

ARMENIAN PROTESTANTS

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The Armenian Protestant Church was established in the 19th century, in almost three hundred years after the origin of Protestantism. This was conditioned by a number of development peculiarities of both the world and Armenian history. Armenian Protestants launched vigorous activities in both Western and Eastern Armenia. Broadening the scope of their activity, they soon became an important factor in the life of the Armeniacy. Armenian Protestants continued their activity over the period of the First Republic of Armenia and in the first years of the Soviet Armenian. The following years were marked by the extensive activities of Armenian Protestants in the Diaspora. They resumed their activities in Armenia after the country gained independence. Today Armenian Protestants are very active in spiritual, educational, social, benevolent, cultural areas in the Republic of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and numerous communities in the Diaspora.

Besides the adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church who constitute the overwhelming majority of Armenians, there are also adherents of other confessions – Catholics and Protestants. The study of historical, sociopolitical, cultural, demographic, psychological and confessional peculiarities of the Armenian Protestants (as well as other multi-confessional strata of the Armeniacy) is of great importance in the context of national consolidation, broadening the scope of unified activities of the Armeniacy, achieving the national goals. The origin of the Protestantism is connected with the Reformation movement that emerged in Europe in the 16th century. Protestant Churches were formed in a result of a struggle against the Catholic Church. Unlike the vertical hierarchy of the Catholic Church, they are much more partitioned and scattered.

The origin of Protestantism in Armenia is related to a number of historical circumstances. In the early modern era missionaries undertook vigorous activities in Armenia. Of course, the spread of the Protestant movement in Armenia took place

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gradually, but in the 19th century it became massive and as a result, the Protestants scored a significant success. Of the Protestant teachings, the Evangelical movement spread the most among the Armenians.

Typically, the missionaries did not belong to any centrally managed structure. They often served to the interests of different states. In this regard Raffi wrote that the English missionaries were a lot more dangerous than the American ones [1, pp. 488-489]. Thus, studying the activities of missionaries, the political actions implemented by them should be covered in addition to the confessional and clerical dimension. The activities of missionaries found fertile ground among the Western Armenians, given their difficult legal, political and socioeconomic situation.

Interestingly, while Armenian Catholics were called “franks”, the Protestants were nicknamed “ingliz”.

If the spread of Catholicism among Armenians was conditioned by the Rome factor, the penetration of Protestantism took place mainly through Anglo-American missionaries. Conversion to Protestantism was accompanied by cultivating the English-speaking Western civilizational values, which could have been a reason good enough to call the Armenian Protestants “ingliz”.

Establishment of Protestantism in Armenia

On June 1, 1846 Armenian Evangelicals were recognized as a separate “millet” (literally – nation) in Ottoman Empire. In fact, Armenian Evangelicals were actually separated on official basis from the Armenian Apostolic Church and acquired an independent status. Earlier, the Armenian Catholics had acquired such status in 1830. Consequently, two new Armenian independent entities were established in the Ottoman Empire.

The foreign powers played an important role in recognizing the Armenian Evangelicals as a separate “millet”: “...through an immediate mediation of the American and English ambassadors to the Sultan’s High Porte ...” [2, p. 261]

Since the middle of the 19th century the Armenian Evangelical movement spread over Western Armenia, Cilicia and other regions of the Ottoman Empire populated by Armenians. Starting from the 1860s the Armenian Evangelical churches formed unions in different parts of Turkey. Before the Armenian Genocide, four Evangelical unions existed on the territory of the Ottoman Empire. The first one to be formed was the union of Butaniya established in 1864 (included 27 churches); the Eastern union was established in 1866 with 4 districts (68 churches); the Cilicia union– in 1867 (4 districts, 65 churches); the Central union – in 1868 (3 districts, 42 churches). There were many Armenian Evangelical educational institu-

tions in the Ottoman Empire. The number of secondary schools in 1908 was 35, of which 20 were for girls. Prior to the Genocide Armenian Evangelical seminaries functioned in Kharberd (since 1859), Marash (since 1864), Marzvan (since 1865). In 1875-1915 there were 7 colleges in Turkey: (Aintap, 1876), Yeprat college (Kharberd, 1878), Girls' Central College (Marash, 1885), Anatolia college (Marzvan, 1886), St. Paul's college (Tarson, 1888), Jenanian college (Konia, 1892), International college (Izmir, 1903). [3, p. 701, 704]

