

THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

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Fresno, California

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PREFACE

This study has been prepared for the Armenian new generation of America, in order to give them some basic idea about the Armenian Apostolic Church. There is more information about the Armenian Church and church affairs in the church history of Patriarch Ormanian and also in Catechism of Catholicos Papken Guleserian.

The content of this booklet was published in Fidelity monthly paper in Fresno, Calif. We shall be very glad if this had a little help for our youth to lead them to get interest in church affairs.

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K. A. Sarafian

THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

1. THE RELIGION OF ARMENIA BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

Before Christianity the Armenian nation was heathen and worshipped the following gods:

Aramazt (Zeus, Jupiter, Ormizd) was one of the main gods of the ancient Armenians and as the father of the country he was the creator of the earth and the heavens. Aramazt was the father also of Anahid, Mihr and Nane who were born without a mother.

Anahid (Artemis, Diana, Nahit) was the mother of all chastity and at the same time she was the life giver of the country.

Vahagn (Herakles, Mars) was the god of bravery, was the emblem of the light, sun and art and also the spirit of goodness.

Asdghig (Aphrodite, Venus) was the daughter of Anahid and would shine just as the morning star.

Tir (Apollo, Mercury) was a representative and protector of literature and arts and also the clerk of Aramazt. The saying, "May the writer (clerk) snatch you away" still in use among the Armenians as a curse.

Mihr (Hephaestas, Vulcan) as the son of Aramazt was called sun-god. He was at the same time the god of justice, truth, light and punctuality.

Naneh (Athene, Minerva) was the daughter of Aramazt and the goddess of victory.

Barshamin (Hera-Juno) was a foreign god and was taken to Armenia from Mesopotamia through Tigranes the great, and he was known as the lord of heaven.

When Christianity entered into Armenia all these heathen gods passed away and lost their authority over the people.

2. APOSTOLIC ORIGIN OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

Christianity was preached in Armenia in the apostolic age through the Apostle Thaddeus (Judas, not Iscariot) and Bartholomew, who were the disciples of Jesus. And then gradually, it was rooted among the people during the first three centuries. In the first part of the fourth century, in the year 301 A. D., Christianity became the official religion of Armenia as the result of the evangelical efforts of Gregory the Illuminator and the conversion of the Armenian king, Tiridates, (Dirtad) to Christianity.

If Christianity had not taken a strong root among the Armenian people during the first three centuries, it would have been impossible for this new faith to be established as a religion of state immediately in Armenia.

During the first three centuries the Armenian kings, Ardashes (110 A. D.), Khosrov (230 A. D.) and Tiridates (287 A. D.) persecuted Christianity in Armenia, officially. This historical event showed that this new religion was strong enough among the Armenians during this period to draw such persecution upon itself.

At the same time Christian martyrs in those three centuries in Armenia give evidence that Christianity as a new religious movement had strong background in the country.

And in 301 A. D. when the king Tiridates became a Christian, by his official order the people of Armenia also received Christianity as the national and state religion. And so the Armenian people were the first in history in declaring Christianity as a state religion.

Gregory the Illuminator immediately destroyed the pagodas of the heathen religion and built Christian churches all over the country for the worship of the people. But in 303 A. D. the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin was the first Armenian official church which was erected by the help of the king Tiridates and the Armenian princes of the country, through the leadership of Gregory the Illuminator.

3. THE NAME

The official name of the Armenian church is, "ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH."

It is called "Armenian" because she has a national character for the Armenian people. Also it is called "Apostolic" because Christianity started in Armenia by the preaching of the apostles of Christ. And now for this reason apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew were called the first Illuminators of the Armenian church.

It is a great mistake to call the Armenian Church "Gregorian" because of the wrong idea that Gregory, the Illuminator was the founder of the Armenian church.

4. THE TRANSLATION OF THE ARMENIAN BIBLE

The Bible was translated into the Armenian language in the first part of the fifth century by Sahag and Mesrop. Before this translation the Bible was read in the Armenian churches in Greek and Syrian languages. The people could not understand it; there was no Armenian alphabet. It was necessary to invent the

Armenian alphabet to solve this difficulty. Mesrop was especially concerned about this problem.

History gives the credit of this invention to Masrop. He spent much time to invent it, traveling from city to city. This problem was the subject of his prayer and dreams, but at the end of his unselfish and tremendous labor, with hope and aspirations, he finally succeeded in inventing the Armenian alphabet in 404 A. D. Misrop, with the assistance of Sahag, immediately opened schools in the country and prepared leaders for the Armenian church. And thus Sahag and Mesrop translated the Bible into Armenian language by the help of religious leaders they themselves had educated. The translation was first made from Syriac and then Greek texts of the Septuagint and then finally was revised and put into circulation in 433 A. D.

The language of the Armenian Bible is so refined that La Croze calls it "The Queen of Versions" because of its exactness and beauty.

After the translation of the Bible they translated also a number of works of the fathers of the Greek Church and Greek classics. It is very interesting to know that while some of the originals of these books are lost, Armenian translations of these are still kept in some Armenian monasteries.

