common religion among the different confessional strata of the same religion (see more details in [1, pp. 27-28]). This means prevalence of the religious (in this case, Christian) identity over the confessional one, with the latter being viewed as of secondary significance. The

Evangelicals claimed that in the 1820s the preachers of Basel Mission who conducted missionary activities in the Russian Empire, did not seek conversion when preaching among the Christians, but rather wanted to spread the word of God, because "... as long as a man's heart is devoted to God, he will be saved regardless of what church he belongs to" [2, p.180].

The idea of primacy of the common religion over the confessional differences has been reflected in poetry as well. "We are brothers", a poem by the already mentioned author G.M. Shmavonian points out:

We are brothers, sons of one father,  
No one is greater or lesser among us,  
Jesus is our sole teacher,  
There is one faith and one hope for us [2, p. 369]

Presently, the Armenian communities of the Middle East are exemplary among the Diaspora in terms of the common religion's primacy over the confessional differences. For instance, Rev. Datev Basmajian, pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Church of Damascus substantiates the unification of Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians in Syria's Armenian community with the following words: "Being a Christian Armenian is the important thing ... When we stand before God at the end of our days, we are not going to be asked – are you Evangelical or Apostolic" [4, pp.33, 34].

Pushing back the confessional differences can be done most successfully through a combined emphasis on the importance of national and religious commonalities, when the national and religious elements of a person's identity simultaneously prevail in his/her self-consciousness and perception of the others. As S. Nazariants wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; "When an Apostolic Armenian converts to Protestantism, he remains our brother both ethnically and in Christ. Ethnically – because the Armenian blood does not change in a Protestant convert, and brother in Christ, because Jesus belongs both to the Protestant and the Apostolic" [2 p. 172].

*Secularity.* In present days the widespread secularity pushes the religious and theological matters to the sidelines and significantly alleviates possibilities of tension and conflicts based on those. Taking advantage of this circumstance it is necessary to facilitate establishment and development of secular institutions as instruments of national consolidation in the Armenian Diaspora. This is an urgent matter for the Armenian communities abroad, as despite the atmosphere of secularity in the modern societies the religious establishments (churches) continue to be a dominant force in Diaspora, perhaps by inertia, because in absence of a national state over a prolonged period of time (several centuries) the spiritual structures (especially the Armenian Apostolic Church) had to assume responsibility for a number of state functions.

However, currently the dominance of spiritual/religious structures in the community life causes some fragmentation along the religious/confessional lines among the Armenian communities of the Diaspora, which results in weakening the national potential.

The problem is not confined just to the division between the Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical. In the religious dimension troubles within confessions contribute to weakening the national potential as well. For example, after adoption of the 1863 Armenian National Constitution the rivalry and struggle taking place in Antioch between the Sis Catholicosate, Constantinople and Jerusalem Patriarchates to increase their influences dealt a serious blow to the Armenian Apostolic Church (see [5, pp. 124-125]). As H. Cholakian wrote: “The indifference and internal strife of the Armenian Church was one of the spurs pushing Armenian people towards foreign creeds, especially in the Antioch district.” [5, p.135].

Presently such trouble exists in the Armenian community of Damascus. After the ecclesial upheaval in 1956, the issue whether the Damascus diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church should belong to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin or to Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia caused a morbid

rivalry among the local Armenian public circles and impaired the community's potential. The Hunchak, Ramgavar, benevolent and Communist circles were aligned toward Etchmiadzin, whereas the Dashnaks backed Antelias. The problem was so acute that the Dashnaks boycotted any events organized under aegis of the Prelate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus (who was appointed by Etchmiadzin). Even the April 24 events for commemoration of the Armenian Genocide victims were held separately [4, pp. 17-18].

To overcome this challenge it is worth taking advantage of the modern time atmosphere of secularity and promoting establishment and vigorous activities of secular structures and institutions. Such national (all-national) structures will encompass in their activities all (including religious and confessional) segments of the Armenianness and thus become effective means of national consolidation. These secular institutions may include the traditional Armenian political parties in Diaspora (ARF, SDHP, ADL), charitable establishments (AGBU, ARS, etc.), sports and cultural unions (Homenetmen, Hamazkayin Armenian Educational and Cultural Association, etc.), community structures (committees, etc.), educational institutions, mass media, etc. As experience has shown, regardless of the confessional affiliation Armenians get involved in the activities of such secular institutions. At the same time the activities of these institutions cover all Armenians, again, regardless of their confessional affiliation. These circumstances are a serious basis for bringing the Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians to a common arena of activities and thus integrating them in a national-base single entity of a non-religious, secular nature. As Hagop Cholakian mentions, at the time the activities of Armenian political parties in the Armenian community of Syria significantly contributed to the rise of the overall national self-consciousness: "SDHP was the first one to awaken national consciousness and feelings among the co-villagers that were so divided and hostile to each other due to matters of faith. In these villages an Armenian priest, a Catholic minister, a



