

Dr. theol., Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia

ELIZABETE TAIVĀNE

CHRISTOLOGY OF ST. NERSES SHNORHALI: AT THE CROSSROADS OF EASTERN AND WESTERN THEOLOGY

*Thanks to Bishop Vardan Navasardyan for his
advice and helpful editorial comments!*

As St. Nerses Shnorhali was open to Byzantine and European culture, he integrated those elements in his theology. His Christological position represented in his letter to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Komnenos in 1166 bears the evidence of his theological genius and ability to find a compromise in Christological debates of that time. This theme seems to be central for Armenian Christology and has been much discussed. The present short research is dedicated to the phenomenological evaluation of Nersesian vision of Christ and not the theological one. It is based on the popular understanding of Jesus Christ as the God in the East and the man in the West. We shall also try to show that such a modern and very popular theological strategy in the West as the anthropological shift is present in Nersesian Christological approach, and should be revitalized by Armenian theologians today. Not only the anthropological, but also the Christological shift of Shnorhali is a burning necessity in Armenian theology and *orthopraxis* today.

Keywords: St. Nerses Shnorhali, Christology of Armenian Church, Western and Eastern Christology, popular Christology, anthropological shift

Introduction

It is common knowledge that Armenian Cilicia was situated at the crossroads of the East and the West. It was located on the southeastern coast of Asia Minor and was a centre of Armenian culture between 1199 and 1375. It had a contact with a diverse range of cultures – from Genoa, Venice and France to Asian countries. Cilicia’s geopolitical position is reflected in various spheres of life including religion and culture.¹ The region was strongly influenced by the West being surrounded by the states founded by Crusades. Cilicia was politically and economically connected to the Western Europe, especially to France. Despite Western influences among noble people, Armenians of Cilicia were devoted to their cultural roots, preserving memory about the Greater Armenia. It is noteworthy that not only Armenians accepted elements of Western culture, but also Europe adopted Cilician stylistics that is fragmentary present, for instance, in Italian and French architecture.² Unions between the Armenian and the Latin Church were announced multiple times after catholicos Nerses Shnorhali organized negotiations between the churches.³

Called “the Augustine of Armenia” by missionary Joseph Wolff,⁴ St. Nerses Shnorhali was open to the cultures which constituted his environment. He integrated the Eastern and Western elements in his theology. His Christological position represented in his letter to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Komnenos in 1166 is the evidence of his theological genius and ability to find a compromise in Christological debates of that time. Predecessor of St. Nerses catholicos Hovhan Odznetsy (717–728) interpreted one nature in Christ as “the ineffable unification of Logos with the body”. St. Nerses in the 12th century proposed the final interpretation of the issue in the already mentioned *Profession of the Faith of the Armenian Church* addressed to emperor of Byzantium: “We confess that the Son, One of the Three Persons, descended in the Holy Virgin’s womb [...] taking from Her our sinful and corruptible nature: soul, mind, and body. But One Essence and One Person of two natures, united by an unmixed and inseparable unification in One Jesus Christ. We confess that the two natures became one and none of them were lost in the unification.”⁵ The formulation of St. Nerses helps to avoid the misconception of Eutyches about the body of Christ being different from the human body.⁶

1 Christina Maranci, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2018), 92.

2 Vazgen Gnuni, *Armenia: polnaia istoriia* (Moskva: AST, 2022), 164.

3 Christina Maranci, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction*, 92–93.

4 *Memoir of the Rev. Joseph Wolff Missionary to the Jews: comprising his first visit to Palestine in the years 1821 & 1822, Written by Himself*, edited and revised by John Bayfod, Esq., F.S.A., second edition (London, printed by James Duncan, Paternoster Row and L. B. Seeley & Son, Fleet Street, 1827), 194.

5 Bishop Yeznik Petrossian, *Armenian Holy Apostolic Church*, trans. Gayane Aleksanian (Armenia: Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 2001), 83–84.

6 *Ibid.*, 85.

The paradigm of One Essence and One Person as the complete union of the two natures in Christ seems to be very important for Armenian theologians as a guarantee of its theandric effect for human salvation. It is noteworthy that the theandric effect may be interpreted in different ways. Archbishop of Armenian Church Magakiya Ormanian thinks that without the total union of the two natures Passion of Christ would not be endowed with the salvific meaning,⁷ whereas the Orthodox priest Tigrii Hachatryan in his article dedicated to the dialogue between Armenian and Orthodox Churches admits that thanks to the union of the two natures in Christ the human nature is deified.⁸ The latter argument, i.e., the notion of deification is a focus of Eastern Christian spirituality.