As a result of this translation there was created a constructive religious atmosphere throughout Armenia, not only in the church, but also in the Armenian social life. Lazar of Pharpi, an Armenian contemporary historian, quoting Isaiah, says, "The entire land of Armenia was filled thereby with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." This century really is called the golden age of the Armenian history.

This was the reason that in 451 A. D. when Vardanantz war happened in Armenia, people showed religious higher tendency toward Christian idealism.

5. THE RELIGIOUS CRISIS

After the translation of the Bible the Armenian church faced a great crisis which was created through the Persian government. Yezdigirt II (Hazgerd), the king of Persia, planned to assimilate the Armenians into the Persian people. And therefore he tried to destroy Christianity in Armenia and establish the Persian religion of Mazdeism.

The leaders of the Armenian people refused to accept this foreign religion and decided to fight with Persia. In 451 A. D. war broke out in the Valley of Avarair, near Deghmood river. Vardan, the Brave, was the hero and the commander in chief of the Armenian army. Hovsep Catholicos and priest Levont

were the outstanding leaders of this war among the Armenian people. The Persian army was composed of 220,000 persons, but the Armenian army had only 66,000 in the battlefield. Vardan Mamigonian was killed in this battle with 1036 Armenian martyrs.

Armenia showed a great moral power in this war. Although Persia won the battle, nevertheless she could not crush the Armenian spirit of independence and religious liberty. And finally, after a time, Persia respected the religious liberty of the Armenian people and so the religious crisis was over.

The memory of this religious war which is called "Vardanantz Battle" in Armenian history, is celebrated each year in the church of Armenia. The annual commemoration of this battle gives to the people always new strength and fresh inspiration and encouragement morally and spiritually.

6. THE HIERARCHY

According to tradition, during the first three centuries, beginning from the apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, are mentioned among ten clergymen, as the overseers of the Armenian church. This is another evidence that Christianity had a strong ground among the people of Armenia before Gregory the Illuminator; and this was the reason that in 301 A. D. Christianity became the state religion in Armenia without much difficulty.

Tiridates, the king of Armenia was the first Christian king that opened the doors of his country widely to the light of religion that came from Palestine in 301 A. D. King Constantine of Rome accepted Christianity twelve years later, in 313 A. D.

The first official Catholicos of the Armenian church was Gregory the Illuminator, who was installed on the throne of Etchmiadzine by the unanimous vote of the people of Armenia at the first part of the fourth century. Beginning from Gregory the Illuminator until now so many Catholicoses have been installed on the throne of Etchmiadzine. The last Catholicos is Kevork VI Cheurekjian*, who is the head of the Armenian church at the present.

Under the political unfavorable situation sometimes the Catholicosate throne has been moved from place to place, and as a result of this displacement it has created more than one throne of the hierarchy. Until 1895 the Armenian church had three Catholicoses: in Etchmiadzin, Cilicia and Akhtamar. And in the end of the 19th century (1895) Catholicosate of Akhtamar was discontinued. But the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzine and Cilicia are keeping now their existence as centers of the authority of the church.

Besides these two seats of authority the church of Armenia has also two

* He passed away recently.

other patriarchial thrones, one in Jerusalem and the other in Constantinople. The Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem is the keeper of the Armenian church rights in the Holy Land; but the Patriarch of Constantinople is the representative of the Armenian people before the government of the country.

7. THE DOCTRINE

The Armenian church accepts the first three councils of the Christian church. They are, the Nicean (325 A. D.), that of Constantinople (381 A. D.), and that of Ephesus (431 A. D.), and founded her doctrines upon the creeds and dogmas of these councils. The Nicean creed is the basis of the Armenian church doctrine. The church of Armenia does not recognize the council which was held in the city of Chalcedon in 451 A. D.

According to the church of Armenia, Christ has "Incorruptible body and one united nature." In other words, Christ is perfect man and perfect God; but neither His human nature is separated from His divine nature, nor His divine nature from His human nature. These two natures are so united with one another that they are indivisible and are not two, but one. Christ has taken His body from the Virgin Mary and under the influence of the Holy spirit it has been changed into incorruptible body and so united with divine nature that it is impossible to divide or separate them from each other.

And for this reason the Armenian church does not pour any water into the wine at the Holy Mass and also keeps the Holy Mass bread free from any fermentation. That is, the church uses plain bread and pure wine in the Holy communion service as a token of Christ's inseparable nature as Man and God.

According to the doctrine of the church of Armenia, the Holy spirit springs from the father only. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as a Trinity, have formed one nature, one Divinity, and not three gods but one God, one will, one kingdom, one power, one administration and one dominion.

8. THE SACRAMENTS

The church of Armenia accepts seven sacraments, which are, Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, Confession, Ordination, Marriage and Extreme unction.

Baptism is generally practiced by immersion or burial when a child is eight days old, and confirmation comes immediately after baptism, and not sometime later. When the ceremony of baptism is finished, the Armenian priest anoints the nine different parts of the body with the Chrism (holy oil); that is, upon the child's forehead, eyes, mouth, nose, heart, hands, back and

feet. The reason for this anointing is to keep holy the sense organs of the child.