Protestant preacher and reverend, and even a foreigner Latin rite Roman Catholic pastor were members of the party...” [5, p. 151].

As for the educational institutions, Raffi once wrote: “...It is time to embark on the *school*, as a new baptismal font where the Armenian Catholic, Armenian Muslim and Armenian Protestant would be baptized with a new spirit and new life and will be confirmed by the name of *nation*; this is the only way to unite with our brothers who we had been divided by the church font...” [6, p 57]. As if reacting to the words of this renowned Armenian intellectual, in 1910 some young Kessab people of different faiths initiated the Kessab Educational Association, which resolved to “bring the main line and objective of education and upbringing to the national domain, and not the confessional one, to unify the more than one schools in each village and take away the jurisdiction over the educational matters from the confessional authorities” [7, pp. 79-80].

The Republic of Armenia (RA) must play a key role in those secular institutions, activities of which have a unifying effect for the different confessional strata. As the state of the whole Armeniacy, the RA should be involved not only with the main confessional stratum of the Armeniacy, i.e. Apostolic Armenians, but also with other religious and confessional strata (catholic, evangelical, etc.). In the relations with the local Armenian communities in the foreign countries, the Embassies of Armenia have to cover not only the Apostolic, but also Catholic and Evangelical Armenians in their scope of activities. In this sense the RA Embassy in Syria is good example, as it routinely invites Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians to the events organized by the Embassy. In this manner “the Embassy tries to play a uniting role, to consolidate the community under the Armenian flag and around the idea of Homeland and Armeniacy” [4, p. 22].

With such policy, the RA as an all-national secular entity would be able to unite the different religious/confessional strata of Armeniacy through the

principle of secularity, and become a symbol and effective tool of national unity for the Armenian communities abroad. The RA President's speech delivered in the USA on September 24, 2008 outlines the policy of RA state bodies in this area: "The Armenian identity should not be intricate and mysterious. It has to reject linguistic, religious, cultural, partisan, or ideological divides. The English-speaking, Turkish-speaking, Russian-speaking, or Armenian-speaking Armenian; the *Apostolic, Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim Armenian* (italics added); the Socialist or Democrat Armenian; the Nationalist or Liberal Armenian – they are just Armenians. The Armenian identity should not be limited by the boundaries of its own "true" faction, trying to preserve its secluded purity. Diversity is the key to continuity, while secluded species come to extinction" [8].

### *The Practical Aspects of Consolidation*

As for the practical means ensuring the organic unity of various confessional strata of the Armenian Diaspora communities, the main task in this field is to advance and prioritize the areas that ensure wide cooperation between representatives of the Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical faiths. "We have one prayer, and our struggle, challenges are the same..." [9, p.5] – these words by Fr. Antranig Granian, a prominent contemporary luminary in the Armenian Catholic Church have gained a status of slogan. This is the best formula and guidance to bring together the Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians to a cooperation platform. Hence, the cooperation between different confessional strata of Armenian Diaspora communities, exposing and strengthening their organic unity, should be based on shared objectives and solution of common problems.

The main aspects of practical activities that provide a platform for cooperation between the confessional strata of the Armenians in foreign countries are:

- Preserving Armeniacy.
- Facing the challenges brought by the public and political environments of a given country.
- Struggle for achieving all-national objectives (international recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide, Artsakh problem, etc.).

*Preserving Armeniacy.* The assimilation as the sword of Damocles constantly hangs over the all Armenian Diaspora communities. Armenians residing abroad integrate rapidly or slowly in the local socio-cultural environment, which is unfortunately accompanied by loss of the national identity components, such as language, affinity to the national culture, and national self-consciousness. Therefore, preserving the national character of Armenian Diaspora communities requires combination of all-national efforts for a single goal, which is the preservation of Armeniacy. This implies, *inter alia*, cooperation between Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians in such areas as education (preserving the national language), culture (helping the Armenian community to be in touch with the national culture), and other fields. Referring to the situation during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, H. Cholakian contends that national education and upbringing is a necessity "... for all Armenians, regardless of what community they belong to" [5, p. 151].