The theme of One Essence and One Person is central for Armenian Christology. The issue is much discussed by theologians, hence, we shall try to propose another sort of interpretation of Nersesian vision of Christ. It will be based on the popular understanding of Jesus Christ as the God in the East and the man in the West. Utilizing the method of phenomenological structural analysis, we shall seek Eastern and Western Christological patterns in a prominent treatise of St. Nerses Shnorhali called *Jesus, the Son* and in his short Song dedicated to Crucifixion of Christ. It is also supposed to demonstrate that such a modern and very popular theological strategy in the West as the anthropological shift is present in Nersesian Christological approach. By doing this, we want to show that Nersesian Christology is endowed with the necessary means of revitalizing Armenian theology and orthopraxis today. For this purpose, we shall briefly analyse popular religious trends in modern Armenia referring to the same structures found in the texts of St. Nerses Shnorhali.

Western and Eastern Christology

Russian theologian Yevgenii Zaicev contends that in the Christian West a problem of human being is discussed in the context of law. The focus of anthropology here is the fault of man and his inability to achieve salvation by his own efforts. Here, the concept of substitutional atonement appears. It means that the salvific role of Christ is to become the Redeemer. His death on the cross is the central event in His mission. Referring to John Breck, Zaicev stresses that the paradigm of Redemption does not presuppose the ontological necessity for Christ to be

7 Arhiepiskop Magakiia Ormanian, *Armianskaia Cerkov: ee istoria, uchenie, upravlenie, vnitrennii stroi, liturgiia, literatura, nastoyashchee* (Erevan: Ankiunakar, 2016), 111.

8 Khachatryan Tigrii, "K voprosu o dialoge mezhdou Pravoslavnoi Cerkoviu i Drevnimi Vostochnimi Cerkviami", К вопросу о диалоге между Православной Церковью и Древними Восточными Церквями : Богослов. RU (bogoslov.ru), viewed 8.10.2023.

God.⁹ The Christian East does not emphasize one or another episode of life of the Savior, rather, the focus is the Incarnation itself. The main purpose of man is his spiritual growth and attainment of the state of deification that is impossible without God's help.¹⁰ In contrast to the Western Christological scheme, the Eastern one needs Christ to be the God and the man simultaneously. The prominent formula of Athanasius "God has become man in order man can become God" presupposes the reciprocal activity of the two natures in Christ. Although Magakiya Ormayan emphasizes the union of the two natures as the guarantee of the salvific meaning of the Crucifixion, in fact, the logic of the One Essence and One Person as the complete union of the two natures in Christ supports the Eastern scheme, i.e., the Incarnation in collaboration with deification (Gr. *θέωσις*, Arm. *մարդիկաւսուլածացում*).

The correct theological accents are the basis for understanding the popular Christology in Christian West and East. Although Christian East and West agree in the question of the two natures in Christ, for the popular mentality of the East, Christ is more the God than the man. Such a view of Christ is visually represented in Orthodox churches of Byzantium as the image of Christ Almighty (Gr. *Χριστὸς Παντοκράτωρ*). The most attractive episodes from the life of the Saviour for Eastern Christians are those witnessing His divinity. Such are the Transfiguration on the mount Tabor and Resurrection of Christ. In his prominent book dedicated to the mystical and dogmatic theology of Orthodox Church, Vladimir Losskii writes that in these episodes the humanity of Christ reveals the Divinity common to the three Persons of the Trinity.¹¹

For Western Christians, the image of the man Jesus seems to be much closer than for the adherents of Christian East. The favourite events in the life story of Jesus are those indicating His human nature, i.e., His birth and His crucifixion. The popular visual representation of such an interpretation of Jesus Christ is the image of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Crucified, or the icon of the most sacred Heart of Jesus. The latter is supposed to demonstrate the flesh reality of Jesus. On the one hand, the image of the Heart of Jesus emphasizes the humanity of the Saviour, Who is so close to us. On the other hand, the Heart of Jesus becomes a symbol of the pure Ultimate Reality completely transformed into human flesh. The most popular religious festivals are Christmas in the Christian West and Easter in the East.

Regarding Armenia, the visual images of Christ, which are so usual for Armenian miniature, are rather rare in the churches. Prominent Armenian cross-stones or *khachkars*

9 John Breck, "Divine Initiative: Salvation in the Divine-Human Dialogue", in *Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 115–116. (In Evgenii Zaicev, *Uchenie V. Losskogo o teozise* (Moskva: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii institute sv. Apostola Andreia, 2007), 24–25.)

10 *Ibid.*, 24.

11 Vladimir Nikolaevich Losskii, *Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviia Vostochnoi Cerkvi. Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* (Moskva: SEI, 1991), 113.

(Arm. խաչքար) avoid the depiction of the Crucified, underscoring His ineffable and inaccessible divine nature. A very rare exception is the image of the crucified Lord on khachkars, called by Armenians *amenaprkich* (Arm. Ամենափրկիչ). Hence, khachkars depicting various theological and cosmological symbols spiritualize and, at the same time, depersonalize the figure of the Saviour. As a result, Christ is converted into the far God. Ordinary people in Armenia have a strong need for the caritative element in their faith preferring the Kwasi-Christian cult of the Saints (Arm. սուրբ). It is interesting that the most popular image found in the village chapels (Arm. մատուռ) across Armenia is the already mentioned Catholic icon of the most sacred Heart of Jesus. It means that the human mode of Jesus Christ, as well as the Saints (Arm. սուրբեր) of the Armenian vernacular religion allegedly embodied in chapels, books and nature objects give ordinary people a feeling of intimacy with the Sacred. The aforementioned Kwasi-Christian cult of the Saints is very strong in Armenia, whereas the churches where Liturgy (Arm. Պատարագ) takes place are rarely attended.