Ordination is seven in number. The first four are not so important, but the last three are important, deaconship, archdeaconship and priesthood, which are more honorary. If the priest is celibate he is called Vartabed; and when the ordained shows merit, the church gives him opportunity to be ordained bishop, archbishop, and even Catholicos. But the married priest is not in line for promotion.

The extreme unction is practiced now in the church of Armenia only for clergymen. The sick is not anointed. because of the fact he has received anointing when a child at baptism.

9. THE DEMOCRACY

Administrative power in the Catholic Church is in the hands of clergymen, but in the Armenian church laymen also have a share in it. This democratic spirit in the church is very old. The church of Armenia has three oldest church councils which were held in Ashdishad city, 365 A. D. at Shahabivan in 448 A. D. and in Touvin, A. D. 506. In these councils both clergymen and laymen discussed church matters and solved the problems of the day. And especially the subject of the council, at 506, in Touvin, was wholly dogmatic and doctrinal and again both clergymen and laymen discussed with equal right and vote. This democratic custom has been practised in all church councils and is still in use in the church at the present time.

This is the reason that the Armenian church trustees are formed by laymen now, everywhere. The candidate for priesthood is determined upon by the vote of church members and not by clergymen. No bishop in the church of Armenia has authority to ordain a priest without the consent of the people. Even the election of the Catholicos takes place in a similar way, that is, by the vote of laymen as much as by the vote of the clergymen.

10. THE BROADMINDEDNESS

The Catholic Church declares that there is no salvation outside of her institution. Greek orthodox church had almost the same claim in the past. But the church of Armenia never had this kind of claim. According to the Armenian church there is salvation in any church if the attendants are following the life of Christ and their faith is in harmony with their deeds.

The Christian church has both creed and doctrines. According to Patriarch Ormanian, creed is the truth which has been approved by the authority of the church councils, but the doctrine is a belief declared by the theological seminaries. The first is firm and the last is changeable. The creed belongs to the

faith but doctrine belongs to the theological science. The essential teaching of the Armenian church is condensed in the Nicean creed, but the secondary doctrines took their latest form during the middle ages.

The church of Armenia demands from her members loyalty to the creed and the assential doctrines of the church; but on the other hand leaves believers free for non-important doctrines and interpretations. In other words, the church is not against the new light and new thoughts that explain Christian experience and problems in the modern point of view.

The Catholic Church has definite forms for any belief of the religious life and demands that every members of the church think just the same. No member in the Catholic church has any right to express himself freely about religious matters. Every window is shut to prevent new light. This was tolerated in the middle ages but now it is not justifiable..

Broadmindedness has been the main characteristic of the Armenian church since the beginning. Among the old Christian churches the Armenian church is the only one which shows this spirit of tolerance that is the spirit of the modern age.

11. HER DIFFERENCE FROM OTHER ANCIENT CHURCHES

According to the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches' christology, Christ has two distinct natures. He is perfect man and perfect God. The church of Armenian accepts this doctrine but at the same time declares that these two natures of Christ are so united with one another that it is impossible to be divided. In other words, this unity is inseparable and indivisible.

In the Catholic Church Holy Mass bread is unleavened, but in the wine they pour a little cold water. The Greek church uses leavened bread and pours cold and hot water in the wine. But the Armenian church uses unleavened bread and pure wine, without any cold or hot water.

On January 6 of each year the church of Armenia celebrates, at the same time, both the birth and the baptism of Jesus Christ. The Catholic church celebrates the birth of our Lord on December 25th, but in the Greek church the birth of Jesus Christ is celebrated on Dec. 25th and the baptism on January 6th.

The Armenian church recognizes only the authority of the first three church councils (Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus). The Greek church accepts seven and the Catholic church recognizes twenty-one church councils.

At the ordinations, the Armenian church ordains and also anoints the candidate that is going to be a clergy. The Greek church ordains only and

omits the anointing. But the Catholic church ordains and anoints only priests and bishops and does not anoint the Pope.

In the Armenian church Bishops are ordained by the Catholicos only; in the Greek church by Patriarch; but in the Catholic church through three bishops by the special order of the pope.

12. THE MODERN NEEDS

The church of Armenia is very rich in moral and religious values, inspirations and traditions. In olden times the Armenian church was very plain and simple, but during the middle ages she was overloaded with foreign ceremonies and doctrines. Now she needs reformation and new adaptation to the modern life. This need has been emphasized during the last fifty years and not only by laymen but also by clergymen of the church. Even Etchmiadzin headquarters of the church has officially raised this question of reformation, and now it is on the table and must be solved in the near future.

The church of Armenia has been the center of inspiration for the Armenian nation for a long time in the past, as it is now. The modernization will multiply, of course, her usefulness for the people, creating new apostolic simplicity, enthusiasm and missionary spirit. In the fifth century the church of Armenia spread the light of the gospel into neighboring countries by the Armenian missionaries. The same spirit will rise again in the church by reformation.

The calling of the Armenian church now is to preach the gospel to the nations in the East that live in the darkness of the heathen religions.

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