

## **The Origins of The Armenian Christianity, Hierarchical Structure & Denominations**

Christianity in Armenia can be traced back to the age of the Apostles. The Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew were the first evangelizers of Armenia and, according to tradition, were martyred there. There is historical evidence of the existence of a Christian community and clergy in Armenia prior to the fourth century. The church historian Eusebius of Caesaria (c. 260-c.339) refers to Meruzhanes, a bishop of Armenia in the middle of the third century. It was at the beginning of the fourth century, in 301, that Christianity was first proclaimed as the official religion of Armenia. This proclamation was the result of the missionary activity of St. Gregory the Illuminator (240-332). The fifth century historian Agathangelos recounts the works of the patron saint of the Armenian Church. St. Gregory, a relative of the Armenian king Tiridates (c. 238-314), was brought up as a Christian in Caesarea in Cappadocia. The pagan Tiridates had St. Gregory imprisoned for nearly fifteen years in Khor Virab ("deep dungeon") in Artashat. Several years later, a group of Christian nuns, led by St. Gayane and fleeing persecution in Rome, came to Armenia. King Tiridates was attracted to one of the women, St. Hripsime, who resisted his attempts to possess her. In his anger, Tiridates had the women killed. After the martyrdom of the women, Tiridates was struck by an illness that turned the king into a wild boar. After all other attempts at curing him failed, the king's sister St. Khosrovidoukht told her brother that only St. Gregory could cure him. Fifteen years had passed since Gregory's imprisonment in the dungeon so he was presumed dead. But he was still alive and was released from the dungeon. Gregory cured Tiridates and converted the king and the royal family to Christianity. At this time, Gregory had still not been ordained. In 302, he left for Caesarea, which was an important see at the time, where he was ordained a bishop by Leontius, the Archbishop of Caesarea. Gregory returned to Armenia, baptized the king and the royal family, was installed as the first Catholicos, or chief bishop of Armenia, and continued to convert the Armenian people.

Another important event associated with St. Gregory was the vision that he had in Vagharshapat of Christ descending from heaven and striking the ground with a golden hammer. It is at this spot that the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin ("the

Only Begotten descended”) was built. Nearby were built the churches of St. Hripsime and Gayane, where the relics of the martyred nuns are kept.

With the support of the royal family, Christianity was able to spread quickly throughout Armenia and within just a few centuries to permeate all aspects of Armenian life and culture. Furthermore, Armenian missionaries were sent among the Georgians and Alans, who also subsequently established their own national churches.

St. Gregory’s son, Aristakes, succeeded his father as Catholicos. Aristakes had been the representative of the Armenian Church at the Council of Nicaea (325). The Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council, set forth the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine is formulated in the Nicene Creed (Havadamk), which is professed every Sunday during the Divine Liturgy. Under Catholicos Nerses the Great (c. 326-373; Catholicos from 353 to 373), monasteries and various charitable institutions were first established throughout Armenia.

The Faith of the Armenian Church is transmitted through the church's Holy Tradition, i.e., the ongoing life of the church from the time of Christ to our times. The Bible, liturgy and worship, writing of the church fathers, church councils, saints, canons, religious art and rituals - organically linked together - formulate the Holy Tradition of the Church.

This Faith is articulated in the Creed of the Armenian Church, which in turn defines the church's *raison d'etre* and sets the parameters of its *modus operandi*.

The Armenian Church professes her faith in the context of her worship. Theologically, whatever the church believes, the church prays. Therefore, the Armenian Church's worship and liturgy constitute a prime source for teaching her faith. History, i.e., Tradition, on the other hand, defines and formulates the "articles of faith" and transmits them from generation to generation.

The Armenian Church believes in **One God**, the Father Almighty who is the **Creator** of heaven and earth, of all things visible & invisible. **Humanity (male and female)** is created in the image and likeness of God, and as such is a special creature. However, because of the Fall of man, **sin** entered the world.

The Church believes in **Jesus Christ**, "the only begotten **Son of God**...who came down from heaven," was **incarnate**, was born of the **Virgin Mary**, by the Holy Spirit. He became man, was **crucified** for us and **suffered** and was **buried**. He **rose again** from the dead on the third day and **ascended** into