It is noteworthy that the formation of Evangelical unions began in 1860s when a new stage of ethnic persecutions kicked off. Apostolic Armenians often adopted Protestantism in order to avoid discrimination on ethnic grounds. The study of the national policy of the Turkish state helps to understand the cause-and-effect relation of Protestantism spreading among Armenians.

Naturally, the power and influence of the Armenian Patriarchate weakened because of this. This way the national policy of the Ottoman Empire made efforts to divide the unity of the Armenian people. However, granting the status of separate "millet" to the Catholic and Protestant Armenians also led to negative effects for Turkey. Taking advantage of the existence of Armenian Catholic and Protestant communities, foreign powers interfered with Turkey's domestic affairs on the pretext of protecting the rights of their coreligionists.

It has to be noted that the Armenian Protestants took part in the Armenian liberation struggle at the end of the 19th century. "...as Armenians by feeling and nature, the Armenian Evangelicals could not watch indifferently those atrocities taking place at the time all over the country". [4, p. 395]

In contrast to Turkey, where the state policy often supported the activities of missionaries so as to divide the unity of the Armenians, Iran tended to strengthen the positions of the Armenian Apostolic Church in an attempt to hamper the energetic activities of the missionaries.

In spite of that, the Armenian Evangelicals carried out significant activities also in the regions of Iran inhabited by the Armenians. Garabed Adanalian's account in this regard is noteworthy: "In the major cities of Iran like Hamadan, Sultanabad, Burburot, Tabriz, Farajabad, Kendi, Leilahan, Ortichaman, Isfahan, Gharakhan, and in many surrounding small villages, despite the lack of funding and shortage of pastors the Evangelical Church did its best to promote the cause it inherited" [4, p. 211].

Evangelical were ideas spread among the Eastern Armenians at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries by the first Protestant individuals and small groups. The spread of Protestantism among Eastern Armenians was boosted by the small separate communities and individuals affiliated to Protestantism and Baptism

that were scattered in Eastern Armenia and in a number of regions in Georgia, as well as by Swiss, German and Swedish Protestant preachers who had settled in the Caucasus in the 1820s.

The Evangelical Churches in Eastern Armenia were separate and independent units. It can be attributed to the political partition of Armenia, and as a result, the Western Armenians and Eastern Armenians each took their own peculiar ways of historical development. Despite the numerous appeals, the Russian Empire did not formally recognize the Eastern Armenian Evangelists as a separate religious community till 1914 (only the Lutheran Church officially functioned in the Russian Empire). The Lutheran Church did make attempts to subordinate the Armenian Evangelicals in the Caucasus. In 1820s-1890s the centers of the Armenian Evangelicals in the Transcaucasia were Shamakhi and Karabakh. The Armenian Evangelical schools in Shushi, Shamakhi and Tiflis were eminent in Transcaucasia.

By the middle of the 19th century there were Armenian Evangelical communities in Yerevan, Vagharshapat, Aleksandrapol, Kars, Tiflis, Baku, Batumi and Sukhumi.

Since the end of the 19th century, and especially by early 1900s, Yerevan had become the center of Evangelicalism in Eastern Armenia.