The Eastern Christological pattern in theology of Shnorhali

It is noteworthy that the difference between the popular understanding of Jesus Christ in the Christian East and West becomes obvious in how the Crucifixion of the Saviour is interpreted and visually depicted. Vladimir Losskii stresses that in the East the divine nature of Christ becomes obvious even on the Cross. His Passion and Death are endowed by glorious aspect. His divine mightiness manifests in His loneliness and humiliation. Such a motif is present in the Liturgical songs of the Orthodox Church, for instance: “He Whose cloth is heavenly Light, is standing naked; The hands He created are hitting Him in the face.” “Today He Who hanged the earth upon the waters, is hanged on the wood; He Who is the King of angels, receives the crown of thorns on his head.”¹²

The same paradigm of glorious representation of Christ in Passion is witnessed by St. Nerses Shnorhali in his Song dedicated to the Crucifixion (ԼԸ. Տաղ խաչելութեան Քրիստոսի). “He Who suffered on the Cross as an ordinary man, has created the ocean full of water¹³; [...] The old veil in the holy temple was torn in the moment, when He

12 Free translation from Russian: «Одеяться светом яко ризою, наг на суде стояше, и в ланиту ударение прият от рук, иже созда.» «Днесь висит на древе, Иже на водах землю повесивый; венцем от терния облагается, Иже ангелов Царь.» (In Vladimir Nikolaevich Losskii, *Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviia Vostochnoi Cerkvi. Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 113–114).

13 Ծարաւեցաւ որպէս ըզմարդ Տէրն ի խաչին,
Այն որ արար զծով եւ զերկինքս ջրրային: (Ներսէս Շնորհալի, *Տաղեր* 23 ԼԸ. 1-2 // Տաղեր և զանծեր (Երևան: Հայկական ԱԱՀ ԳԱ Հրատարակչություն, 1987), էջ 100. / Nerses Shnorhali, *Tagher* 23 LY 1–2 // *Tagher yev gandzer* (Yerevan: Haykakan AAH GA Hratarakch'ut'yun, 1987), ej 100.)

Who is the source of life died in great pain¹⁴; [...] The great shout of Jesus Who gives us life, has released souls from prison.¹⁵¹⁶

At the same time, the fundamental and very popular treatise of Shnorhali called *Jesus, the Son* (Հիսուս Որդի) is the evidence of the holistic approach of St. Nerses¹⁷. In it, both the Eastern and the Western visions of Christ are present. The prominent work written in 1152 in the form of prayer encompasses the whole history of the world and its salvation, starting from the creation and ending with the last days in the context of Biblical narrative. The focus of the book is the Person of the Savior, his life and mission.

In *Jesus, the Son* the Eastern paradigm of Christ the Heavenly King is clearly represented. Shnorhali describing the Passion of Christ underscores the glorious mode of the event: “Thy celestial head before which the seraphim were filled with awe, They pummelled with their fists and they smote it with the reed: in order that the earthly head which bowed down at a woman’s feet, Thou shouldst set upon thy body, Thou, supreme in the celestial ranks.¹⁸¹⁹ It would be hard to ignore the great expression and

14 Եւ վարագոյր հին աւրինին սուրբ տաճարին
Ընդ չարչարանս կենարարին պատառէին: (Ներսէս Շնորհալի, *Տաղեր* 23 ԼԸ. 9-10, էջ 101. /
Nerses Shnorhali, *Tagher* 23 LY 9–10, ej 101.)

15 Յահեղ ձայնէն կենդանատու Տեառն Յիսուսին
Ազատեցան կապեալ հոգիքն, որ ի բանտին: (Ներսէս Շնորհալի, *Տաղեր* 23 ԼԸ. 15–16, էջ 101. /
Nerses Shnorhali, *Tagher* 23 LY 15-16, ej 101.)

16 A free translation into English from Nerses Shnorhali, *Tagher ev gandzer*, 100–101.

17 It seems that St. Nerses approaches any topic in the holistic manner. See, for instance, Armine Melkonyan, “The “Encyclical letter” by Nerses the Graceful as a source for studying the history of everyday life and social relations in the 12th century” (PDF, Homiletic Manuscripts | Armine MelkonyanAcademia.edu (last viewed 08.12.2023)). The Encyclical letter devoted to a completely another theme, i.e., to moral standards, is the evidence of Nersesian holistic approach to any context he is involved in. In the letter, Shnorhali addresses all social groups, including clergy, princes, soldiers, farmers, and women.

