

“The Armenians were the first to Adopt Christianity as the State Religion”. The Understanding of Statehood and Collective Symbolism in Armenia

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Abstract *This paper focuses on the concept and phenomenon of statehood in Armenia. The divergence of the actual status of nation state and the traditional idea of state in Armenian narratives is the topic of the article. The role of religion and the reference to the territory for the conception of the Armenian state are discussed against the historical background and the context of Europeanization and westernization. In this regard the traditional collective symbols and those of the present national state are observed and compared.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The editors of this issue of *Euxeinos* have set the aim of illustrating processes of Europeanization in the countries Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The main focus of attention is placed on these three sovereign nations and their relationship to Europe. Each of these three peoples cultivated relationships to the cultures of Europe at an early stage through trade, religion and culture. However, the contributions to this issue will discuss the processes which target these states as such (in contrast to the peoples that inhabit them). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, three independent nation states have come into being in the region. While the Republic of Armenia, Europe and Europeanization will be part of my reflections in this essay in a broader sense, I will focus above all on the concept and phenomenon of statehood. In doing so, I wish to address several cultural elements, which influenced the perception of statehood in Armenia. The conditions and the history of the contemporary Armenian nation state impact the perception and handling of the state and the corresponding measures introduced by the state, which included those aimed at Europeanization. The question impacts both the perception of the state within Armenia as well as the perception of the state by external observers and partners. What does statehood mean for Armenia? In what constellations

does the Armenian state confront processes of Europeanization and westernization? What is meaningful for these processes and how can they be explained? Thus, the central question is *how the state is conceived of*.

2. THE ARMENIAN STATE

Long before the origin of the Armenian nation state, concepts for Armenian statehood were drawn up. The notion of an Armenian state is much older than the establishment of the nation state. “Armenia is the first country that accepted Christianity as the state religion”: this is a classical sentence which one can read in many texts on Armenia and the Armenians. The sentence pertains, in particular, to events in the early 4th century, when the Armenian King Tiridat decided to define Christianity as the official religion in his empire (see Mahé, 1995). Ever since Christianity has developed into the main religion for the Armenian people and a centerpiece of Armenian culture, and thus had a significant impact on the political development of the region, among other things. The concept of statehood pertains to the administrative system of Armenia at that time. The Armenian dynasties ceased to exist in the 11th century. After many years of foreign rule and the dispersion of Armenians around the world, the first Armenian Republic was not established on the historically Armenian territories until 1918. The Second Armenian Republic

(Soviet Republic of Armenia) followed in 1922 and in 1991 the Third Republic after Armenia regained its independence. This emergence of statehood, which was interrupted for several centuries, provides the historical context for contemporary Armenian statehood. This includes a notion of the state as a central administrative mechanism, reflected in narratives about the adoption of the Christian religion, for example. Armenian statehood is viewed as a holistic unit, which was restored in the late 20th century and in which the centuries without statehood are conceived as part of, thus as an additional integral component to some extent. In order for this holistic unit to even be conceived of, in particular during the period without statehood, the church took on an important role as an organizing and administrating institution, and therefore as a center for all Armenians.

3. THE LINK BETWEEN STATEHOOD AND CHRISTIANITY

The notion of statehood in the Armenian tradition is closely linked with Christianity. The history of Armenia and the Armenians dates back to long before the Christian era. Nevertheless, the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the early 4th century is together with the Armenian language the central pillar of Armenian identity. This has exerted a strong impact on the independent development of the nation and its demarcation from its neighbors. The Armenian alphabet also became an important element of the Armenian culture and self-conception. It was created by the monk Mesrop Maschtoz in the early 5th century, who was the first to translate the bible to Armenian (and before that to Old Greek and Aramaic). The Armenian language, alphabet and letters became a symbol

of the preservation of the cultural treasures, while the church became a place and center of Armenian narratives. The separation of the Armenian Church from the Roman church also took place in the 5th century. Through its separation from its Roman counterpart, the Armenian Church became a unifying factor for Armenians. This is also apparent in symbolic combinations. Saint Mesrop translated the bible into Armenian and Saint Vardan succumbed while defending the Christian-Armenian faith against the great powers (Zekiyan, 1996, p. 52). These two important elements, which enabled Armenians to demarcate themselves from their surroundings, also played a decisive role during the years without a state and during the establishment of the Diaspora centers. Dispersion and distance were often thereby compensated for by the church. A large part of the important Armenian symbols reflect ties to the church and the Christian religion. These include the Armenian Mountain Ararat as a biblical place, the ancient Armenian alphabet, the Saint Vardan – the fighting martyr from the 5th century - and others. The main events and figures can be viewed in this religious context (Dabag, 1995, p. 22).