On January 31, 1914, the Armenian Evangelical Union of Ararat was formally registered, which included the Armenian Evangelical communities in Yerevan, Vagharshapat, Aleksandrapol, Kars, Nor Bayazet and in the surrounding villages. On June 28, 1917, the Armenian Evangelicals of the Ararat Valley held their annual meeting in Yerevan with participation of more than 300 representatives from the Ararat Union, Vagharshapat, Kars, Aleksandrapol and surrounding villages, as well as Evangelicals from Van and Bitlis. There was an intention to form a union of Armenian Evangelical churches of Caucasus, Van and Bitlis, and to unite the Evangelical Armenians of Caucasus and Turkey. Although a commission consisting of 11 members was elected, the materialization of this intention proved impossible due to the political reasons [5, p. 6-7].

The Armenian Evangelicals in both Western and Eastern Armenia always considered themselves the progeny of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the same nation. They endeavored to contribute to the development of the nation, shared the common pains, bore and maintained in themselves the all-Armenian values. By staying loyal to these principles in word and deed, they have asserted their right of existence and have secured their place and role in the Armenian society [6, p. 129]. This is particularly conditioned by the fact that Armenian Evangelicals have never taken a repudiating stance toward the national values and have attached an ever-increasing importance to the national and political issues [7, p. 13].

The activity of the Armenian Evangelicals in the First Republic is remarkable. The declaration of independence of the Republic of Armenia on May 28, 1918 opened a new stage in the life of the Armenian Evangelical churches. Many experienced pastors, preachers and evangelists worked in Armenia in 1919. One of the most renowned figures of the Evangelical Union of Ararat in the period of the First Republic and first years of the Soviet period was Rev. Hakob Mudoyan, who was the secretary of the central council of the Ararat Union. In 1915 he took part in the heroic struggle in Van-Vaspurakan, organized and commanded the self-defense combats in Hayots Dzor. In 1918 Rev. H. Mudoyan became a member of the parliament of the Republic of Armenia. Hence, we may conclude that the Armenian Evangelicals carried out quite extensive activities during the period of the First Republic of Armenia. The parliament membership of an Evangelical leader is an evidence of tolerant and open-minded state policies. In fact, it proves that the participation of the Armenian Evangelicals in the governance issues was regarded important in the Republic of Armenia. The number of the Evangelicals in the Republic of Armenia was about 3000 [5, p. 7].

The Union headquartered in Yerevan functioned till 1928. It was led by Rev. Vahan Mikaelyan. In 1923 the authorities of the Soviet Armenia officially recognized the Armenian Evangelical Union of Ararat and registered its charter.

In 1920s there were 15 communities in Soviet Armenia recognized by the state and additionally, spiritual meetings were allowed to be held at 15 other places. In 1918-1930 there were 2500-3000 Armenian Evangelicals in Armenia and about 3500-4000 in the whole Transcaucasia. Almost all communities had churches or prayer houses, Sunday schools, ordained pastors. At the end of the 1920s repressions against the religious communities in the Soviet Union intensified. Since 1930, the activities of the Armenian Evangelical churches along with many other churches had been banned in the USSR.

In February 1946 the government of the Soviet Armenia officially recognized the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church of Yerevan and the Evangelical-Baptist Church in Gyumri became its part.

The Structure of the Armenian Evangelical Church

Today the Armenian Evangelical Church functions both in Armenia and Diaspora. Armenian Evangelical spiritual, educational, benevolent and other bodies play an important role in the spiritual field in Armenia and in the life of the Armenian communities in the Diaspora.

The Armenian Evangelical Church has no clergy like Catholicoi, bishops, archimandrites, and no dioceses. Each church has three official bodies:

1. Church council, which controls the general activities of the church (particularly, the spiritual activities),
2. Trustees, who administer the economic matters and the property of the church, as well as issue marriage certificates,
3. School committee, which controls the schools owned by the church. Sunday schools, Christian youth organizations, women's and cultural unions, joint worship groups constitute an important part of the Evangelical churches.

Since 1991 the Armenian Missionary Association of America has been functioning in Yerevan. On July 1, 1994 the Armenian Evangelical Church secured the right to work in Armenia officially. There are 50 Evangelical churches and prayer houses in Armenia.