18 Nerses Shnorhali, *Jesus, the Son* 70-77, book 3, trans. Mischa Kudian (London: Mashtots Press, 1986), 68. Further references in the text in brackets with abbreviation *Jesus, the Son*. The text in Armenian is below:

Որ ըզգուլի Քո զերկնային,
Յորնէ սարսեալ սերովբէին,
Ծածկեալ ձորձովքըն կըռփէին
Եւ եղեգամբ հարկանէին:
Վասըն գըլխոյ հողեղինին,
Խոնարիելոյ կընոջն ոտին,
Չի վեհագոյն երկնից դասին

Ըզնա դիցես ի Քոյդ մարմին: (Ներսէս Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, (Երևան, Ապոլոն, 1991), էջ 162, 164: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi, girk' yerrord*, (Yerevan, Apolon, 1991), ej 162, 164.)

19 Nerses Shnorhali, *Jesus, the Son* 70-77, book 3, trans. Mischa Kudian (London: Mashtots Press, 1986), 68. Further references in the text in brackets with abbreviation *Jesus, the Son*.

empathy of St. Nerses. On the one hand Christ is “supreme in the celestial ranks”, on the other hand he is so close to us experiencing sorrow.

One more detail witnessing about the Eastern Christological pattern is the return to the issue of human nature that is cured and deified through the Incarnation. In the beginning of the Book 2 of *Jesus, the Son* we can read: “But despite so many physicians of the soul, the human malady was not cured, for their nature lacked in ability and they could not, therefore, heal it²⁰; [...] Until our infirm nature had drunk of thy celestial remedy for life²¹, [...] Then thou, the only-begotten Son of the Father, didst willingly descend into her [Virgin’s] womb, and didst veritably become incarnate: God and man became as one²².” (*Jesus, the Son* 1-4, 9-10, 17-20, book 2, p. 36.)

In the context of the last days, St. Nerses describes the Cross in the abstract manner. It becomes a sign of God’s glory and seems to be a verbal equivalent of the classical Armenian image of the cross-stone or *khachkar* with its four widening and encompassing the world arms: “Then shall the sign of thy holy cross appear even like unto lightning, and shall blazon forth from the East unto the four corners of the earth²³.” (*Jesus, the Son* 690, book 3, p. 80.)

The theological patterns were supported by Armenian art of miniature. During the Cilician epoch of Armenian history and throughout the other periods, artists depicted Christ on the cross in a manner which differed from the Western one. In the West, Jesus on the cross is just man who suffers immeasurably. The images of Crucifixion may be rather realistic and even shocking. The Divine nature of Christ here is completely obscured in order for the believers to be able to unite with the reality

20 Բայց այսբանտօք բժիշկք անծին
Ոչ բուժեցաւ աստ մարդկային.
Քանզի կարտօք բնութեամբ էին,
Եւ բըժըշկել ոչ կարացին. (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երկրորդ, էջ 80: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk’ yerkrord, ej 80.)

21 Մինչև զկենաց դեղդ երկնային
Էարբ զբնութիւն մեր աստային, (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երկրորդ, էջ 80: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk’ yerkrord, ej 80.)

22 Ապա Որդիդ Յօր միածին
Կամաւ իջեալ յորովայնին,
Եջմարտապէս առեր մարմին
Աստուած և մարդ՝ մի երկդին. (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երկրորդ, էջ 80: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk’ yerkrord, ej 80.)

23 Յորժամ նըշան Քո սուրբ խաչին,
Որպէս փայլակն երևեսցին
Յարևելից ճառագայթին
Ի չորս անկիւնս տարածին. (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 196: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk’ yerrord, ej 196.)

of Christ through observing and imitation of His humanity and total humiliation. Only going through His death, it is possible to experience the Resurrection.

In the visual art of Christian East and, to be precise, in Armenian miniature of Cilicia and Gladzor, Christ on the cross is depicted as rather standing than hanging. Discussing the image of the Crucified from Gladzor, Thomas F. Matthews and Alice Taylor contend that “it is in marked contrast with the sagging body of Christ ubiquitous in contemporary European and Byzantine representations. Clearly, it was important to show Christ as powerful even in death, and this is a common Armenian theme.”²⁴ Referring to the *Teaching of Saint Gregory the Illuminator* Matthews and Taylor underscore that “the Godhead was not separated from the manhood, neither during the passion nor in death”. Therefore, God is still almighty in the dead Christ.²⁵ Here we once more return to the paradigm of the One Essence and One Person as the complete union of the two natures. The aforementioned glorious elements in Christology supported by the visual images of the Crucified are based on the idea of the inseparable union of the two natures in Christ.

The Western Christological pattern in theology of Shnorhali

As noted above, the theological focus of the Western Christology is the Crucifixion as the means of the Redemption of the mankind. The popular symbolic and visual derivatives of such a paradigm are the images of the man Jesus and His the most Sacred Heart, good Shepherd and the Lamb of God. It is interesting that in the treatise *Jesus, the Son* St. Nerses Shnorhali demonstrates his devotion to Western Christological pattern much more frequently than to the Eastern one. His references to the idea of Shepherd and Sacrifice are, as follows. In the first part of his book, he describes the mystery of the Cross in the context of the sacrificial practices of the Old Testament: “Through the killing of the fatted calf, that is the sacrifice upon the cross and blood shed with the spear from thy side, whence gushed the stream of life for us²⁶.” (*Jesus, the Son* 93-96, book 1, p. 11) In the other place, Shnorhali compares Jesus with Isaac:

24 Thomas F. Matthews and Alice Taylor, *The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor: The Life of Christ Illuminated* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001), 37.