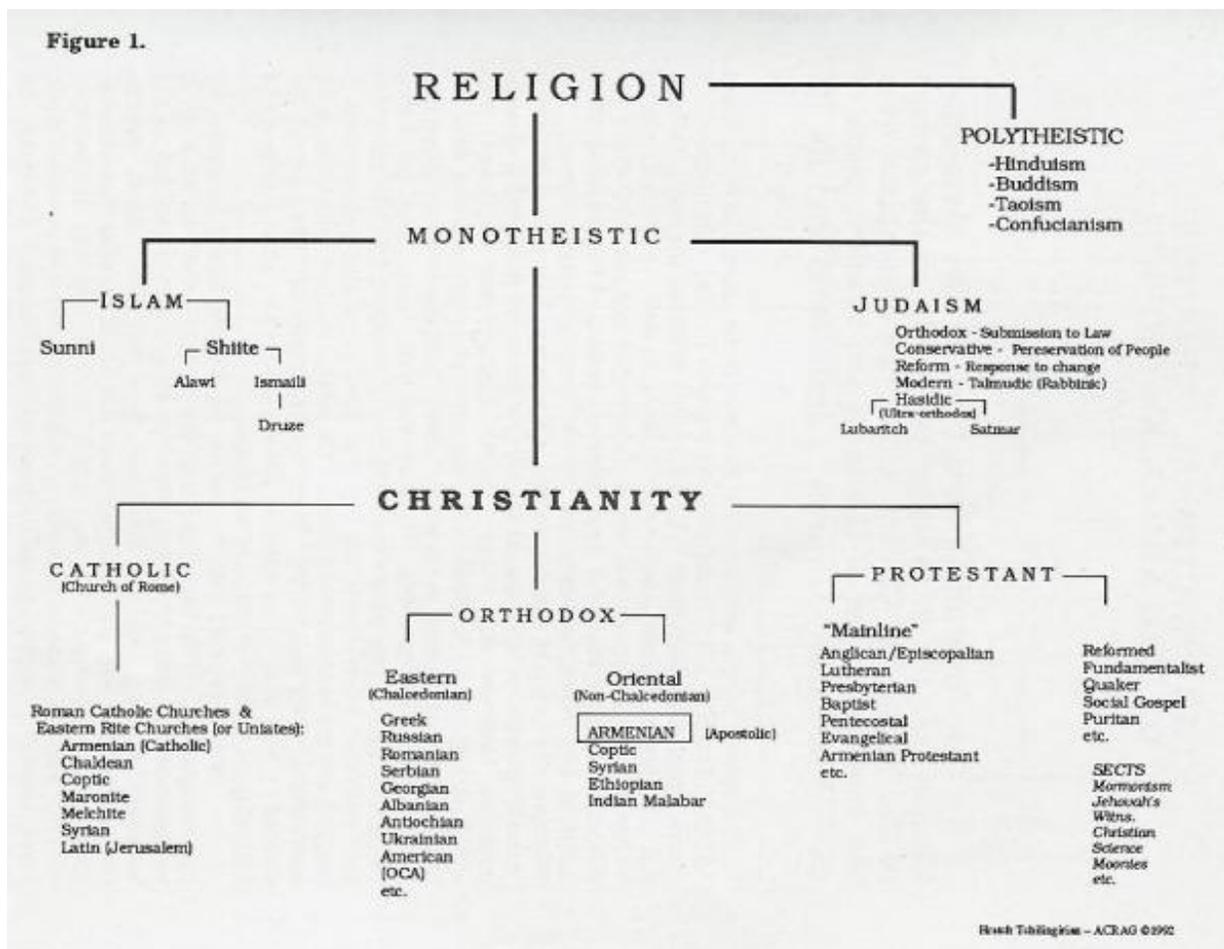
heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. He will **come again** with glory to **judge** the living and the dead.

The Armenian Church believes in the **Holy Spirit** - uncreated and perfect, who proceeds from the Father- and together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. The Holy Spirit spoke to the **prophets** and **apostles** and descended into the Jordan, witnessing Christ's Baptism.

The Armenian Church is **One, Holy, Apostolic, Catholic, Church**. She believes in one **Baptism** with **repentance** for the **remission** and **forgiveness** of sins. On judgment day, Christ will call all men and women who have repented to **eternal life** in His **Heavenly Kingdom**, which has no end. Christ overcame the power of death with His own and gave **salvation** to all mankind.

The dogmas of the Armenian Church are based on these "articles of faith."

The Armenian Church belongs to the Orthodox family of churches (see fig. 1). She is also known as the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (Հայաստանեայց Առաքելական Ուղղափառ Եկեղեցի).



## The Hierarchical Structure of the Armenian Church

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### Clerical Hierarchy:

- Catholicos
- Bishop
- Priest

### Lay Representation:

- National Ecclesiastical Assembly
- Diocesan Assembly
- Parish Assembly

### The Catholicos

First on the hierarchical ladder is the Catholicos, as the Chief Bishop and Supreme head of the Armenian Church. The Catholicos is elected by a National Ecclesiastical Assembly (NEA), consisting of lay and clergy representatives of the Armenian Churches from around the world. Working closely with the Catholicos is the Supreme Ecclesiastical Council, (the administrative arm of the NEA) which carries out the overall administration of the Armenian Church throughout the world.

### The Bishop

Second on the hierarchical ladder is the bishop, who is "elected" by the people and consecrated by the Catholicos with the aid of two other bishops (according to current practice, the Catholicos has exclusive right to consecrate bishops). A bishop in a given diocese is the "chief executive officer" of the region, who works in cooperation with a Diocesan Council (consisting of clergy and lay members), who in turn are elected by the Diocesan Assembly of the region. The Bishop is the ex-officio president of each and every Diocesan organization.

### The Priest

Third on the hierarchical ladder is the priest, who is appointed by the Bishop and accepted by the Parish Assembly of a given parish. The parish priest is the ex-officio president of each and every Parish organization. (In the case of "monastic priests," as it is the case in Etchmiadzin, Antelias, Jerusalem and Constantinople, they are under the jurisdiction of the Catholicos or the Patriarch of the given See).