In May 1995 the Union of Evangelical Churches of Armenia was established in Yerevan. And in August 1995 the Armenian Evangelical Union of Armenia, Georgia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia was established (headquartered in Yerevan, with Rene Leonian as chairman). The Union incorporates the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches of Armenia, Armenian Evangelical Union of Georgia¹, the Armenian Evangelical Baptist Church in Sukhumi, Armenian Evangelical churches of Sochi and Moscow, as well as the Armenian office of the Armenian Missionary Association of America.

There are no precise data about the number of the Evangelicals in Armenia, and therefore one has to rely on approximate figures. Rene Leonian mentions that the number of the members of the Armenian Evangelical Church is 25-30 thousand and the total number of adherents of Evangelically oriented churches in Armenia is about 100 thousand [8].

There are 3 Armenian Evangelical Unions in the Diaspora.

1. Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East (established in 1924, headquartered in Beirut, includes 11 churches in Syria, 6 – in Lebanon, 3 – in Iran, 3 – in Turkey, 2 – in Greece, 1 – in Egypt).
2. Armenian Evangelical Union of France (established in 1927, recognized by the government in 1946, headquartered in Paris, includes 14 churches).
3. Armenian Evangelical Union of North America (established in 1971, headquartered in New Jersey, includes 20 Evangelical churches in the US and 4 in Canada).

¹There are Armenian Evangelical churches in Tbilisi, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalak, Bolnisi, Lilo, Isain. Armenian Evangelicals of Georgia maintain extensive relations with the Evangelical-Christian and Baptist Union of Georgia.

There are Armenian Evangelical Churches in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Montevideo, London, Brussels, Sofia, Sidney [3, p 701].

At the beginning of the 1980s 3 unions of Diaspora formed the Armenian Evangelical World Council (headquartered in New Jersey, USA) and later on, 2 Unions of Armenia joined it. It seems natural that the Armenian Evangelical World Council is located in New Jersey. It implies that the US Armenian Protestant community takes an important place in the Armenian Protestant reality. The Council manages joint activities of the unions. The chairman is elected for a 2-year period and can be re-elected for a second time. The Council has an executive body, in the meetings summoned by which representatives of five Armenian Evangelical unions (of Near East, France, Eurasia, Armenia and North America) and the Armenian Evangelical Association participate. Issues concerning the activities of the Armenian Evangelical churches and preserving Armenianness are discussed at these meetings. The members of divan consisting of the president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and executive director, are elected at these meetings.¹

On June 7, 1918 the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA) was established in Worcester, MA, USA. This is the organizational and executive body of the Armenian Evangelical churches and the first and the only Armenian Evangelical missionary organization. The AMAA has its branches and offices in approximately 20 countries all over the world, including Armenia (since 1991) and NKR (since 1995). The AMAA carries out its projects in Armenia and Artsakh together with the French organization “Hope for Armenia”. The projects pursue two main directions – charitable and educational. Among the important goals of the AMAA the followings can be mentioned: assistance in rehabilitation of the regions suffered from the December 1988 earthquake; care of the orphans and children of the deceased freedom fighters; Christian education for the young generation; medical services, as well as assisting the two Armenian states in agriculture, construction, and education.

The Armenian Evangelical Church implements its benevolent, educational, publishing, social service activities through about a dozen of organizations managed either by the Armenian Evangelical Church or together with the Armenian Apostolic and Catholic Churches. Some of the notable ones are Jinishian Foundation, Philibosian Foundation, Armenian Evangelical Social Service Center (Los Angeles), Armenian National Sanatorium (Lebanon), Armenian Old Age Home (Aleppo), etc.