25 *Ibid.*, 38.

26 Չենման եզին պարարակին,
Որ ի խաչին պատարագին
Եւ տիգահոս արեան կողին,
Կենաց վըտակ մեզ բըղխողին [...] (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, էջ 16: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, ej 16.)

Creator of the hearts, O Lord, thou alone
 Who dost see all deeds and thoughts,
 Didst put to the test thy beloved,
 To sacrifice his son unto thee:
 Thou didst bid him go to a high mountain
 At Golgotha, in accordance with thy word,
 Taking the wood for the burnt offering
 Of his only son, so pure in mind.
 There he laid him upon the altar,
 Like unto thee, O Lord, upon the cross,
 He stretched forth his hand, took the knife,
 And brought it nigh unto his throat,
 When a voice called out from above:
 Lay not thine hand upon the lad,
 But behold upon thy right
 A ram caught in the thicket,
 Which in the stead of thy servant Isaac,
 He who is endowed with reason,
 Offer thou as a sacrificial offering
 The beast created with no reasoning power²⁷.

(Jesus the Son 289-308,
 book 1, pp. 14-15)

27 Ստեղծիչ սըրտից, Տէր, առանձին
 Տեսող գործոց և խորհըրդին,
 Ի փորձ մըտեր առ սիրելին,
 Պատարագել քեզ զամլորդին,
 Երթալ ի մեծ բարձըր ի լերին
 Ի Գողգոթա, որպէս ասին,
 Բառնալ ըզփայտ ողջակիզին
 Իւր միաձնին ողջախոհին.
 Չոր և հանեալ ի սեղանին,
 Որպէս ըզքեզ, Տէր, ի խաչին,
 Բուռնն հարեալ ի սուսերին
 Եւ մերձ եղեալ պարանոցին,
 Մինչ ի վերուստ հնչեալ ձայնին,
 Թէ մի մըխեր ի պատանին,
 Այլ հայեսցիս յաջոյ ձեռին
 Կախեալ ըզխոյն ի սաբէկին:
 Չոր փոխանակ բանականին,
 Իսահակայ Քում ծառային
 Ետուր ի զոհ պատարագին
 Չանբան ստեղծեալըն կենդանին: (Ներսէս Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, Էջ 26, 28: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, ej 26,28.)

The idea of the sacrificial Lamb in the book of Shnorhali resonates with the art of Cilician miniature. Christina Maranci in her book dedicated to the art of Armenia mentioned the Gospel Book from Hromkla dated to 1166 and produced during the first year of the reign of catholicos Nerses Shnorhali. The book is illustrated by the artist named Kozma. Maranci notes, that Cilician miniature is strongly influenced by Byzantian patterns,²⁸ yet the Cilician manuscript demonstrates a significant innovation on the incipit of the Gospel of John, that is an image of a lamb holding a cross-shaped staff. This image refers to the Lamb of God, or *Agnus Dei*, and is a symbol of Christ's sacrifice for humanity. "At the Quinisext Council of 692, the Byzantines rejected it as an inappropriate depiction of Christ, preferring instead the anthropomorphic form that stressed his Incarnation. Nor is the *Agnus Dei* known from earlier Armenian manuscript painting. Yet it appears widely in European medieval illumination, wall painting, stone sculpture, and metalwork".²⁹

The idea of the substitutional atonement in Western Christology as the core of mission of Christ is mentioned by St. Nerses in his *Jesus, the Son*. In the book 3, he writes: "The redeeming mystery of the cross Thou didst reveal in the evening, and Thy life-giving body, as with the cup, Thou didst distribute among them"³⁰. (*Jesus, the Son* 1-4, book 3, p. 67.) With empathy St. Nerses refers to the fear Jesus experiences in Gethsemane at the mount of Olives. Shnorhali emphasizes the human and not the divine nature in Christ: "Thy human nature thou didst display, when tormented with fear during the night, thou didst pray unto thy Father, who is in heaven"³¹. (*Jesus, the Son* 17-20, book 3, p. 67.)

The next aspect of the Western vision of the Saviour is the great empathy to the man Jesus on the cross. Sorrow joined by deepening into the physiological details of the Crucifixion is a feature of Western mysticism and liturgical practice. On the contrary, in the Byzantian and Russian tradition the Passion of Christ is always described in the abstract manner as a means of pacifying and curing passions the human nature

28 Christina Maranci, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction*, 97–98.

29 *Ibid.*, 98–99.