*Facing the challenges brought by the public and political environments of a given country.* Every country or region with Armenian communities has a unique socio-political environment. In some of the countries this environment brings security challenges to the Armenian communities. For instance, in the Middle Eastern countries such challenges include Armenophobia (Turkey), Islamic fundamentalism (Iraq, Iran, etc.), terrorism (Iraq, Palestine, etc.), civil war (Lebanon), wars, including Arab-Israeli (Syria, Lebanon, Israel, etc.), Iran-Iraq (Iraq, Iran), US-Iraq (Iraq), internal political cataclysms (Egypt, Syria, etc.). For another example, in the post-Soviet period the Armenian community of Russia had to face serious challenges caused by the public

and political environment of the country, such as internal political tremors and instability, terrorism, xenophobia and so forth.

Factionalism (including that along the confessional lines) is a needless luxury for the Armenian communities facing such challenges. Partitioning the potential of Armenianness makes it even more susceptible to various threats. On the contrary, withstanding these challenges requires combined national efforts, i.e. cooperation between Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical communities.

*Struggle for achieving all-national objectives (international recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide, Artsakh problem, etc.).* The joint struggle for achieving all-national objectives is the best field for cooperation between different confessional strata. In this context the main areas are the Artsakh problem and struggle for international recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide. These two objectives play a consolidating role especially in the life of the Armenian Diaspora and even constitute components of the national identity. “It can be said that these two pillars of the historical self-consciousness consolidate the whole Armenianness and are the fundamental incarnation of national consciousness. In some sense, the self-identification of Armenians begins with such consolidation” [10 p. 254]. H. Marutyan, an ethnologist, notes the following with respect to the historical memory of the Armenian Genocide: “... Ethnic commonality or a memory shared between a nation’s members is a means to bond the individuals, to build their relationships and actions” [11, p.9].

Therefore, the joint struggle for achieving all-national objectives; international recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide, solution of the Artsakh problem and other issues helps unite and bring about close cooperation between various confessional strata of the Armenian communities, because these concerns are common for all (social, religious/confessional and other) strata of Armenianness.

### ***Forms and Levels of Inter-Confessional Cooperation***

Cooperation between different confessional strata of the Armenianness in Diaspora can be implemented at two levels:

- *Individual*, whereby cooperation occurs between individuals representing different confessions (Apostolic, Catholic, Evangelical);
- *Institutional*, when cooperation between different confessional strata is implemented through institutional structures.

The cooperation at the *individual* level may take the following forms:

- *Involvement of individuals representing different confessions in the activities of all-national and secular institutions.* Such institutions may include the traditional Armenian political parties in Diaspora (ARF, SDHP, ADL), national charitable, cultural and other unions (AGBU, Hamazkayin Armenian Educational and Cultural Association, etc.), community structures, mass media, sports clubs, etc. For example, H. Cholakian writes about the consolidating role of AGBU: “The presence of the Armenian General Benevolent Union in Antioch region villages, as well as in Kessab had a positive effect in sense of bringing together people from different communities and triggering aspirations of national upbringing among them. Along with the Apostolic Armenians the same branch of the Union included Armenian Protestants, Catholics and even Latin rite Roman Catholics” [5, p.187].
- *Participation of Armenian individuals representing different confessions in the organization and implementation of national and secular events.* The annual April 24 commemoration of the Armenian Genocide victims is the main one among such events. Besides the commemoration of the Genocide victims, other events consolidating different confessional strata of the Armenianness may include scientific conferences, exhibitions, protest rallies and other events with participation of Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armenians.