### The National Ecclesiastical Assembly

The National Ecclesiastical Assembly (NEA) consists of lay and clergy delegates elected by the diocesan Assemblies of the dioceses of the Armenian Church around the world. Every bishop in the Armenian Church is automatically a member of the Assembly. The Catholicos-or in his absence the Locum Tenens-is ex-officio president of the NEA. The primary function of the NEA is to elect a successor to a deceased Catholicos.

### **The Diocesan Assembly**

The Diocesan Assembly consists of lay delegates elected by the Parish Assemblies. The Religious Council is part of the Assembly. The Diocesan Primate is ex-officio president of the Diocesan Assembly.

### **The Parish Assembly**

The Parish Assembly consists of all baptized and/or dues paying members of a given parish in a given diocese. The Pastor is the ex-officio president of the Parish Assembly.

### **There are four hierarchical Sees in the Armenian Church:**

The Catholicosate of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin (established by St. Gregory the Illuminator in the fourth century).

The Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (re-established in Antelias, Lebanon in 1930. Its roots go back to the 13th century).

The Patriarchate of Jersusalem was established in 1281. The presence of Armenians in the Holy Land extends back to the earliest period of the Church. Together with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Catholic Franciscan Order, the Armenian Patriarchate serves as custodian of the Christian Holy Places. The Patriarchate also has a seminary that has produced many clergymen who have served and continue to serve the Armenian Church throughout the world. (the St. James Brotherhood established the Patriarchate at the beginning of the 14th century).

The Patriarchate of Constantinople (established in 1461 by Sultan Mehmet II). To administer the affairs of the Armenian community of the Ottoman Empire. This is the same role the Greek Patriarchate had with respect to the Greek community.

Each See has its own brotherhood, ecclesiastical jurisdiction and internal administrative by-laws. They are not separate churches, but are part of the One, Holy, Apostolic Church--the Armenian Church--and are one in dogma, theology, liturgy and in their service to the Armenian nation.

### **The Armenian Catholic Church**

Beginning in the 12th century, Armenians came into contact with the Roman Church through their ties with the Crusaders in Cilicia. In 1195 during the Crusades, the church of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia entered into a union with the Catholic Church which lasted until Cilicia was conquered by the Mamluks in 1375.

In 1740, Abraham-Pierre I Ardzivian, who had earlier become a Catholic, was elected as the patriarch of Sis. Two years later Pope Benedict XIV formally established the **Armenian Catholic Church**. The headquarters of the patriarchate was later moved to Antelias, north of Beirut. In 1749, the Armenian Catholic Church built a convent in Bzoummar, Lebanon. During the horrific Armenian genocide in 1915–1918 the Church scattered among neighboring countries, mainly Lebanon and Syria.

Later in the 14th century, through the missionary activities of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, a "latinizing movement" gained ground among "liberal elements in the Armenian Church." However, it was only in the 19th century, during the Ottoman period, that the Armenian Catholics became a millet--an autonomous Church affiliated with Roman Catholicism. In 1831, when a new constitution for Christians living in the Ottoman Empire was instituted, " 'the (Armenian) Catholic Church Community" was created and legally recognized to form the Armenian Rite Catholic segment of the Roman Church, with its own hierarchy and its own Catholicos-Patriarch." In the early 18th century, two Mekhitarist monastic congregations were established in Venice and Vienna, which have "rendered inestimable service to Armenian letters and scholarship fostering and enriching the religious and cultural heritage of Armenians".

### **The Evangelical Armenians**

In the 19th century there was intellectual and spiritual awakening in Constantinople. This awakening and enlightenment pushed the reformists to study the Bible. Under the patronage of the Armenian Patriarchate, a school was opened, headed by Krikor

Peshdimajian, one of the leading intellectuals of the time. The principal aim of this school was to train qualified clergy for the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The result of this awakening was the formation of a society called “Pietistical Union.” The members held meetings for the study of the Bible. Naturally, during these meetings and Bible studies, questions were raised regarding the practices and traditions of the church, which to them seemed to conflict with biblical truths.

These reformists faced strong retaliation from the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. Eventually, after Patriarch Matteos Chouhajian excommunicated the reformists, they were forced to organize themselves into a separate religious community, the Protestant Millet. This separation led to the formation of the Armenian Evangelical Church in 1846.

The Armenian Evangelical community was formally recognized in 1846 by the Ottoman government, after "paiful clashes" between church authorities and the "reformers"-- those within the Mother Church who wished to "reestablished" the church's true evangelical mission. The beginning of Armenian Protestantism is traced back to the 19th century missionary activities of the American Board of Missions, which expanded an aggressive mission throughout Asia Minor. As a result of the continued affiliation of the Armenian Evangelicals with American missionary organizations, many schools and colleges were established during the second half of the 19th century, which benefited thousands Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire.

Today, there are close to a 100 Armenian Evangelical Churches in the following countries: Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, England, France, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Uruguay, and the United States of America.