4. TERRITORY AND STATE

An additional element, which contains the traditional notion of statehood and poses difficulties for the contemporary state, is its territorial reference. The ground on which the country is located is an additional central symbolic factor, which impacts collective symbolism. It gives rise to pomegranates, apricots as well as works of art from stone and other substances. This relationship to the earth, to the historical territory and to everything which man can create, elaborate and produce from it, draws parallels to many important notions:

the territory is what is *older* than the church. It provides the link to times of grandeur, powerful dynasties and great victories, when Armenia could measure its strength with that of the great world powers of the time. At the same time it offers continuity. In many ways religious themes and other references to the territory are interweaved with one another. The cross stones are a Christian symbol, as their name already suggests, and at the same time they symbolize strong demonstrations of will and the strength to produce something artistic from the dry and barren Armenian landscape (see Ieni, 1996). However, in terms of their ambiguity the attachment to the territory and its perception are also problematic for the state. The territory that is referred to is larger than what the borders of the contemporary state allow for. Another significant Armenian symbol – the biblical mountain of Ararat – is an additional aspect in this context. The historical territories and the relationship to them define the perception of what is Armenian.

The exile-Armenians and their centers are another factor that widens the perceptions of the boundaries of the contemporary nation state beyond its territory. For the self-conception of the Armenians the Armenian Diaspora is just as important as the population of Armenia. Armenians are not primarily understood as citizens of the Armenian state, rather as people with an Armenian cultural background. The affiliation with the Armenian Apostolic Church, knowledge of the Armenian language, as well as the family and everyday background play an important role. In this regard, Armenian collective symbolism concentrates on themes which surpass the boundaries of the contemporary Armenian state.

5. OFFICIAL STATE SYMBOLISM TODAY

I now wish to place this traditionally understood notion of statehood in relationship to the contemporary nation state and its symbols. The Armenian nation state emerged upon the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s. The Soviet years thus had a profound impact on the earliest phase of the independent Armenia. The Soviet Republic was clearly not a sovereign state, but did benefit in some ways from the Soviet period in terms of its organization and development. Within the Soviet Union, the security and existence of Armenia as well as its remaining territory were protected, even though Armenia was forced to adapt to the system. A radical transformation of political institutions, in particular, was enforced: all parties except for the communist party as well as the church were banned. However, like the parties, the church was able to continue with its activities in the Diaspora centers. Several of the main Armenian symbols thus were preserved within the Diaspora, in particular. As the traditional church-related symbols could not be cultivated in Armenia, the Diaspora centers became ever more important for preserving traditions. The political parties also further pursued their activities in the exile centers. It was not until the Second World War that the church gained some degree of freedom in Soviet Armenia. The language and alphabet (independent of the church) thus had become the main conveyors of Armenian identity and also provided a basis for research, writings and publications in Armenia.

The independent Armenian state was established in 1991 as the “territorial legacy” of Soviet Armenia. However, as an independent state it aimed to herald a new phase in Armenian statehood, as the successor of the First Republic and the Armenian Kingdoms. The

first independent state founded in 1918 with its history of just two years became the main source of the symbolism of the contemporary Armenian state. Thus while differentiating itself from the USSR, the independent Armenian state adhered to and preserved many of the symbols of the First Republic. The memory of the Armenian Kingdoms, four Armenian dynasties and their emblems were reflected in the contemporary national coat of arms of the Republic of Armenia. The new symbols were immediately decided on. The Dashnaktsutyun Party, to which several main symbols (the flag, the anthem) of the nation state can be traced back, is not and was not a unifying element for the Armenian society. In Armenia parties did not play a significant role and many competing parties operated in the Diaspora. The adherents to the other parties in the Diaspora reject the flag of Armenia up to today as a sign of their attitude towards the Dashnaktsutyun Party. While the symbols discussed here – whether regarding the religion or the country – have the capacity to unify all Armenians, the symbols of the nation state are based on themes which are primarily divisive. They do not reflect the central themes of the established understanding of statehood. A discrepancy between recognized collective symbols and official national systems is occurring. The state is becoming a necessary structure, but is not sufficient to encompass the collective.

CONCLUSIONS

What does the state mean for Armenia? In this essay, multiple dimensions of continuity of a religious, territorial and cultural nature have been created. At the same time, breaches in this continuity can be identified in the contemporary state symbolism, which are only seldom reflected on though. One could argue

that the history of the most recent form of statehood is a history of breaches. In terms of their design, the three republics of the 20th century have broken in their own ways with existing traditions and embarked on processes of internal reorganization. Armenia's functioning as a nation state nowadays also constitutes such a breach, not least because the concept of nation state is not an Armenian concept.

In what constellation does the Armenian state confront processes of Europeanization and westernization? This is taking place, on the one hand, in a phase of orientation towards the future in which many aspects of life must be set up and continuously evaluated and devolved. On the other hand, the historical breach must be overcome, which is occurring against the background the country's self-confident position of passed down unity, a long history, cultural tradition and cultivated relationships. The Europeanization measures can be of great significance for the structuring, orientation and organization of many areas as well as for the integration of the new state into the community of states. The approximation with Europe can also provide a basis for fruitful exchange while developing new concepts, but only to the extent that they draw on existing traditions.

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