¹The regular meeting of the executive body of the Armenian Evangelical World Council (October 17, 2008)
<http://www.azad-hye.net/media/r1/armenian-evangelical-world-council.htm>

Reinforcing the ties of the Diaspora's Armenian Evangelicals with Armenia is of great importance. This cooperation facilitates both the collaboration between Armenian Evangelicals and adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and strengthening relations between Armenia and Diaspora. Joint efforts directed to bolstering the RA-NKR-Diaspora relations are particularly crucial. In this respect, the activities of Armenian Evangelical communities in different countries are certainly critical. Having their own peculiarities, these communities are part of the Protestant Armenianness that in its turn constitutes an integral part of the entire Armenianness.

Armenian Evangelical Church regarded and still regards the Armenian Apostolic Church as the Mother church, accepts the Holy Fathers of the Armenian Church, uses Armenian medieval sharakans during worship, carries out joint ceremonies together with the clergymen of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The civilizational significance of the Armenian Catholics and Armenian Protestants is not to be underestimated. The latter, for instance, provided access to different cultural values, which played an important role for the Armenianness. In addition, their activities contributed to the promotion of the issues of the Armenianness in various circles abroad [2, p. 369].

The Armenian Evangelical Church is one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches and it cooperates with American, European and Middle Eastern churches.

Educational Institutions of the Armenian Evangelicals

Since the formation of the Armenian Evangelical Church, Evangelical educational institutions have been created – preschools, secondary schools, colleges, schools. Armenians who wish to study in these educational institutions are admitted irrespective of their confessional affiliation. Presently there are 18 Armenian Evangelical educational establishments (from preschool to higher education). Armenian Evangelical educational institutions play an important role in Lebanon and Syria, as well as in Armenia, Greece, Iran and the USA. Haigazian University, the only higher education institution of the Diaspora (established in 1995), is distinguished among these educational institutions.¹ The Near East School of Theology (Beirut), the Aleppo College (Syria), and the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Armenia established in 1997 in Yerevan are also notable.

¹ See www.haigazian.edu.lb for details

Armenian Evangelical Press

Armenian Evangelical Church has published periodicals: the first Armenian newspaper in Ashkharhabar (modern Armenian language) – “Fount of Useful Knowledge” was published with interruptions in 1839-1856 in Zmurnia. It was followed by “Avetaber” (Istanbul, in Armenian and in Turkish with Armenian script). Currently, “Banber” (since 1925, Paris), “Badanekan Artsakank” (since 1936, Beirut), “Chanasser” (since 1937, Beirut), “Le Lumignon” (Lyon, in French), “Lraper” (since 1965, New Jersey) magazines, “Forum” (since 1975) and “Our Daily Bread” (since 1991) periodicals of the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America, the “Haigazian Armenological Review” (since 1970, Beirut) annual publication, “Armenian Evangelical Church” quarterly (since 1997, Yerevan), are published [3, p. 704].

Conclusions

- Today the matters of the Armenian Protestants play an important role in the self-organization processes of the Armeniacy. The protection of the Armenian national values and strengthening the national self-consciousness among the Protestant Armenians are urgent matters for the social and political consolidation of the Armeniacy.
- The positive, continuous development of relations between the Protestant Armenians and Armenian Apostolic Church can ensure the good will in mutual perception and collaboration between the Armenian adherents of these two Christian teachings.
- In addition to the Armenian Evangelical-Armenian Apostolic relations, the cooperation of the Armenian Evangelicals with other confessional strata of the Armeniacy manifests some tendencies for development and has a great potential to broaden, deepen and strengthen.
- The issues of Protestant Armenians are also important in the context of preserving the national identity of the Armenian Diaspora. The Protestant Armenians ought to preserve their national identity and not to get alienated from their Apostolic compatriots. The approaches of both parties, which should be based on national unity, tolerance, emphasis on common values and joint endeavors, are crucial in this matter.
- Armenian Evangelicals represent a great civilizational value, and their appreciation and maximum involvement in handling the challenges faced by the Armeniacy are imperatives of the 21st century.

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