30 Որ զփղրկական խորհուրդ խաչին
Յայտնեալ ցուցեր յերեկոյին
Եվ զկենարարը Քո մարմին
Բաշխեալ ետուր ընդ բաժակին, [...] (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 160: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerrord, ej 160.)

31 Որ ըզբնութիւն Քո մարդկային
Յուցանելով ի գիշերին,
Տագնապեցար Դու յերկիւղին,
Աղոթեցեր առ Հայր յերկին, [...] (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 160: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerrord, ej 160.)

is endowed with. Such a vision of Crucifixion is described, for instance, by Callistos Angelicoudis (Κάλλιστος Ἀγγελικούδης). He demonstrates the Crucifixion as the aforementioned healing of the three parts of the soul: the sensual, the cognitive and the passionate parts or activities of the soul. The narrative is completely free of any empathy and sorrow.³²

The illustration of the Western vision of the Cross is the prominent text written by St. Ignatius Loyola and titled *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius explains the principals of the first stage of prayer, i.e., meditation³³ that is intended to be a reflection on the episodes of the life of Jesus and further imitation of Christ, utilizing senses, memory, imagination, and profound empathy. *The Exercises* consist of four weeks. The third week is dedicated to the meditation on the Passion of Christ. The main instruction for the contemplator here is to ignore the further Resurrection to experience the bitterness of what our Saviour experienced as a man.

St. Nerses Shnorhali describing the Passion of Christ is rather close to the Western pattern. His text is extremely touching: “Thy Mother, beating her breast, lamented near the cross, O Lord, and when she heard that thou didst thirst, she started shedding doleful tears³⁴.” (*Jesus, the Son* 145-148, book 3, p. 70.)³⁵ “And the moon, following the sun, turned into the colour of blood: for they could not suffer to see their Lord naked upon

32 See Patrologiae Graecae, Vol. 147: Callistus Cataphugiota, *De Unione cum Deo et Vita Contemplativa* (36), col. 873–876.

33 The second stage of prayer is contemplation when God Himself speaks to the soul of a mystic.

34 Որ ողբալով բախմամբ սըրտին
Տեառնըդ իմոյ մայր առ խաչին,
Յորժամ լըսէր ըզձարաւին,
Յեղոյր արտօսըր ցաւազին: (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 166–168: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerrord, ej 160–168).

35 During discussion in the context of international conference dedicated to St. Nerses Shnorhali in November 2023 at the University of Latvia, the expert in Armenian Church music Haig Utidian contended that the Liturgical practice of the Armenian Apostolic Church takes the middle path between the Eastern and Western Christian tradition and hence is not strictly associated with the East. As an argument, he mentioned the prominent Liturgical song of Armenian Church of Medieval period called *Mother, where are You?* (Arm. *ՈՒր ես Մայր իմ*). The humanity of Christ is described in it in the Western manner, ignoring the glorious, i.e., divine aspect of Christ. From my perspective, it can be added that the content of the song expresses itself even stronger when is experienced in its liturgical context: during the ceremony, “held on Maundy Thursday, the twelve candles lighted in the church are put out one after the other, symbolizing the abandonment of Jesus by the twelve Apostles – including the black candle representing Judas – after the Last Supper and his prayer at the garden of Gethsemane. The church remains in the dark, while the poignant hymn *Where Are Thou, My Mother?* (*Ո՞ւր ես, մայր իմ / Oor es, mayr eem*) is sung.” See “Maungy Thursday and the Eclipse”, Maundy Thursday and the Eclipse – Armenian Prelacy (last viewed 10.01.2023). The present episode of Armenian Liturgy is rather close to the description of the Passion by St. Nerses Shnorhali.

the cross; and instead of beings endowed with reason, the elements devoid of reason shuddered³⁶.” (*Jesus, the Son* 163-168, book 3, p. 70.)

In his prayer of St. Nerses, the physiological details of the Passion transform into the means of salvation in the same way as it is in the prominent prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Nerses writes:

*Upon fulfilling the words of the Scriptures
And consigning thy spirit unto thy Father,
When the soldier pierced thee with a spear,
A fountain gushed from thy sacred side:
As the water to bathe in the font
And the blood to drink in sacrament,
[...] Open thou my mouth unto the sacred stream
Of blood flowing from thy side,
In the way that an infant sucks
From its own mother's breast³⁷.* (*Jesus, the Son* 193-212, book 3, p. 71)

The text of St. Nerses is in accord with the prayer of St. Ignatius that is present in the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*:

*Soul of Christ, sanctify me
Body of Christ, save me
Blood of Christ, inebriate me*

36 Նա և լուսինն, օրինակին,
Փոփոխելով յարեան գունին,
Քանզի ըզՏերոյ իւրեանց տեսին,
Մերկ ի խաչին, չհանդուրժեցին:
Որ փոխանակ բանականին
Անբան տարերբըն սարսէին, (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 168: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerrord, ej 168.)