The inter-confessional cooperation at the *institutional* level may take the following forms:

- *Establishment and operation of integrated structures.* An excellent example is set in this field by the Armenian communities of the Middle East, where different confessions have established and managed joint social, educational, public health and other institutions. For instance, the Azouniyeh Sanatorium in Lebanon has been created and governed by Armenian Apostolic and Evangelical Churches (see [12, pp.56-57]).
- *Organization and implementation of joint events.* Besides the annual April 24 event for commemoration of the Armenian Genocide victims, which is jointly organized and carried out by the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches, the inter-confessional collaboration may also include organization and implementation of joint scientific conferences and other public events. This form of cooperation is particularly important from the viewpoint of joint efforts to solve common problems (political, social, educational and other types of problems). For instance, in August 2006, the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches in Lebanon made a joint announcement against deployment of Turkish peacekeepers in the country<sup>1</sup>.
- *Participation of other communities in the events organized by one of the communities.* A noteworthy example of such cooperation was the International Conference on Culture of Armenian Cilicia jointly organized by the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia and Yerevan Matenadaran, which was attended also by the Armenian Catholic and Evangelical Churches<sup>2</sup>.
- *All-national events with participation of the three confessions.* Visits of the RA President or other high-ranking officials to a given country

<sup>1</sup> Армяне Ливана против включения турецких сил в состав миротворческого контингента  
<http://www.regnum.ru/news/690305.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ливанские эскизы <http://aniv.ru/view.php?numer=16&st=2>

could be viewed as such events in Diaspora. The leaders or representatives of the three Armenian churches may accompany the RA President or attend the events with the latter's participation. This will not only symbolize the national unity of the Armeniacy's different confessional strata, but also will emphasize the role of RA as the state of the whole Armeniacy and as a consolidating factor. For example, during the RA President S. Sargsyan's visit to Syria on March 22-24, 2010, the leaders of the three Armenian confessional communities accompanied the President and jointly participated in the planned events [13, p. 50].

- *Being represented at institutional level in the all-national structures.* Involvement of the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches in management and activities of the all-national structures would significantly facilitate the inter-confessional cooperation at the institutional level among the Armenian Diaspora communities. The Hayastan All-Armenian Fund is a brilliant example of such involvement, as the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches are represented in its Board of Trustees<sup>1</sup>. The Catholicos of All Armenians (H.H. Garegin II), Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia (H.H. Aram I), Catholicos-Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church (Nerses Bedros Tarmouni) and representative of the Armenian Evangelical Church (Rev. Rene Levonian) are among the members of the Fund's Board of Trustees<sup>2</sup>.

This model of cooperation can be spread also among the all-national structures of the Diaspora, their local subsidiaries, as well as governing bodies of various Armenian communities abroad (e.g. Union of the Armenians of Russia).

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.himnadram.org/index.php?lang=2&id=46>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

### *Summary*

Thus, high level of national self-consciousness, common Christian faith and secularity are the theoretical/worldview bases that secure an environment of tolerance and solidarity between different confessional strata of the Armeni-  
nancy. Consequently, the national consolidation in the Armenian communi-  
ties of Diaspora among other factors implies also promoting these theoretical/  
worldview bases.

At the same time, preserving Armeni-  
nancy, facing challenges that stem  
from the given country's public/political environment, as well as the joint  
struggle to solve all-national problems are the areas of practical activities,  
which bring wide horizons for cooperation between different confessional  
strata of the Armeni-  
nancy in Diaspora.

The active cooperation of Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Armeni-  
ans in these areas would first of all bring better effectiveness to the efforts of  
solving the common problems. As the experience has shown, the combined  
efforts of the three Armenian confessional communities produce desirable  
results. For instance, in 1970s the joint efforts of the Armenian Apostolic,  
Catholic and Evangelical churches in Syria enabled achieving a permission to  
teach Armenian language in the Armenian schools, as well as to teach Reli-  
gious Studies in Armenian language [4, p.15].

On the other hand, inter-confessional cooperation would contribute to  
strengthening the unity of the different confessional strata of the Diaspora  
Armenians, becoming a serious basis and stimulus for organic cohesion of the  
Armenian communities.

The mentioned types of inter-confessional cooperation exist in the Dias-  
pora communities in one form or another. Having emphasized the importance  
of their development, we find it worth proposing a new form of cooperation:  
*establishment of an inter-confessional council to coordinate the activities of the  
Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches.* This would be an im-  
portant step towards more effective and targeted institutional-level cooperation



between different confessional strata of the Armenian communities in Diaspora. In addition to being an effective institutional mechanism for better and more targeted efforts of the three Armenian denominations, it would also make an excellent form of cooperation between them at the institutional level. The Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches could be represented in such council either proportionally (according to their weight in the entirety of the Armenian community), or in equal shares. Raising the inter-confessional collaboration to the institutional level would be facilitated and expressed by adoption of a charter for the coordinating council.

*December, 2011.*

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