37 Որ յետ լընլոյ գրելոյ բանին,
Աւանդեցեր առ Հայր գիողին,
Տիգով հարեալ զինաւորին,
Աղբիւր բըղխեաց ի սուրբ կողին:
Ձուրն ի լուացումն աւազանին,
Արիւնն յարբումըն խորհըրդին: [...]
Բա՛ց ըզբերան իմ վըտակին
Քո սուրբ արեան կողահոսին,
Որպէս տըղայի ստընդիային,
Որ զմօրն յինքեան ձըզէ ըզստին, [...] (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Յիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 170: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerrord, ej 170.)

*Water from the side of Christ, wash me
Passion of Christ, strengthen me
O good Jesus, hear me
Within Thy wounds hide me
Permit me not to be separated from Thee
From the wicked foe defend me
At the hour of my death call me
And bid me come to Thee
That with Thy Saints I may praise Thee
For ever and ever. Amen³⁸*

The anthropological shift and holism

In the modern times, when Europe experiences the religious crisis, Christian theology needs to be revitalized. One of the most popular trends in the Western theology today is the anthropological shift. The prominent German theologian Karl Rahner has initiated the idea of the anthropological shift as a theological method inviting us to return to the principle of anthropocentrism. This method means that any discourse about God and the Divine Revelation should be anthropologically motivated. The question of human salvation must be the starting point of any theological discussion.³⁹

In Russia, the method is successfully used by the prominent philosopher Sergei Khoruzhii (Сергей Хоружий). He suggests a new anthropological paradigm based on Hesychast doctrine of man. Khoruzhii suggests a new interpretation of Orthodox spirituality and tries to appropriate it to other humanities. The new vision of the basic Orthodox ideas seems to be rather attractive for the Russian intellectuals of the modernity.⁴⁰

The anthropological shift is initiated in the 20th century in Europe, yet St. Nerses Shnorhali already used it in Cilicia in the 12th century. As noted above, his treatise *Jesus, the Son* discusses the history of salvation of the humanity in the form of prayer. The author places his personal self in the context of history of humankind and life of Christ and hence becomes a participator of the narrative. He takes the path of imitation of Christ, intuitively utilizing the method of the anthropological shift. For instance, in

38 St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, Louis J. Puhl, SJ Translation – The Spiritual Exercises | St. Ignatius of Loyola (ignatianspirituality.com, last viewed 13.08.2023).

39 Mikhael Kuncler, *Liturgija Cerkvi*, kniga I (Moskva: Hristianskaia Rossiia, 2001), 15.

40 See more about the critical analysis of the anthropological shift of S. Khoruzhii: Elizabete Taivāne, “S. Horužija antropoloģiskais pavērsiens: uz filozofijas, teoloģijas, psiholoģijas un fizikas robežas” // Elizabete Taivāne, *Reliģijas fenomenologam pa pēdām* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2014), 44–62.

the episode about Lazarus Shnorhali writes: “Like unto Lazarus who was thy friend, I died and was buried in a grave, not for four days, but for many years my dead soul has lain in my body; Resound thy celestial voice unto me and let me hear thy Word, O Lord; Unloose mine infernal bonds and take me out of my dark house⁴¹.” (*Jesus, the Son* 1365-1372, book 2, p. 63.) Sometimes St. Nerses is ready to transform into a voiceless item to be close to Christ: “Purify me also, as in the parable, O Lord, and rest thou in me with thy Spirit; Make me into a celestial throne for thee, and sit in my soul like unto Cherubim⁴².” (*Jesus, the Son* 1401-1404, book 2, p. 64.)

As observed above, the approach of Nerses is holistic. In his *Jesus, the Son* he sometimes puts together the principles of Eastern and Western Christology, adding the method of anthropological shift. He simultaneously refers to the curing of human nature and the idea of the substitutional atonement: “Now by ascending the holy cross, Thou didst expiate the sins of mankind, and the enemy of our human nature Thou didst likewise nail thereon. Fortify me with the protection of thine ever vanquishing Sign, and when it riseth in the East, illuminate me with its light.” (*Jesus, the Son* 130, book 3, p. 69.) Making use of the Eastern paradigm, St. Nerses describes the crucifixion with a great empathy, as if he himself was present:

*On that Friday, at the third hour,
The day the first man was deceived,
Thou wast nailed to the wood, O Lord,
Together with the lawless thieves.
The hands that created the earth
Thou didst extend upon the cross,
In place of theirs that stretched forth
To pluck death from the tree.*

41 Ընդ Ղազարու բարեկամին
Մեռեալ եղայ ի տապանին,
Ո՛չ բառօրեայ, այլ բազմամին
Մեռեալ հոգիս է ի մարմին.
Զայնըդ հնչեա՛ր յիս երկնային
Եւ լըսելի արա բանին,
Լո՛յծ ի կապից դժոխային,
Հա՛ն ի տանես խաւարային: (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երկրորդ, էջ 148: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerkrord, ej 148.)

42 Մաքրեա՛ր և զիս ըստ առակին
Եւ յիս հանգիր Հոգւով Քոյին.
Արա՛ աթոռ զիս երկնային,
Բազմեաց յոգիս ըստ բրովբէին: (Ներսես Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երկրորդ, էջ 150: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerkrord, ej 150.)

*I who have trespassed like unto them
And even surpassed them in sin,
By planting the plant of Gomorrah
And plucking the fruit of Sodom,
Do not punish me according to my sins,
Do not demand the extent of my debt,
But be thou the atoner of my transgressions,
Like unto those in the region of despair⁴³. (Jesus, the Son 113-128, book 3, p. 69.)*

Conclusion

Christian tradition in the West goes through a deep crisis. Europeans extensively forget the Christian vocabulary.

A visual sign of the progressing secularization linked to economic growth and modernization is the decrease of church attendance. Various revivalist movements appear in the church environment of Western Europe. The purpose of charismatic, ecumenical, and other popular movements inside the Western Church is to revitalize Christianity. Inside the modern Roman Catholic and Protestant tradition, there is an endeavor to go back to the classical heritage of the Church that allows a believer to experience intimacy with the Divine. Popularity of *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the works of other mystics of the Church increases. At the same time, such a heritage needs to be translated into the language of modernity. Here, the method of anthropological shift can be of assistance.

43 Որ յուրբաթու ժամ երրորդին,
Յօր պատրանաց նախաստեղծին
Բւենեցար Տեր ի խաչին
Ընդ անօրէն աւազակին:
Ձեռք, որ զերկիր հաստատեցին,
Տարածեցեր զայն ի խաչին,
Փոխան նոցա ձրգման ձեռին,
Չոր ի ծառոյն մահ կըլեցին:
Չիս որ յանցեալ նըման նոցին
Եւ առաւել քան ըզնոսին,
Ձեռամբ տընկեալ տունկ Գոմորին,
Պըտուղ կըլթեալ սողովմային,
Մի՛ տուժեսցես չափով չարին,
Մի՛ պահանջեր զհամար պարտին:
Այլ լեր քաւիչ իմոյ յանցին,
Որպէս նոցա անյոյս վայրին: (Ներսէս Շնորհալի, *Հիսուս Որդի*, գիրք երրորդ, էջ 166: / Nerses Shnorhali, *Hisus Vordi*, girk' yerrord, ej 166.)

According to the information from the Pew Research Center, the least religious countries in Europe are Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, and Netherlands.⁴⁴ The most religious countries in Europe today are Romania, Armenia, Georgia, Greece, and Moldova.⁴⁵ Despite the statistics, the churches in Armenia on Sundays are rather empty – just like in the Western Europe. Insufficiency of the caritative element in the traditional Armenian Christology may be one of the causes, why ordinary people, especially in the country, choose to turn to local vernacular cults and not to attend Liturgy in the church. The adequate strategy here may be the Christological shift beside the anthropological one. In the same way as the Western Church returns to the works of prominent mystics, Armenian theologians may be inspired by the Christological approach of St. Nerses Šnorhali. The Western vision of Christ, as well as the anthropological shift in the situation of intense popularity of Western images of Christ in Armenia seem to constitute the most appropriate theological strategy of today.

KOPSAVILKUMS

Sv. Nersesa Šnorhali kristoloģija: Austrumu un Rietumu teoloģijas krustcelēs

Sv. Nersess Šnorhali bija atvērts bizantiešu un eiropiešu kultūrai un integrēja to elementus savā teoloģijā. Viņa kristoloģisko pozīciju uzrāda viņa vēstule, kas bija adresēta bizantiešu imperatoram Manuilam Komnēnam 1166. g. Tā ir liecība viņa teoloģiskajam ģēnijam un spējai atrast kompromisu tālaika teoloģiskajās debatēs. Šī tēma ir centrālā armēņu kristoloģijā un ir kļuvusi par plašu debašu objektu. Šis īsais pētījums ir veltīts Nersesa kristoloģijas fenomenoloģiskajam, nevis teoloģiskajam izvērtējumam. Tas balstās uz Jēzus Kristus populāro izpratni kā par Dievu kristīgajos Austrumos un kā par cilvēku kristīgajos Rietumos. Ir paredzēts arī parādīt to, ka tāda mūsdienīga un ļoti populāra teoloģiskā stratēģija kā antropoloģiskais pavērsiens ir klāt Nersesa kristoloģiskajā pieejā un ir aktīvi izmantojams arī mūsdienu armēņu teoloģijā. Ne tikai antropoloģiskais, bet arī kristoloģiskais pavērsiens ir pieprasīta stratēģija mūsdienu armēņu teoloģijā un reliģiskajā praksē.



© 2024, Elizabete Taivāne, Latvijas Universitāte

Raksts publicēts brīvpieejā saskaņā ar *Creative Commons* Attiecinājuma-Nekomerciāls 4.0 starptautisko licenci (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

44 “Least Religious Countries 2022”, Least Religious Countries 2022 (worldpopulationreview.com, last viewed 19.11.2022).

45 “Pew: Romania Is Now Most Religious Country in Europe”, Pew: Romania Is Now Most Religious Country in Europe (breitbart.com, last viewed 19.11.2022).